



INTERNATIONAL  
INSTITUTE OF  
ISLAMIC  
THOUGHT

# Reform of Higher Education in Muslim Societies

Wilson Center and the International Institute of  
Islamic Thought (IIIT)

Washington, D.C. & Herndon, VA

December 9 & 10, 2013

**THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT**

**Two-Day Symposium on Reform of Higher Education  
in Muslim Societies**

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## **BACKGROUND PAPER**

### **Introduction – Statement of the Problem**

To say that higher education in Muslim societies is in need of extensive reform is an understatement. The recent uprisings in the Arab world underscored elementary problems related to governance, economics, education, and employment, among other issues. In spite of being challenged by the growing gap in educational standards and achievements between highly industrialized nations and Muslim countries, most Muslim societies continue to produce mediocre results in higher education. This is obvious in latest world university rankings. Notwithstanding some justifiable reservations regarding these classifications, one could at least agree that they provide a general view of the quality of education at university levels. According to QS World University Ranking 2013, the highest ranking university in a Muslim country is Universiti Malaya (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) in 167<sup>th</sup> place. Next is King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals (Saudi Arabia) in 216<sup>th</sup> place. Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2013-2014 have Boğaziçi (Bosphorus) University in Turkey as the highest ranking university in a Muslim country, at the 199<sup>th</sup> place. More than a billion Muslims in majority-Muslim societies

do not have a single university in the top 150 universities in the world. In comparison, Singapore with its 5.4 million inhabitants has two universities in the QS top 50 and Times Higher Education top 100, respectively.

Other data on higher education are equally depressing. A series of recent reports on the Arab world by the United Nations Development Program paint a picture of seriously underdeveloped societies at every level. In terms of higher education and knowledge development, the statistics are so damning that it would not be an exaggeration to say that nothing short of national emergencies is in order to fix the problem. According to 2003 UNDP report on knowledge societies, in the period of 1981-1985 the Arab world translated 4.4 books per one million people. The corresponding number in Hungary was 519, and in Spain 920 books per million inhabitants. During the period of 1980-2000, nine Arab countries registered the combined total of 370 patents. The number in Israel was 7,652, while South Korea registered 16,328 patents in the same period. Similar discrepancy exists in terms of citations in scientific journals – another important measure of academic output. The UNDP reports focused on the Arab world only, so the question may be asked about other Muslim societies. While it is true that

Turkish and Malaysian universities in particular tend to foster better research and are ranked higher than Arab universities, they are still well behind the universities in the West, or in Japan, China, Taiwan, and South Korea. A recent splurge on education in some oil and gas-rich Gulf countries – especially Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar – is too recent to assess its impact on higher education and their societies in general. What is clear in these efforts is that they are distinctly imitative in nature, i.e., adopting Western-style philosophies of education and curricula, and lacking in Islamic grounding and values. Students from the Gulf have been studying in the West for decades without any meaningful scientific output once they returned to their countries. Bringing Western universities to the countries of the region is not going to solve the problem by itself. *The crisis of higher education is systemic in nature and needs to be addressed as such.*

## About the Symposium

The symposium aims to address the main issues underlying the crisis in higher education in Muslim societies and explore possible pathways toward reform. The three main areas of focus are:

- 1) The root causes of the crisis of higher education in Muslim societies

Poor governance and inadequate government policies lie at the root of the crisis. Too much centralized planning, lack of support to explore and innovate, outdated approaches to education and deficient curricula, corruption and lack of transparency, and – above all – lack of freedom to think, express, and act are some of the major problems plaguing Muslim societies. But misguided policies only go that far in explaining the crisis; one also has to take into consideration pervasive social and political cultures that are steeped in compliance, acquiescence, intolerance of different opinions, conspiratorial tendencies, blame-game and victimhood, and many other negative cultural traits that have become mainstream in many Muslim countries. Compounding the problem is the obstinate inability to extract from Muslim history and traditions what is best in them and connect Muslim past with the present. Left without

historical and value-based guidelines, Muslim educators, administrators, and students often lack spiritual and intellectual conviction which is necessary in order to develop highly effective and innovative systems of higher education. This is where rooting higher education in a *tawhidic* civilizational approach – based on the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* (monotheism), and on responsibility to God and humanity – can provide the required high level of conviction, leading to regeneration and innovation.

On top of this, pedagogical approaches are still rooted in memorization of facts, with little emphasis on analytical skills. Lecturing and note taking are main classroom activities. Group activities, giving individual attention to students, field trips, and hands-on educational activities are rare. Criticism, experimentation, and self-discovery are seldom practiced. Teachers and government-issued textbooks are seen as absolutely authoritative and unquestionable sources of knowledge. In Islamic studies courses, students are required to memorize facts and rules, but do not usually engage in moral and ethical reasoning and in issue-oriented discussions. They are instructed that there is only one correct answer to any given question, which only breeds the culture of intolerance and compliance. The Symposium aims at

discussing and examining the above issues: government policies and governance, social and political culture, imitative solutions, role of values and history in education, the *tawhidic* approach to education, inefficient culture of learning, and inadequate pedagogy.

## 2) Current manifestations of the crisis and its implications for socioeconomic development

Some of the manifestations – such as those mentioned in introductory paragraphs – are apparent in educational outcomes. Others impact socioeconomic development in adverse ways. The 2003 UNDP Report on knowledge society in the Arab world mentions “rentier” economies, lack of competition, scarcity of medium-sized and large companies, low GDP growth, low productivity, migration, and brain drain as some of the major symptoms of the deeper educational crisis in the Arab world. Much of this applies to most other Muslim nations and societies today.

An important aspect of higher education is creating knowledgeable and skillful workforce that is capable of meeting challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized world. Richer Muslim nations still depend overwhelmingly on foreign, expatriate labor for a variety of

reasons – foreigners are better skilled, work for less than domestic workers, and can be fired with relative ease. Poorer Muslim nations often cannot afford to pay foreign expatriates, relying thus on ill-equipped domestic workers which results in lack of competitiveness. There is often a definite mismatch between educational outcomes and market demands, which gives rise to a nominally educated workforce that is unable to enter the job markets. Lack of quality higher education, combined with systemic political problems, leads to relatively higher levels of poverty. Even in countries that are relatively wealthy in GDP terms, HDI (human development index) lags behind their wealth, exposing thus another important manifestation of the crisis.

### 3) Policy recommendations to governments and to institutions of higher learning

The main outcome of the two-day Symposium will be a set of policy recommendations to governments and institutions of higher learning. It is our hope that the Symposium deliberations will result in clear and realistic recommendations. The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) plans to hold seminars and workshops in 2014 to expand on the Symposium's main conclusions and recommendations.

## **Special Topics**

While the Symposium will cover a variety of topics related to reforming higher education in Muslim societies, the following issues will be given special attention:

- **The traditional system of education.**

This is a mainstay of classical Islamic education in Muslim societies, which is often articulated through Islamic schools (*madrasah*, pl. *madāris*; often Anglicized as *madrasahs*). The traditional system has been on the receiving end of much criticism, some of it warranted, and some of it rather unjustified. There are many virtues to the traditional system of education and its role in transmitting religious and ethical values. Yet, the question could be asked if this system is well-equipped and responsive to the needs of contemporary Muslim societies. Also, what happens when this traditional system of learning is carried over into higher education? In order to understand this, the Symposium will discuss, debate, and examine experiences in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Pakistan, Afghanistan, as well as traditional schools and universities in the Arab countries.

- **The impact and challenges of globalization.**

With the highly globalized world we all live in today, it is important to assess the impact and challenges of globalization on higher education in Muslim societies. What the rise of English language as the *lingua franca* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – where much of the scientific output is now done in English – means to Muslim higher education? Current globalization favors rich countries and sometimes disproportionately disadvantages developing nations and indigenous communities, many of which are in the Muslim world. What is the effect of this on higher education in Muslim societies? How do modes of production, global distribution of wealth, and favoring of certain types of knowledge over others influence and impact higher education? Can Muslim societies harness the power of globalization in their favor and benefit their educational systems by it? What does this all mean for state-owned and state-administered universities in the world in which powerful multinational corporations dictate labor laws and markets? Conversely, what the recent wave of new private universities in Muslim societies means for the quality of higher education? Would the privatizing moment tilt the scale in favor of

bigger, transnational entities at the expense of Muslim societies' needs?

- **The economics of education and issues of governance.**

The public-private partnership is essential in advancing R&D at non-governmental, national, and international levels. This partnership is also central to education and training systems. The public-private sector relationship, however, is inextricably related to issues of governance. The pervasiveness of authoritarianism, state patrimonialism, weak rule of law, lack of representation, corruption, and weaknesses in other governance areas create an atmosphere where public-private-NGO sectors cooperation is either done in order to support official state ideologies or to advance foreign interests with little benefit for local population. Education expenditures also suffer due to misplaced priorities in many Muslim societies where spending on the military far outweighs spending on any level of education, including the higher education. What are the ways of improving governance, economics of education, and private-public partnerships in order to achieve better education outcomes? Are there success stories in the Muslim world and how can these benefit other Muslim societies?

- **Science and technology, innovation and entrepreneurship.**

While the statistics show that scientific publications in the Arab world are at the level of advanced developing nations, most of the publishing activity is in applied sciences with only a small fraction of publications being in basic sciences, implying a low level of innovation. The issue of innovation is inseparable from wider social and political trends in Muslim societies where freedom of expression, association, and religion are often severely curtailed. Engendering innovation through educational system requires deep cultural and political change. Universities and other institutions of higher learning need to foster critical pedagogical approaches in education which stimulate creative thinking, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

- **The status and role of women in higher education.**

Studies show that unemployment rates for women in the Arab region are higher than in any other region in the world. This is partly due to nature and quality of higher education, but mostly because of the demand-side in employment. As such, the problem is related in greater measure to governance and economics, than to education. Yet, there is a

whole set of issues that stem from inequalities in higher education. Even though women participate in higher education in unprecedented numbers – in the 2006/2007 academic year, women comprised 57.76% of all students in the Iranian universities – they are still severely under-represented in higher administration, both in ministries of education as well as at the level of university governance. There are exceptions to this norm, however. In 2011, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) appointed Prof. Dr. Zaleha Kamaruddin as the first woman Rector of the University. The Symposium will explore both the deficiencies in the status and role of women in higher education, as well as the good examples and practices in order to derive lessons for policymaking.

### **Outcome**

After the Symposium, the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) will issue a report which will summarize the discussions held, lessons learned, and include policy recommendations to governments and institutions of higher learning. The report will also suggest the list of priorities in terms of reforming higher education in Muslim societies. Based on this report, the IIIT will convene a workshop/seminar in 2014, which will



examine issues contained in the report in greater depth by bringing together leading scholars, administrators, politicians, practitioners and activists in the field of education.

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## **About the IIIT**

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) is a private, non-profit, academic, cultural and educational institution. The headquarters of the Institute are situated in Herndon, Virginia, in the suburbs of Washington DC. The Institute is an intellectual forum working on educational, academic and societal issues from an Islamic perspective to promote and support research projects, organize intellectual and cultural meetings, publish scholarly works, and engage in teaching and training.

The International Institute of Islamic Thought is dedicated to the revival and reform of Islamic thought and its methodology in order to enable the Muslims

to deal effectively with present challenges, and contribute to the progress of human civilization.

The Institute promotes academic research on the methodology and philosophy of various disciplines, and gives special emphasis to the development of Islamic scholarship in contemporary social sciences. The IIIT aspires to conduct courses in order to promote its objective to reform Islamic thought, and to bridge the intellectual divide between the Islamic tradition and Western civilization. In its teaching and selection of teachers and courses, the IIIT activities promote moderation, inter-faith dialogue and good citizenship. To date, the IIIT has published more than 600 books on Islamic thought in 22 languages.

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