# The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on Teaching Islam in American Universities

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## Abstrak

Signifikansi Ikhwanul Muslimin dalam dunia akademis Amerika terletak pada artikulasi akademis dari wacana Ikhwanul Muslimin sebagai ekspresi Islam modern secara umum. Dengan demikian, wacana kelompok politik tertentu diambil sebagai contoh yang tepat dari Islam arus utama modern. Perlakuan terhadap wacana Ikhwanul Muslimin ini menghasilkan asumsi bahwa Islam, atau setidaknya Islam modern, pada dasarnya bersifat politis. Oleh karena itu, tidak mengherankan jika kita dapat dengan mudah menemukan mata kuliah yang mengajarkan "Islam dan Politik", atau "Islam dan Demokrasi", yang tidak ada padanannya dalam mata kuliah yang diajarkan pada agama-agama lain. Apa yang menciptakan distorsi ini bukanlah semata-mata sifat politis Ikhwanul Muslimin sebagai sebuah organisasi. Melainkan pendefinisian ulang Islam sebagaimana yang telah disajikan oleh wacana para Ikhwan sejak pendiriannya. Di sana, Islam disajikan sebagai struktur yang berbeda yang mencerminkan struktur yang berbeda dari negara sekuler. Islam disajikan sebagai sistem modern yang komprehensif yang mencakup sejumlah sistem yang saling melengkapi: politik, ekonomi, sosial, pendidikan, kesehatan, dan sebagainya yang bekerja secara harmonis, dipandu oleh prinsip rasional maṣlaḥah, kepentingan umum. Wacana tentang para Ikhwan mendefinisikan objek studi bagi akademisi Amerika dan menetapkan agenda penelitiannya. Penyajian Islam secara berlebihan ini tidak hanya mempolitisasi Islam, tetapi juga meminggirkan sejumlah besar struktur dan konsep tradisional yang signifikan, serta beberapa tanggapan modern yang tidak termasuk dalam wacana Ikhwanul Muslimin. Politisasi Islam yang berlebihan dan penyajian Islam sebagai Islamisme telah menjadi bukan hanya masalah misrepresentasi media, tetapi juga krisis dalam kualitas pengetahuan tentang Islam yang diproduksi dan dipupuk di dunia akademis. Selain itu, situasi ini mengembangkan dua kesarjanaan yang tidak menguntungkan tentang Islam modern di dunia akademis Barat yang semakin mendistorsi dan menghalangi pengetahuan kita tentang Islam: yang satu bersifat minor dan Islamofobia, yang lain bersifat mayor dan Islamofilik. Pendekatan Islamofobia melihat Islam sebagai sesuatu yang secara inheren bertentangan dengan struktur modern seperti masyarakat sipil, demokrasi, keragaman budaya, dan pasar bebas. Pendekatan Islamofobia menggambarkan Islamisme - yang dilihat sebagai bentuk normatif dari Islam

modern, yang dianut oleh masyarakat Muslim, sebagai gerakan protes pribumi yang sah dan populer terhadap rezim-rezim non-demokratis. Eksplorasi terhadap John Esposito, yang kesarjanaannya telah menentukan corak Islam di dunia akademis selama beberapa dekade, dan buku-bukunya telah diadopsi secara luas dalam mata kuliah yang diajarkan di berbagai universitas di Amerika, akan membuktikan argumen saya.

***Kata Kunci****: Ikhwanul Muslimin; Wacana akademis; Islam Modern; Overpolitisasi; Islamofobia.*

## Abstract

The significance of the Muslim Brotherhood in American academia lies in the academic articulation of the brothers' discourse as the expression of modern Islam in general. As such, the discourse of a specific political group is taken as the appropriate example of modern mainstream Islam. This treatment of the brothers' discourse has resulted in an assumption that Islam, or at least modern Islam, is essentially political. It is not surprising, therefore, that one can easily find courses that teach "Islam and Politics," or "Islam and Democracy," which have no parallel in courses taught on other religions. What creates this distortion is not the mere political nature of the Brothers as an organization. It is the redefinition of Islam as has been presented by the brothers' discourse since its foundation. There, Islam is presented as a differentiated structure that mirrors the differentiated structure of the secular state. Islam is presented as a comprehensive modern system that includes a number of complementary systems: political, economic, social, educational, health, etc. that work in harmony, guided by the rational principle of maṣlaḥah, public interest. The discourse of the Brothers defined the object of studies for American academia and set its research agenda. Not only has this presentation of Islam over politicized it, but it marginalized a plethora of significant traditional structures and concepts, as well as several modern responses that are not included in the brothers' discourse. The overpoliticization of Islam and presenting it as necessarily Islamism has become not just a problem of media misrepresentation, but a crisis in the quality of knowledge about Islam that is produced and nurtured in academia. Moreover, this situation developed two unfortunate scholarships on modern Islam in Western academia that further distorted and blocked our knowledge on Islam: one is minor and Islamophobic, the other is major and Islamophilic. The Islamophobic approach sees Islam as inherently opposed to the modern structures of civil society, democracy, cultural diversity, and free market. The Islamophilic approach portrays Islamism—seen as the normative form of modern Islam, which is embraced by Muslim societies, as legitimate and popular native protest movement against non-democratic regimes. An exploration of John Esposito, whose scholarship has set the tone on Islam in academia for decades, and whose books have been widely adopted in courses taught in American universities will prove my argument.

***Keywords:*** *Muslim Brotherhood; Academic discourse; Modern Islam; Overpoliticization; Islamophobia.*

## Introduction

Interestingly, Islam had no space in the American Academy of Religion, AAR, until the 1970s. The field of Islamic Studies had been defined and hosted mainly by the American Oriental Society. A new generation of scholars, who received their doctorates around or shortly after this time, for instance, Vincent Cornell, Richard C. Martin, Bruce Lawrence, William Graham, Marilyn Waldman, and Andrew Rippin, were concerned that the limited scope of Oriental Studies would not accommodate their academic projects and aspirations and tried to find a space in the AAR. It was a more senior scholar, Ismāʿīl al-Fārūqī, with an academic background in philosophy rather than religion, however, who led these efforts. In the 1970s, Fārūqī's career was shifting from Arabism to Islamism as his newly acquired commitment to Islam was shaped out through his intensive engagement with the Muslim Students Association, MSA—an organization that was founded by members of the Muslim Brotherhood Group in the U.S.[1] It is worth noted that Fārūqī, in addition to presiding over the MSA, could cofound the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, AMSS, the Islamic Society of North America, and the International Institute of Islamic Thought, IIIT. Fārūqī succeeded eventually in creating a *Group* for Islamic Studies within the AAR before his resignation in 1983. Fārūqī's participation at the AAR was described as exercising "such strong control of the major AAR program unit devoted to Islamic studies for his own ideological purposes."[2] Only in 1986, the AAR established a full *Section* to Islamic studies.

Two important events changed the academic course of Islamic studies in the U.S.: the publishing of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1979, and the Iranian Revolution in 1980.[3] Said's book was either the cause, or only the announcement of the collapse of the field of Oriental studies that followed its publication. Richard Martin wrote that "By the end of the first decade of the present century, Orientalism in substance and practice has all but disappeared."[4] Said's attack certainly removed a significant obstacle that stood against the new generation, who wanted to invite social sciences into the study of Islam, and paved the way for them to reshape Islamic studies in the U.S. The Iranian Revolution in 1980 supported this academic shift, thanks

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[1] Steven Merley, *The Muslim Brotherhood in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Hudson Institute, 2009), 5–9.

[2] R. C. Martin, "Islamic Studies in the American Academy: A Personal Reflection," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (December 2010): 901, https://doi.org/10.-1093/jaarel/lfq089.

[3] Martin, "Islamic Studies in the American Academy: A Personal Reflection."

[4] Martin.

to the sudden and intense media interest in understanding Islam. The media was constantly interested in socio-cultural, and politico-economic interpretations of Islam that help their audience understand the dramatic events in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Needless to mention here the 1970s rise of religious nationalism around the world, and its echoes in the Islamic World in the form of a plethora of Islamic Movements that turned to political activism to assert its agenda. Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the emergence of Hezbollah in 1985 further emphasized the political framing of Islam. Nothing however is compared—in effect on the image of Islam in the media and studying Islam in academia, to the tragic event of September eleventh. In his study, "Islamic Studies in US Universities," Kurzman and Ernst wrote that "especially since 9/11, scholarly interest in Islamic studies has mushroomed. ... As a percentage of all dissertations in the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database, Islamic studies themes grew from less than one percent prior to the late 1970s to three percent in the 1980s and 1990s, to over four percent since 2001."[5]

With the collapse of Orientalism, this academic demand was accommodated mainly, not in religious studies departments, but in departments of area studies, which restressed, once again, the politico-economic, and socio-cultural framing of Islam. Kurzman and Ernst wrote that "The scholars who led the Middle East studies were hostile to Orientalist modes of inquiry, which they saw as antiquarian and unsuited to contemporary policy-relevant research."[6] Richard Martin in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, Rashid Khalidi in "Is There a Future for Middle Eastern Studies," and Marcia Hermansen in "The Academic Study of Sufism in American Universities" criticized this shift. Hermansen wrote, "area studies programs have been criticized for training specialists who speak to a narrow range of issues and, as a result, cannot engage in the broader theoretical debates and employ the cross-disciplinary methodologies that would make their work accessible and relevant to a broad range of scholars."[7] In fact, one can easily observe a number of challenges and awkwardness in studying Islam in area studies programs, as Kurzman and Ernst explained in their

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[5] Charles Kurzman and Carl W. Ernst, "Islamic Studies in U.S. Universities," *Review of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (March 2012): 24, https://doi.org/10.1017/S2151348100002974.

[6] Kurzman and Ernst, "Islamic Studies in U.S. Universities."

[7] Marcia Hermansen, "The Academic Study of Sufism at American Universities," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 24, no. 3 (April 2007): 25, https://doi.org/10.35632/ajiss.v24-i3.423.

study. For instance, an Islamicist will have to focus only on Islam in a specific region, ignoring his interest in studying cross-regional themes. Scholars from a variety of disciplines find themselves constrained within, say, Middle East case studies. Even in a limited region, there would be more interest in studying violence than other phenomena. The interests of book publishers and funding agencies leave only a narrow space for scholars of Islam to negotiate their own academic interests and projects.[8]

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Academic Interests and Political Support—Or the Other Way Around?

The interest in Islamic studies in the U.S. has in fact another story. Perhaps no one told this story better than Zachary Lockman in his two books, *Contending Visions in the Middle East*, and *Field Notes*. Lockman grounds the "rise of area studies," neither in an academic discussion around the value of Orientalism, nor in a number of political events, such as the Iranian Revolution. He explains how area studies rose because of the rise of the U.S. global role after the second World War, and the need of policy makers, strategists, the military, and the security institutions to have accurate and enough information on several areas in the world. Lockman explains the funding of Middle East studies by a number of organizations, such as Ford Foundation, Carnegie Foundation and RAND, as well as the direct Federal funding after the National Defense Education Act, which the Congress passed in 1958.[9] Lockman writes that "there were substantial number of academics who were willing, indeed eager, to put their skills to use in even more direct ways, accepting (even soliciting) open or secret funding from the military or intelligence agencies to conduct research that had a clear bearing on US policy in the Third World."[10] After years of receiving funds from Ford Foundation, the Middle East Studies Association, MESA, found it unacceptable to receive funds from military or intelligence entities to conduct research on the Middle East. It also criticized the National Security Education Program that was created by the National Security Education Act of 1991.[11] Lockman explains how the CIA was persistent in pursuing the MESA to work on its project by offering funds through the Agency for International Development, AID, which

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[8] Kurzman and Ernst, "Islamic Studies in U.S. Universities."

[9] Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 122–28, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511606786.

[10] Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*.

[11] Lockman.

Lockman describes as an arm of the Department of State that is frequently used by the Central Intelligence Agency, CIA.[12]

This background is important in the context of this paper because it explains the *definition* of Islam in the context of American academia—Islam as a political construct that invites security concerns. Lockman wrote that Middle East scholars, who strove to make their academic work policy-relevant, legitimized, rather than created, policies.[13] There is a striking example that Lockman invites to his narrative: Bernard Lewis. Lewis' example is striking because it brings us right to the Muslim Brotherhood. Bernard Lewis was invited after September eleventh to the White House to meet with the President, the Vice President, and members of the Defense Department's key Defense Policy Board. Lewis offered his understanding of the region and supported the decision to invade Iraq and turning it into a model of democracy for the Arab and Muslim Worlds. Lewis had published his book, *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, which was considered by the administration and large sectors of the public as key in understanding Muslims. Bernard Lewis' understanding, and we can add many other scholars, for instance, Fouad Ajami, is an understanding of Islam that was celebrated by Bush's administration and supported U.S. policies in the Middle East. This understanding matches, concept by concept, argument by argument, and statement by statement the understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood Group of "Islam."

## 2. The Brothers' Islam

In 1928, Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906-1949) founded the Muslim Brotherhood Group in Egypt. Against the conventional wisdom among those who researched the Brothers, I argue that al-Bannā did not produce any original thought. Al-Bannā had two other achievements: first, weaving statements and pieces of knowledge that were popular in his time, but especially from ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Jāwīš (1876-1929), and weaving them into a coherent ideology, and second, organizing Muslim activists into a hierarchical organization. For the purpose of this article, the ideology of al-Bannā can be summarized in three principles. First, Muslims need to *return* o Islam. This principle could be observed in a very early article that he published in *al-Fatḥ* in 1928. In this article, al-Bannā focused on two concepts: *al-daʿwah* and *al-hijrah*. *Al-daʿwah* refers to a missionary work, activists should launch to call Muslims back to the folds of Islam. *Al-hijrah* literally means migration, and it refers to the act

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[12] Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 194.

[13] Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States*.

of leaving an older, non-Islamic lifestyle and moving to a new way of life that is regulated by Islam. These two concepts assume a reality that is non-Islamic, and should be deserted for a new Islamic reality that needs to be recreated.

The second principle defines the political society, to which Muslims should belong. Regardless of their birthplace, all Muslims belong to one political community that is *al-ummah*. Here, as al-Bannā states, Islam is *waṭan wa jinsiyyah*, or a homeland and a citizenship. *Al-ummah* precedes the Caliphate, for the latter is only the political framework of governance, not the governed nation itself. *Al-ummah* provides Muslims with their political identity, and requires in return their loyalty. Al-Bannā emphasizes the need to have unity among all Muslims, unity that stands against their non-Islamic, national divisions.

The third principle is *šumūl*, which refers to the inclusiveness of Šarī‘ah to all human activities. Al-Bannā explains repeatedly that all fields of activity, be they political, economic, social, cultural, athletic, spiritual, scientific, educational, entertainment, etc. should be regulated and organized by Islam. Islam is presented as *niẓām šāmil*, a comprehensive, or an inclusive system. He frequently uses *Islāmī* or *Islāmiyyah* as a character that distinguishes its objects, be they an economic system or *al-da‘wah* from other systems, movements, lifestyles and traditions that are not Islamic.

The Borthers' Islam has certainly never been the only type of Islam available for researchers. A plethora of traditions, practices, organizations, legislations, identities, etc. have emerged as a response to Muslims' encounter of moderni*ties*. Others were continuities of pre modern traditions. The question is why was this specific Islam of the Brothers that was extensively researched in American academia? How could the Brothers be that influential within academic discourses in the U.S.? How could a specific discourse of Islam, in the context of American academia, become the presentation of "Islam" as a whole, or at least the presentation of mainstream modern Islam? My short answer to this intriguing question is that the Brothers offered a discourse of Islam that, first, could match the interests of the American political and security institutions, and second, could fit perfectly within the established, and definitely limited, theoretical approaches in American academia.

In their discourse, the Brothers presented Islam as inherently political, and culturally opposed to the "West." This presentation matches the American political approaches to countries as different as Morocco and

Pakistan, or Iraq and Afghanistan. It provides the strategists and policymakers with an easy frame to deal with a complicated reality. In the previous section, I pointed out to Bernard Lewis' visit with the President, and to his ideas and writings. Lewis explains the growth of Islamist ideologies as a "return to Islam," which al-Bannā used in the form of *hijrah* almost a century ago. In fact, Fārūqī too, an advocate of Islam, matches the ideas of Lewis. Ghamari-Tabrizi wrote, "Adopting the allegory of the Prophet's migration or *hijra*, al-Faruqi constructed a fantastic notion of the *ummah* and a normative *homo islamicus* subject."[14] No matter what citizenship, culture or language a certain Muslim has, s/he has already been programmed, in his return to Islam, to think and act in a specific way, as a member of a global *ummah*. [15]

Lewis describes Islam as "independent, different , and autonomous religious phenomenon." He describes Muslims as an entire civilization that has religion as its primary loyalty. Like al-Bannā, Lewis emphasizes that in Islam religion and the state are twined together. This is why, Lewis argues, Muslims "found an outlet in programs and organizations of a different kind—led by religious leaders and formulated in religious language and aspiration." The perfect example Lewis gives for "Muslims" is no one but the Muslim Brotherhood Group. While other religions are limited in their scope, Lewis write, "Islam is not conceived as a religion in the limited Western sense but as a community, a loyalty, and a way of life." If al-Bannā writes that Islam is *manhaj ḥayāh*, Lewis echoes it by writing that Islam is a way of life—a literal translation of the Brothers' ideology offered as an academic work on Islam that is helpful and useful to American policymakers. A continuous theme in Lewis' work is the inherent incompatibility of Islam and modernity. Islam, removed from any historical context, makes a distinct civilization that has been and will always be antagonistic to Western secular modernity. Is this statement any radical next to al-Fārūqī's intellectual project of "Islamizing Knowledge"? Farūqī's *homo islamicus* emerges in Lewis' writings as Muslims who behave *instinctively* seeking *ummah* solidarity as they respond to the challenges of modernity.[16]

## 3.  Western Academic Approaches

With admitted generalization, we can observe a dominance of modernization theory in the post WWII era until roughly the mid 1970s, where Marxism

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[14] Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, "Loving America and Longing for Home: Isma'il Al-Faruqi and the Emergence of the Muslim Diaspora in North America," *International Migration* 42, no. 2 (June 2004): 61, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-7985.2004.00281.x.

[15] Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*.

[16] Lockman.

and conflict theory began to gain significance in American academia. The 1980s came with interest in postmodern and post-structuralist approaches that paid attention to culture, identity, and discourse, and frequently visited notions of diversity, plurality, consumerism, globalization, gender, and the new social role of media. These theoretical frameworks articulated Islam in Islamic studies, as far as social sciences, and area studies programs were concerned. The early approaches of modernization theory that saw religion as a relic from the traditional past, soon to disappear, were replaced by approaches—still modernization-centered, that investigated the challenges of religious *encounter* of modernity.[17] Richard Martin and Carl Ernst wrote that,

> Modernity has been defined as an intrinsic characteristic of the civilization and culture of Europe and the United States; put in somewhat different terms, modernity is seen as a direct product of the Enlightenment. A corollary of this perspective is the customary expectation that Muslim societies are by definition excluded from that modernity, despite their having been on the receiving end of the Enlightenment through widespread colonization beginning in the late eighteenth century.

This premise is indeed the corner stone in a majority of the American scholarship on Islam, especially within the area studies programs—Muslims' culture is in essential conflict with Western modernity.

If we quickly review the syllabi of Islamic studies taught in American universities, we easily find topics, such as: Islam and Modernity, Islam and Democracy, Islam and Politics, Islam and the West, Islam and Human Rights, Islam and Gender, etc. By no means I see these courses as insignificant; they are significant and contribute to our understanding of modern Islam. The trouble with these topics however is twofold. First, why do not we see similar courses in studying other religions, for instance, Buddhism? The answer to this question comes from the assumption that while Buddhism is *only* a religion, and therefore can fit smoothly within the structures of the modern world, Islam comes with its own traditions and structures, be they political, social, economic, or otherwise. This is why Islam is necessarily challenged by a modern world, which it finds incompatible. This answer is indeed provided twice: once by American academia, and once by Ḥasan al-Bannā. It is here, where the Brothers influence the study of Islam in American universities. It is here where Lewis, who is certainly not a fan of Islam, Esposito, who usually

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[17] Hermansen, "The Academic Study of Sufism at American Universities."

figures as the advocate of Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood Group meet in this simplistic and shallow assumption about a complex tradition, such as Islam.

Second, the trouble with these courses is that the narrow vision of Islam, on which they are based, provides *the* perspective, the approach par excellence, of studying Islam. Muslims are studied as being constantly in a crisis, struggling their way through the modern structures of society and state. When researchers occasionally pay attention to other phenomena in Islam, for instance, Sufism, these phenomena are explained as archaic remnants of premodern Islam, as marginal phenomena, or, at best, as representatives of *local* Islam. Against these phenomena lies mainstream normative Islam that fights daily to negotiate the modern world and fit within its structures. Unlike their brothers and sisters, who belong to other religions, Muslims live a life characterized by its ongoing tension with their own tradition and culture. Here, Muslims have to make one of two choices: either be liberal, find new *interpretations* of Islam that are in harmony with the modern reality, or choose their traditions over modernity and automatically become fundamentalists.

I want to argue here that the question of modernity is not merely a cultural or civilizational question; it is necessarily a *political* question. It is necessarily political because modernity assumes a rupture with traditional structures, and their replacement with political, social, and economic structures that create the modern state, society, and economy. Al-Bannā understood this very well as he was turning Islamic reflections, and responses into a modern ideology and a political project. His Islam was certainly political because it reflected, contrasted, or translated modernity and its structures. Al-Bannā came up with an ideology of rupture, a political society, and a group of *differentiated* systems—claimed to be Islamic systems, that are built on the same modern structures of the modern nation-state: economic, political, social, cultural, spiritual, educational, entertainments, etc. How convenient are the Brothers, thus, to the American scholar, who comes with an agenda to investigate the challenges Muslims have with modernity! Al-Bannā offers this scholar with a rational and systematic *classification* of Islamic fields that perfectly matches not only the structures of the modern society, but the disciplines of Western academia as well. The serious problem here is the assumption that by studying a variety of fields-specific questions, we would be studying *Islam* in the modern world—not just Islam according to the worldview of the Brothers. The Brothers' Islam, one ideological version of Islamism, is being studied and presented as the normative mainstream

version of Islam, or at least of modern Islam. Even if you are not studying the Muslim Brotherhood Group, you are still using their worldview in classifying and studying other Islamic phenomena.

Cultural, economic, and political approaches were tried to study Islam. Culturally, researchers investigated such notions as identity or ideology. Economically, Marxian approaches were used to explain Islamic movements as a manifestation of class conflict and grievance because of maldistribution of wealth. Politically, social movement theories were frequently used to frame Muslims' activism. Again, all of these approaches contribute significantly to our scholarship of modern Islam. The problem, however, remains its reduction of Islam into modern Islam, and modern Islam into political Islam, and eventually the use of the Brothers' worldview as the perfect academic agenda to studying Islam. One may ask, should we expect every Muslim to walk around with an ideology of a sort? A sophisticated scholar, such as William Shepard seems to say yes, for he wrote an article, "Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology," where he classifies Muslims into eight groups: radical secularism, Islamic modernism, accommodationist-neo traditionalism, rejectionist neo-traditionalism, accommodationist traditionalism, rejectionist traditionalism, moderate secularism, and radical Islamism. He spreads these groups on a graph that has two dimensions: vertical for modernity, and horizontal for Islamic totalism.[18] One may also ask, can a Marxian approach help us understand even some aspects of political Islam itself, such as the leadership of Bin Lādin or Ẓawāhirī, who came from wealthy and prestigious families? Another question that can be raised is the capacity of social movement theories to analyze all patterns of social contention in Muslims societies that unnecessarily produce social movements.

Once again, I want to repeat that the above Western approaches contribute significantly to our understanding of modern Islam. The problem with these approaches, again, is their limitations and narrow perspective. The academic agenda of Islamic studies in the U.S. is, by and large, built on the worldview of the Brothers—or their ideological opponents who look like a mirror image of the Brothers, and on the political interests of strategic and security institutions in the U.S. Missing there are traditions, practices, ideas, actions, groups, movements, as well as a variety of social, cultural and economic formations that escape the limited scope of the modernist academic

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[18] William E. Shepard, "Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 3 (August 1987): 307–36, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800056750.

agenda. An approach that promises more capacity, and one that has been used more frequently since the 1990s is the Foucauldian *discourse*. One will have to wonder again: how may we investigate *undiscoursed* phenomena in Muslims' societies? How may we present a majority of Muslims, who buy or sell commodities every day without embracing or discussing the Islamic economic system, who go to schools, study, and graduate without reflecting on the Islamic epistemology of knowledge, or who start families, and work hard to raise their kids and take care of their partners without repeating statements on the Islamic family and its role in building the Muslim society? What we truly observe in our Muslims societies today is an implosion of Islam, not its withdrawal, but it is an implosion that escapes the Brothers' structures, and the American academic approaches.[19]

## 4. The Binary Phobic/Philic Response

Scholars of Islamic studies have been busy giving presentations, speeches and responding to media questions to refute Islamophobia. Richard Martin wrote,

> Since September 11, 2001 especially, messages on the ISLAMAAR listserv give evidence of members spending many hours seeking help in trying to educate the public about Islam in the face of so much hostility—in public lectures, talks with religious and civic groups, and media appearances, in developing new courses and new content in old courses that attempt to deconstruct the strong association of the Islamic tradition with violence, terrorism, wholesale misogyny, and anti-Western world views.[20]

Martin warns, however, against constantly advocating for Islam out of our passion as scholars of a field of study that we love, for problems in Islam that require recognition and investigation do exist. Martin seems equally concerned of new scholars of Islam, whose advocacy for Islam is based on their adoption of liberal interpretations, which they see as the true expression of the religion. Scholars of Islam, as they discuss Islam today, have no choice but to submit their evaluation of political Islam, and especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Whether they advocate for the Brothers, such as Charles Kurzman, or side with Bassam Tibi, who argued that Islamism is totalitarian, anti democratic and anti Western Civilization, that Jihadism is

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[19] I find the less used approaches, in Islamic studies, of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his work on the logic of practice and his conept of *habitus*, and Deleuze and Guattari's approach and arsenal of concepts very useful to study Islam.

[20] Martin, "Islamic Studies in the American Academy: A Personal Reflection."

not just a militant movement, but it includes social movements as well, that the Muslim Brothers Movement is the root of this totalitarianism, these scholars will necessarily invite the discourse of the Brothers, reflecting on it, and giving an impression that, again, the Brothers so represent mainstream Islam—or at least the branch that is interesting to U.S. policymakers and the American public in general. Mahmood Mamdani argued in a popular article, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslims: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," that September 11 resulted in the spread of "cultural talks," where religious experience has been turned into a political category, differentiating good Muslims from bad Muslims, rather than terrorists from civilians.[21] The war on terror, it seems, is only supporting further politicization of Islam, whether by Islamophobics, or by those who advocate for Islam and find themselves advocating for the Brothers as moderates and non-violent. That brings us to the next section.

## 5.  The Example of Esposito

As a random sample, I downloaded a list of twenty Islam syllabi that are taught in different American schools in the undergraduate programs. Each one of these syllabi, with only one exception, had an Esposito's book on the list of the required readings. Not all these courses are "Introduction to Islam." Some of them are "Islam and Modernity," "Islam in the Contemporary World," "Islam in the Modern World," and "Religion and Politics in Muslims Societies." The one course that did not have an Esposito's book as a required reading was "Islam and Modernity." The instructor created an anthology of Muslim writers, whose ideas represent Islam's response to modernity. The list of these authors includes Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad ʿAbduh, Abū al-Aʿlā al-Mawdūdī, Sayīd Quṭb, Zaynab al-Ghazālī, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, and Rāšid al-Ghannūšī. Esposito's book that is most frequently used is *Islam: The Straight Path*. Next to it in popularity comes his book, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*

On the website of the Islamic Society of North America, ISNA, an organization that al-Fārūqī cofounded in 1963 as an offshoot of the Muslim Students Association, there is a short biography of John Esposito, a frequent guest speaker of the organization. I am copying the short biography here:

> John Esposito is University Professor, Professor of Religion and International Affairs and of Islamic Studies and Founding Director

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[21] Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 766–75, https://doi.org/10.-1525/aa.2002.104.3.766.

of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and of The Bridge Initiative: Protecting Pluralism – Ending Islamophobia at Georgetown University. His more than 55 books include: *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*; *Shariah, What Everyone Needs to Know,*; *The Future of Islam*; *Who Speaks for Islam?*: *What a Billion Muslims Really Think; Religion and Violence*; *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam; The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?; Islam and Democracy after the Arab Spring*, *Islamophobia and the Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*. Esposito's writings are translated into more than 45 languages. Past President of the American Academy of Religion and Middle East Studies Association of North America**,** Esposito has been a member of the World Economic Forum's Council of 100 Leaders and the E. C. European Network of Experts on De-Radicalisation, a Senior Scientist for The Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, and ambassador for the UN Alliance of Civilizations. He has served as a consultant to the U.S. Department of State and other agencies, European and Asian governments, corporations, universities, and media worldwide.[22]

The biography of Esposito reflects both the scholarship of Islam in the U.S., the hosting of this scholarship in the AAR and the MESA, and the engagement of this scholarship with the Brothers, on the one hand, and American policymakers on the other hand. We need, however, to briefly explore the two popular books of Esposito in undergraduate programs.

In *Islam the Straight Path*, Esposito offers a historical review of Islam and its institutions to reach toward the middle of his book to modernity. There, he writes about "revivalism" of Islam. Esposito uses the theme of revivalism, resurgence, and resurrection in his writings to indicate a *return* of Islam that matches al-Bannā's *hijrah*, it seems. This theme comes in the text as a sort of conventional wisdom that requires no proof. In a pattern of continuous cycles, Islam returns every time Muslims face a challenge. There is revival in the nineteenth century, resurrection in the twentieth century and resurgence in the nineteen seventies. This is a cornerstone in Esposito, who argues that Islam is not a threat to Western civilization, in Bernard Lewis, who is certain Islam is a threat to Western civilization, and in al-Bannā, who hopes to fight Western imperialism. The coming back of Islam emerges with the typical series that is quite common in Western and non-Western writings:

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[22] ISNA, "John Esposito," Islamic Society of North America, 2022.

Afghānī-ʿAbduh-Riḍā—a series that assumes continuity of intellectual projects that are indeed radically different. Then, Islamic movements follow. Two Islamic movements make the modern history of Muslims worldwide: the Muslim Brotherhood Group in Egypt, and Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan. These movements combine religious ideology with political and social activism. Esposito calls them "neo-revivalists."[23]

In *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, a book that was written after the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, Esposito explains that Muslims—a fifth of the world population, are the remaining power challenging the triumphant West. He writes,

> However diverse in reality, the existence of Islam as a worldwide religion and ideological force embracing one fifth of the world's population, and its continued vitality and power in Muslim world stretching from Africa to Southeast Asia, will continue to raise the specter of an Islamic threat.[24]

The threat, it seems from the passage, is grounded in the large size of Muslim communities, and in Islam being an "ideological force." One wonders if Esposito, who like al-Bannā finds ideology in Islam, sees Buddhism too as an ideological force. He does not leave us wondering for long, for Esposito in another passage explains himself by writing, "Islam and Islamic movements constitute a religious and ideological alternative or challenge and, in some instances, a potential danger to Christianity and the West."[25] It is striking how a prominent scholar of Islam, whose books have set the tone in undergraduate programs in American schools, who presided over the two prominent academic associations that study Islam in America: the AAR and the MESA, would casually combine Islam and Islamic movements as synonyms—a behavior we expect from an Islamist not a scholar.

Repeatedly in the book, Esposito conflate Islam and Islamism, and portrays a picture of Islamic *resurgence* that has swept the Muslims world from Sudan to Indonesia and championed popular oppositions in their countries.[26] Moving to explain the worldview of "Islamic revivalism," Esposito writes,

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[23] John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[24] Esposito.
[25] Esposito.
[26] Esposito.

> At the heart of the revivalist worldview is the belief that the Muslim world is in a state of decline. Its cause is departure from the straight path of Islam; its cure, a return to Islam in personal and public life which will insure the restoration of Islamic identity, values, and power.[27]

Again, Esposito write about Islam, revivalism, and political Islam as if they are either synonyms or at least some points on one continuum. That is made clear when he later on writes that "In the nineties Islamic revivalism has ceased to be restricted to small, marginal organizations on the periphery of the society and instead has become part of mainstream Muslim society." After identifying revivalism with *mainstream* Islam, Esposito adds that "Revivalism continues to grow as a broad-based socio-religious movement, functioning today in virtually every Muslim country and transnationally." After expanding the phenomenon globally, Esposito foresees the future and writes that revivalism is "a vibrant multifaceted movement that will embody the major impact of Islamic revivalism for the foreseeable future."[28]

In this book, as it is in the previous book, Esposito repeats that the Muslim Brotherhood Group in Egypt, and the Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan are the two main revivalist groups in the world and that their global significance is undeniable. This passage is important and worth quoting:

> The significance of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami extended far beyond their national homelands and in time took on transnational significance. The Brotherhood inspired the establishment of similar organizations in the Sudan, Syria, Jordan, the Gulf, and Africa[29]. The Jamaat developed sister organizations in India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Kashmir. The writings of the Brotherhood's Hassan al-Banna and of Sayyid Qutb and Mawlana Mawdudi of the Jamaat-i-Islami would in time become widely translated and disseminated throughout much of the Islamic world. Their vision of Islam as an alternative ideology for state and society and the example of their organizations and activities provided a model for future generations of Muslims. As such, for many, they

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[27] Esposito.
[28] Esposito.
[29] Treating Africa as a country is a common mistake among less educated Americans.

constituted a link between the traditional religious heritage and the realities of modern life.[30]

The line between a scholar of Islam who is examining a specific phenomenon, and an Islamic studies scholar in American academia writing as he cooperates with the U.S. Department of State and other agencies, as well as European and Asian governments is as removed as the line between a specific group and mainstream Islam is.

Recently, Esposito and Emad al-Din Shahin published an edited volume, *Key Islamic Political Thinkers*. The book that was published in 2018 explores ten writers, six of them are Sunnis: Hassan al-Banna, Mawlana Mawdudi, Hassan al-Turabi, Sayyid Qutb, Rashid al-Ghannushi, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Forty years in his career, Esposito, the advocate of Islam, is as consistent as Bernard Lewis was.

## Conclusion

Based on the in-depth research into the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on the teaching of Islam in American universities, it can be concluded that this organization has had a significant impact on shaping the academic narrative about Islam. This is particularly evident in the emphasis on the political and ideological aspects of Islam, often overshadowing the spiritual and cultural dimensions of the religion. The study reveals how events like the Iranian Revolution and the September 11 attacks have heightened interest in Islamic studies, yet often with a narrow and politicized focus. This has led to Islamic education in American universities tending to highlight the political and social aspects of Islam, while neglecting the richness and diversity of practices and views within Islam. The research also highlights limitations in the current academic approaches and calls for a need for broader and more inclusive perspectives in Islamic studies. This includes recognizing the diverse traditions and practices of Islam and the necessity of understanding Islam beyond narratives dominated by specific political viewpoints. This conclusion offers a direction for future research that can explore further the diversity and complexity of Islam, and promote a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the religion in a global context.

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[30] Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*.

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