

# BEYOND ISLAMIZATION: RETHINKING ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

(A Critical Reassessment of the Intellectual Project of Ismail Raji al-Faruqi and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas)

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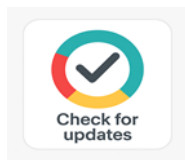
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## Abstract

### Keyword:

Islamization of Knowledge, al Faruqi, al Attas, Islamic epistemology, decolonial thought, knowledge production, post Islamization



The Islamization of Knowledge project, pioneered by Ismail Raji al Faruqi and further developed by Syed Muhammad Naquib al Attas through his concept of the Islamization of the mind (de Westernization), represents one of the most ambitious intellectual enterprises of twentieth century Islamic thought. However, despite its foundational importance, the project has attracted sustained critique regarding its epistemological assumptions, methodological coherence, and practical limitations. This article offers a rigorous critical reassessment of both frameworks, situating them within the broader landscape of contemporary Islamic intellectual discourse. Drawing on a systematic review of primary and secondary sources, this study interrogates the enduring relevance, unresolved tensions, and productive possibilities of the Islamization project. The article proposes a post Islamization paradigm that moves beyond binary frameworks of East/West or sacred/secular, embracing epistemic pluralism, decolonial critique, and contextually embedded Islamic knowledge production. The findings suggest that while the Islamization project laid indispensable groundwork, twenty first century Islamic scholarship requires more nuanced, dialogical, and empirically engaged frameworks capable of addressing the complex realities of Muslim majority societies globally.



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## Introduction

The question of how Muslims should relate to modern knowledge systems has occupied Islamic intellectuals since the encounter with European modernity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that this question was systematised into a coherent, programmatic intellectual project. The Islamization of Knowledge

(IoK), as articulated by the Palestinian American scholar Ismail Raji al Faruqi (1921-1986), and the parallel yet distinct framework of Islamization of the mind and de Westernization developed by the Malaysian philosopher Syed Muhammad Naquib al Attas (b. 1931), together constitute the twin pillars of what may be called the Islamic knowledge reform movement. Both projects emerged out of a shared conviction: that the crisis of Muslim civilization was fundamentally a crisis of knowledge, rooted in the uncritical adoption of secular Western epistemology at the expense of the Islamic intellectual tradition (al Faruqi, 1982; al Attas, 1978).

The historical context of these projects is inseparable from the political and cultural ferment of the post-colonial Muslim world. The failure of secular nationalist projects across the Arab world, the triumph of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and the deepening anxieties about Western cultural hegemony all provided fertile ground for calls to reconstitute knowledge on Islamic foundations. Al Faruqi's founding of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in 1981 and al Attas's establishment of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in Kuala Lumpur in 1987 institutionalised these intellectual ambitions, giving them organizational form and a global reach (Wan Daud, 1998; Stenberg, 1996). These institutions produced a generation of scholars trained in the dual tradition of Western academic disciplines and classical Islamic sciences, and their influence continues to be felt across Islamic universities in the Muslim world and beyond.

However, more than four decades since the formal launch of the Islamization project, a candid reckoning with its achievements, limitations, and unresolved contradictions is overdue. Critics from within the Islamic tradition, as well as scholars in postcolonial studies, science and technology studies, and comparative philosophy, have raised fundamental questions about the epistemological premises of the project, the adequacy of its methodology, and its practical outcomes in shaping actual curricula, research agendas, or scholarly communities (Sardar, 1988; Nasr, 1987; Musa, 2018). Concurrently, the emergence of new intellectual currents including decolonial theory, feminist Islamic thought, and empirical Islamic studies has created both challenges to and opportunities for rethinking the original project.

This article situates itself at precisely this juncture. It aims, first, to offer a rigorous and balanced account of al Faruqi's and al Attas's respective frameworks, attending carefully to their similarities and divergences. Second, it critically analyses the methodological and epistemological tensions inherent in both projects. Third, it surveys the intellectual landscape of post Islamization thought, identifying emerging paradigms that either build upon or depart significantly from the original agenda. Finally, it proposes directions for a more productive and contextually responsive model of Islamic knowledge production in the twenty first century.

## Literature Review

### **Al Faruqi's Islamization of Knowledge: Foundations and Programme**

Al Faruqi's seminal text, *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan* (1982), constitutes the most systematic statement of his intellectual programme. At its core is the argument that the malaise of the umma (Muslim community) is epistemological: Muslims have absorbed Western secular knowledge systems that are structurally incompatible with the tawhidic (divine unity) worldview of Islam. His remedy was a twelve-step programme designed to achieve the creative synthesis of Islamic heritage and modern knowledge disciplines, yielding a unified body of knowledge organised around the principle of tawhid as its epistemological axis (al Faruqi, 1982). Subsequent scholarship associated with the IIIT developed this agenda across numerous disciplines, producing textbooks, journal articles, and institutional curricula premised on the Islamization model (Ahmad, 1994; Alparslan, 2011). Scholars like Taha Jabir al Alwani (1991) and Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman (1989) extended al Faruqi's framework, while also acknowledging its incompleteness as a methodological guide for practising scholars.

## **Al Attas's Islamization of the Mind: A Philosophical Alternative**

Syed Muhammad Naquib al Attas's approach, elaborated in *Islam and Secularism* (1978) and *The Concept of Education in Islam* (1980), is at once more philosophically sophisticated and more narrowly focused than al Faruqi's. For al Attas, the problem is not primarily the content of modern disciplines but rather the secularised and relativist epistemological assumptions embedded within them what he terms the "de Islamisation of the Muslim mind." His solution is the Islamization of the human self: the restoration of proper adab (moral intellectual discipline) as the foundation of a truly Islamic educational system (al Attas, 1980; Wan Daud, 1998). Al Attas's framework has been widely acknowledged as philosophically richer and more internally consistent than al Faruqi's, though it has also been criticised for its elitism and limited engagement with the social sciences and empirical research (Musa, 2018; Dallmayr, 2002).

### **Critiques from Within and Without**

The Islamization project has attracted criticism from multiple intellectual quarters. From within Islamic thought, scholars such as Fazlur Rahman (1982) argued that the project's wholesale rejection of Western social science was intellectually untenable. Ziauddin Sardar (1988) critiqued the project for its failure to produce genuinely Islamic scientific methodologies, arguing that it was more reactive than constructive. Mohammad Arkoun (1994) mounted a more radical challenge, calling for an applied Islamology that would use the resources of critical theory to deconstruct sacralised assumptions in both classical Islamic thought and modern Islamist variants. From outside the Islamic tradition, postcolonial theorists have questioned whether the Islamization project inadvertently replicated the essentialist tendencies of the very Orientalism it sought to overcome (Said, 1978; Dabashi, 2013). Feminist Islamic scholars including Amina Wadud (1999) and Fatima Mernissi (1991) have raised foundational questions about whose knowledge and whose Islam is being centred in these frameworks.

### **Emerging Alternatives and Post Islamization Thought**

The limitations of the Islamization project have stimulated a range of alternative intellectual programmes. Wael Hallaq's *The Impossible State* (2013) offers a fundamental critique of the premises of Islamic modernity, arguing that the structural conditions of the modern state preclude any authentic revival of the Islamic governance tradition. Ebrahim Moosa's (2015) notion of an "Islamic humanity" offers a more pluralistic framework that embraces the hermeneutical and historical dimensions of Islamic intellectual life. Khaled Abou El Fadl (2014) has advocated for a jurisprudential hermeneutics that is simultaneously rigorous and open to moral development. These contributions collectively signal a post Islamization turn in which the binary of Islam versus the West is replaced by more nuanced, historically grounded, and epistemically pluralistic approaches (Kassim, 2020; Osman, 2017).

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in the tradition of intellectual history and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The primary aim is to analyse, contextualise, and critically evaluate the frameworks of al Faruqi and al Attas within their historical and discursive contexts, and to situate them in relation to contemporary developments in Islamic thought and global knowledge production. This methodological orientation is consistent with established approaches in Islamic intellectual studies (Esposito & Voll, 2001; Moosa, 2015) and aligns with the hermeneutical tradition in the social sciences (Ricoeur, 1981).

The study draws on a systematic review of primary texts authored by al Faruqi and al Attas, including *Islamization of Knowledge* (1982), *Islam and Secularism* (1978), *The Concept of Education in Islam* (1980), and related essays and conference proceedings. These are supplemented by secondary

literature comprising monographs, peer reviewed journal articles, and book chapters. Sources were selected through a systematic search of major academic databases including JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using the search terms “Islamization of Knowledge,” “al Faruqi,” “al Attas,” “Islamic epistemology,” and “Islamic knowledge production.”

Critical discourse analysis is employed to examine the rhetorical strategies, conceptual assumptions, and ideological presuppositions embedded in the primary texts. Following Fairclough (1995), discourse analysis attends not only to the semantic content of texts but also to their conditions of production and reception, the power relations they encode, and the social practices through which they are reproduced. The analytical framework is organised around four dimensions: (1) epistemological coherence; (2) methodological operationality; (3) hermeneutical adequacy; and (4) contextual responsiveness. This four-dimensional framework builds on and refines evaluative criteria proposed by Sardar (1988), Musa (2018), and Osman (2017).

## Discussion

### Epistemological Tensions in the Islamization Project

Both al Faruqi’s and al Attas’s frameworks rest on a foundational epistemological claim: that authentic Islamic knowledge is grounded in the principle of tawhid (divine unity) and that modern secular knowledge represents a structural deviation from this principle. This claim is philosophically significant and historically resonant (Leaman, 1997; Nasr, 1996). However, critics have pointed to a fundamental ambiguity in how both thinkers operationalise the concept of tawhid as an epistemological principle. Al Faruqi presents tawhid primarily as a methodological axiom; al Attas treats it as the foundation of a comprehensive ontological worldview whose recovery requires personal transformation through Islamic education. In practice, neither approach has fully resolved the question of what distinctively Islamic contributions to, for example, macroeconomic modelling or psychological therapy would concretely look like, beyond the substitution of Islamic nomenclature for Western concepts (Sardar, 1988; Nasr, 1987).

### Methodological Operationality: Aspirations and Limitations

Al Faruqi’s twelve step programme, while systematic in aspiration, has been criticised for its procedural vagueness at precisely those points where concrete methodological guidance is most needed. Steps such as “survey the discipline” and “establish the relevance of Islam” provide a general orientation but offer little guidance on how to adjudicate between competing Islamic legal opinions when constructing Islamic bioethics, or how to integrate empirical data from the social sciences with normative claims derived from fiqh (Abu Sulayman, 1989; al Alwani, 2005). Al Attas’s framework is more internally consistent, but its circularity requiring Islamised scholars to produce Islamised knowledge highlights a different problem: the institutional conditions it presupposes do not yet exist at the required scale (Wan Daud, 1998; Musa, 2018).

### Hermeneutical Adequacy: Tradition, Diversity, and Exclusion

Al Attas’s privileging of the Sufi metaphysical tradition has been criticised as sectarian in the sense that it positions one strand of Islamic thought as normative while marginalising Salafi, Shia, and rationalist (Mutazilite) perspectives (Musa, 2018; Hallaq, 2013). Al Faruqi’s framework tends in practice to privilege a broadly Sunni modernist reading of the tradition. The near total absence of gender perspectives in both frameworks is a significant hermeneutical lacuna. The subsequent development of the Islamization enterprise by their respective institutional descendants has been similarly slow to engage with the rich body of feminist Islamic scholarship produced since the 1990s (Wadud, 1999; Mir Hosseini, 1999). This failure reflects deeper structural features of both frameworks: their construction of the ideal Muslim intellectual as implicitly male and their grounding in

jurisprudential traditions historically dominated by male scholars.

### **Toward a Post Islamization Paradigm**

The foregoing critique is not intended to dismiss the intellectual achievements of al Faruqi and al Attas, both of whom were thinkers of formidable erudition whose contributions remain indispensable. A post Islamization paradigm would embrace epistemic pluralism the recognition that the Islamic intellectual tradition is itself internally diverse and that this diversity is a resource rather than a problem. It would adopt a dialogical stance toward other intellectual traditions, seeking genuine mutual enrichment rather than either uncritical borrowing or wholesale rejection. It would be empirically grounded, taking seriously the findings of the social, natural, and human sciences as data that Islamic thought must engage with. And it would be reflexively critical, capable of interrogating its own assumptions and attending to the voices of the marginalised (Moosa, 2015; Kassim, 2020). In the Malaysian context, this post Islamization turn carries particular significance given the structural relationship between Islamic scholarship and state institutions such as JAKIM and IIUM (Noor, 2014; Osman, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

This article has offered a critical reassessment of the Islamization of Knowledge project as articulated by al Faruqi and al Attas. Both thinkers correctly identified the challenge of epistemic dependency as a central problem for Muslim intellectual life in the post-colonial era, and both produced frameworks of considerable intellectual power. These contributions have been genuinely formative and cannot be bypassed by any serious engagement with Islamic knowledge production today. However, both frameworks exhibit significant limitations: epistemological ambiguities in the operationalisation of tawhid; methodological gaps that have allowed Islamic labelling to substitute for genuine disciplinary transformation; hermeneutical limitations that marginalise diversity within the Islamic tradition; and contextual inadequacies in addressing contemporary structural realities. The post Islamization paradigm proposed here is not a rejection of the Islamic intellectual tradition but a call for its more adequate and responsive deployment a dynamic intellectual practice rather than a fixed programme.

Several directions for further research emerge from this analysis. First, empirical studies are needed on the actual impact of the Islamization project on curriculum, pedagogy, and research culture in Islamic universities, particularly in Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and the Arab world. Second, comparative philosophical studies examining the relationship between the Islamization project and analogous projects of knowledge reform in other non-Western traditions would illuminate both the distinctiveness and universality of the challenges involved. Third, a sustained engagement with Islamic feminist epistemology and its implications for the Islamization framework is urgently needed. Fourth, the relationship between digital technology and Islamic knowledge production including the emergence of AI generated Islamic content, online fatwa platforms, and digital tafsir communities represents a new frontier that requires fresh intellectual engagement (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Bunt, 2018).

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the manuscript and its [Supporting Information](#) files.