

Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt: Shifting Worlds

Mona Abaza

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Although the debate on the arrival of the Islamization of knowledge (IOK) concept continues among today's scholars, giving it a practical framework is generally credited to the late Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, a Palestinian-American scholar and a founding member of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). Mona Abaza, associate professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the American University in Cairo, acknowledges this. She took over 10 years to collect and present her research in this book. The book is divided into three parts with 14 chapters, a hefty 71 pages of notes and bibliography, and a small index. The facts and figures about Malaysia covered in the initial pages are from mid-1998 and therefore, unfortunately, are outdated.

In the "introductory reflections," which constitute part 1 of the book, Abaza submits that the topic under discussion is controversial even among Muslim academics. Nevertheless, she has set out to compare the IOK endeavors in two very distinct cultures whose Islamizers, she believes, have a primarily secular training but an Islamic outlook. While Malaysia propagates

Islam's values and internationalization, Egypt is stuck in debates with al-Azhar's ulama and is thus "inward-looking." She draws a rather interesting analysis of the love-hate relationship found in the Southeast Asian Muslims toward the Middle East arising from the Arab world as Islam's birthplace yet politically unstable and a place where foreign workers are mistreated.

This part also attempts to contextualize the development of and philosophy behind IOK, including names and works of contributors from both countries. She laments the lack of these scholars' empirical contributions and lambastes the quality of IIIT publications, supporting the view that IOK is plain rhetoric with a political agenda of the Islamizers trying to prove that they are the ones who know the true meaning of knowledge. The novel-like chapter describing the homogeneity and contrasts between Malaysia and Egypt and specifically Kuala Lumpur and Cairo is refreshing after some serious discussions on IOK. Especially interesting is the chapter on the images of intellectuals projected by Jean-Paul Sartre, Pierre Bourdieu, and Edward Said, and then as it is now perceived in the Arab and Malaysian cultures. One would tend to agree that intellectuals in the Middle East have been marginalized by the regimes; their freedom of expression often has cost them dearly, and the clash among the secular and Islamist scholars is far more dramatic than in this part of the world.

Part 2 draws on some notable personalities, including Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, Syed Naquib al-Attas, Henry Corbin, and Syed Hussein Alatas. How Corbin, a French Orientalist, fits into the Malaysian-Egyptian scene is unclear; however, Corbin's writings on Islamic spirituality and his influence on Seyyed Hossein Nasr are undeniable. Abaza describes al-Faruqi as the main ideologist of the Islamization debate and someone with top-level political connections. Although this may be true in certain Muslim countries, his or any other Muslim scholar's political connections within America resulting in positive outcomes for the Muslim community is questionable. Abaza lashes out at al-Faruqi's IOK plan as an "imaginary vision of a transcendental *madrasah* beyond time and space." She questions his lumping of the social sciences without considering each discipline's historical account or being objective in what the West really claims for these sciences, and his ability to explain Islamic methodology from his own perspective. According to Abaza, al-Faruqi follows a "militant language and an Afro-American Muslim style of preaching." Those who have read al-Faruqi's writings know that most of these charges are not true.

As far as al-Attas (Founder-Director of the Islamic Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization-ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur) is concerned, she appears

to have a soft corner for this Malaysian philologist who claims to have introduced the idea of IOK. Al-Attas' contributions to IOK is significant, but many details in the chapter are dubious at best, as they portray the author's subjective opinion based upon her ephemeral exposure to Kuala Lumpur. After ISTAC's complete take over by the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 2002, much of what she writes in this chapter is history.

The chapter on Corbin actually covers the accomplishments of Nasr, as he was intellectually influenced by Corbin but at the same time connected with the Makkah Conference in 1979 that was a precursor to the IOK project in various Muslim countries. Nasr's writings on the relationship between science and religion are popular in Malaysia and other Muslim countries. However, his admiration of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon (who introduced the Sufi *turuq* yet was attracted by Hinduism and Buddhism) and a reflection of their philosophies in his writings has made him controversial within Muslim academic circles. A chapter on Syed Hussein Alatas, the elder brother of S. N. al-Attas, is quite revealing about a scholar who has kept a low profile in Malaysia. According to Abaza, S. H. Alatas rejected the scientific validity in Islamizing any discipline and considered it a political fight "to create space in the academic marketplace." His work is important in the postcolonial cultures of the Middle East and Southeast Asia. His early and short-lived publication *Progressive Islam* (1954-55), his writings on merging the ideas of Ibn Khaldun and Karl Mannheim, and his travels to Europe and the Middle East for sociological researches, are quite informative.

Part 3 deals with the debates in Egypt that include more general coverage on Islam and secularism rather than IOK *per se*. Abaza sketches the beginnings of the IIIT office in Cairo and its activities. That this office sent its intellectuals to Malaysia was true until 1998, after which IIIT had to pack up from there. Also, many scholars from Egypt and other parts of the Middle East left IIUM after the Asian economic crisis. Although this seems to reinforce Abaza's earlier comments that Islamizers came to Malaysia for money, there were more complex reasons for this exodus, including a lack of support from the top (or at least this is how they perceived it) after Anwar was jailed, ideological conflicts, cultural differences with the host population, and so on. There is no doubt that perhaps no other Muslim country could deliver the kind of support and tolerance that these scholars received in Malaysia.

Readers are sure to find the works of the Egyptian scholars Hasan al-Sa'ati, Abdel Wahhab al-Messiri, and Muhammad Immara who have been actively involved in the Islamization project quite informative. Abaza

points out how these scholars have lambasted the West, calling it evil, materialist, secularist, and so on. However, one would agree with the author that the revolutionary mentality prevalent in Islamizers from Cairo is missing in Malaysia. There are writings on IOK in Malaysia, but not the cantankerous type – at least not in English.

The section on the Egyptian government's *tanwir* (enlightenment that results from progressive rather than traditional Islam) campaign is interesting, but one would wish to read a comparative analysis of such an undertaking (if it exists) in Malaysia. Abaza writes that Arab intellectuals are fond of debating the issue of “cultural invasion” from the West, be it the leftists, Islamists or the Azharites, and gets carried away by criticizing them for using western technology (i.e., microphones and TV sets) while preaching against the West. She does remind the reader that the agenda for these groups is obviously not the same.

In the chapter on faith and science, she mentions Ernest Renan's writings on the inability of Muslims (and religionists in general) to develop a scientific mind. She points out how Islamizers still take a defensive attitude in trying to prove the compatibility of Islam with science, and describes the practice of charlatanism in both countries. She goes on to claim that many prominent Arab intellectuals are severely critical of the IOK project (e.g., the late Egyptian philosopher Zaki Nagib Mahmud, Sayyid Yasin, and Muhammad Rida Muharram). In the last chapter, she voices the concerns of a select group of women in Malaysia who were, from the outset, against the Islamization of Malaysian society.

The book is undoubtedly very critical of the Islamization project. It undermines IOK objectives and degrades its accomplishments. Abaza fails to realize that the current IOK endeavors and establishment of the international Islamic universities started a little over 10 years ago, around the time she started writing her book. While the seeds of Islamization are being sown in many countries, one has to wait for at least a generation or two to see the results. Her one-sided story shows a biased evaluation from the beginning. She also needs to educate herself on the statistics on treatment of women in “developed” countries before looking at Egypt and Malaysia. The book's strength lies in the fact that IOK devotees will get an outsider perspective, which they need to weed out the deficiencies in their attempts to Islamize knowledge.

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