Chapter 1

Understanding Knowledge Creation:

A Re-Reading of Female Islamic Education Movements

In August 2010, when I was engaged in field work, women were in regular attendance at the famous Umayyad Mosque, located in bustling Souk Hamidiyah in the heart of old Damascus. One of the foundational mosques in the Muslim world, whose foundations were laid in the very first century of Islam (706),[1] the mosque had a dedicated prayer area for women. This was, however, not the only mosque with a growing female presence; in most mosques in Damascus, whether located in the rich or poor neighbourhoods, increasing numbers of women had been evident in the previous decade; some mosques also hosted female *halaqas* (study circles). The Lala Basha Mosque, located in the affluent Shari' Baghdad (a main road in central Damascus), was a good example of the growing demand for mosque attendance and pursuit of Islamic learning among women in Syria. In the last '*ashra* (the final ten days)[2] of Ramadan, the large turnout of women for the '*Isha'* (night prayer) made it difficult for attendees to secure a spot inside the prayer hall, a fact which obliged some women, as well as men, to pray in the street outside. Other prominent mosques, such as the Kuwaiti Mosque and Abu-Nour Mosque, experienced a similar demand for separate prayer sections for women, and some held regular weekly halaqas. This growing female participation in mosques was in addition to the home-based study circles which continue to some extent even in today's troubled Syria; increased state restrictions on gatherings at mosques since the 2011 uprisings have, however, severely curtailed the mosque-based activities in cities under the control of the regime (Pierret 2012), while in the rebel-held areas, most notably Aleppo, mosques have been a major casualty of the

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[1] The Umayyad Mosque remains an important Islamic landmark in Syrian imagination. During my field work, the Ministry of Awqaf had organised a major event in the courtyard of the mosque to celebrate what it called the four 'foundational mosques' in Islam. Masjid-i-Nabwi in Medina, Masjid-i-Aqsa in Jerusalem, and the Grand Cordoba Mosque were the other three mosques. For a brief introduction to its period of construction and Islamic architectural style, see Yalman (2000).

[2] The last 'ashra is viewed to be particularly auspicious because of the promise of *Layla-tul-qadr* (Night of Destiny), which can fall on any odd night in the last ten days of Ramadan.

ongoing conflict[3] (Reuters 2015). The home-based study circles were most noticeably associated with *Qubaysiat*— a movement which in the last three decades has played a major role in creating demand for the study of Islamic texts among women from affluent families in Syria.

Women were known to be actively involved in the transmission of Islamic knowledge in Damascus in the early periods of Islam (Nadwi 2007). The trend gradually declined from the ninth to eleventh centuries, and subsequently revived between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, after which it largely disappeared.[4] Since the 1970s, this tradition has seen a revival, and a growing number of girls and women of all ages are joining the mosque-based or home-based study circles to gain knowledge of Islamic texts. There is little evidence to suggest that Syrian women have taken an active part in the armed rebel resistance that has gripped the country since early 2011.[5] Sources, however, confirm that these female Islamic study groups, especially those meeting in private homes, such as Qubaysiat, have continued to convene

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[3] Since some of the initial protests in 2011 against the Assad regime had taken place in the mosques or after Friday prayers, Pierret (2012) documents how this led the state to clamp down on mosque-based activities. However, in the rebel-held cities, mosques have remained central to the resistance; both the Assad regime and the Russian military have accused Syrian rebels and ISIS (the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) of using mosques to hide ammunition and to plan attacks (Reuters 2015). The most widely condemned destruction has been that of Aleppo's Umayyad Mosque, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its famous minaret; the rebels blamed the destruction on the regime's aerial bombing, while the government in turn blamed the rebels (France Diplomatie 2013; Martinez and Hamdi 2013).

[4] Nadwi is primarily concerned with tracing the involvement of women in the transmission of *hadith* scholarship. He finds names of women teachers and women students in the records of major centres of hadith scholarship in Damascus during this period. Popular venues for such learning and teaching activities included Al-Madrasah Al-'Umariyyah, Umayyad Mosque, Jami' Al-Muzaffari, and other mosques, gardens, and private schools (Nadwi 2007: 267). From the sixteenth century onwards, however, women's participation in these educational platforms steadily declined.

[5] Fears of sexual assaults in state custody have limited women's participation in armed resistance; many have, however, been able to support the rebels by providing humanitarian assistance (Fotini 2013).

during the resistance, even though the government has restricted the mosque gatherings for men and women alike.

In the Indian sub-continent, over 3,385 km away, (unlike Syria) there is no recorded evidence of women ever being actively involved in teaching Islamic texts in the earlier period of Islam's emergence in the region (Nadwi 2007),[6] even though a vibrant madrasa tradition for the training of 'ulama (Islamic religious scholars) evolved from the twelfth century (Malik 2008; Bano 2012a). Today, however, there is a continually expanding demand among women for formal study of Islamic texts. Islam gained a hold in the sub-continent in the twelfth century,[7] i.e. five centuries after it arrived in present-day Syria. Although few mosques in the Indian sub-continent, especially those in the regions that became part of Pakistan, have dedicated prayer areas for women that are as accommodating as those in their counterparts in the Syrian cities of Damascus or Aleppo, today a larger proportion of women than ever before are accessing madrasas, which normally evolve as an extension of a mosque, for the study of Islamic texts. Traditionally women in this region gained knowledge of Islam by learning to recite the Quran at home under the supervision of older family members or of respected elderly women in the neighbourhood; some families went further and engaged a trained 'alim (Islamic scholar) from a neighbourhood mosque or madrasa to provide home tuition. Today, a growing number of women are enrolling in female madrasas, which emerged only in the 1970s.

These madrasas offer students boarding facilities and a formal four-year degree programme covering Islamic subjects, thereby constituting an even more formal education system than that offered in the mosque- or home-based female halaqas in Damascus or Aleppo. Twenty per cent

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[6] Nadwi (2007) records that only a few female hadith scholars emerged in South Asia, and only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

[7] Islam's initial contact with the Indian sub-continent is recorded as early as the seventh century. A visible Muslim community, which emerged within Syria in the very first century of Islam (Berkey 2003), however, developed only gradually from the twelfth century onwards with the establishment of successive Islamic empires, starting with the Delhi Sultanate (1173–1351) and culminating in the rule of the Mughal Empire (1526–1858) (Malik 2008).

of registered madrasas in Pakistan today cater for female students (Bano 2012a: 125-154). Further, like Qubaysiat in Syria, there is also an informal movement promoting the textual study of Islam among women of all ages, which has made major progress among educated women from affluent families in Pakistan. Known as *Al-Huda*, this movement is distinct from the older tradition of hosting home-based *dars* (sermons) by women for women, which does also continue.[8]

In West Africa, in the most populous and Muslim-majority northern Nigerian state of Kano, where initial contact with Islam developed in the eighth century[9] and was consolidated in the nineteenth century after the Jihad of Usman dan Fodio, female Islamic scholarship did flourish during the reign of dan Fodio family but petered out soon after[10]. Today, however, a similar rise in demand for the pursuit of formal Islamic education for women is evident in northern Nigeria as in the other two contexts. The most pronounced expression of this demand takes the form of *Islamiyya* schools. These schools present a complex landscape of education provision; some operate in the morning, others in the evening or at night, and others operate multiple shifts (Bano 2008). Among them they cater for women of all ages. The Islamiyya school model of Islamic education in northern Nigeria emerged as early as the 1950s.[11] In the first two

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[8] For a comparative account of some of the home-based Islamic study groups in Pakistan, see Ahmad (2009).

[9] The spread of Islam in West Africa took longer than in the other two regions; even when local rulers converted, many retained pagan beliefs and practices (Hill 2009).

[10] A Fulani Islamic scholar who led a jihad against the Muslim leaders of Hausa city states for following pagan practices, Usman dan Fodio ended up establishing the Sokoto Empire, which covered northern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, and parts of Niger, and is referenced by northern Nigerian Muslims with great pride. As we will see in Chapter 2, women from dan Fodio family were very active in scholarly pursuits. For a detailed analysis of the rise and fall of the Sokoto Empire see Last (1967); for the life and times of Usman dan Fodio, see Shagari (1978) and Hiskett (1994).

[11] Interviews in the schools, with Islamic scholars from the two main Sufi *tariqas* (orders) in Kano, Tijaniyya and Qadiriya, as well as those from the more puritanical movement, *Izala*, and with officials within the Ministry of Education verify the foundation dates of the oldest Islamiyya schools in Kano. Umar (2001) similarly identifies the 1970s as being important for the emergence of new Islamic schooling platforms in Kano.

decades (the 1960s and 1970s), there were, however, only a few such schools, and they were targeted primarily at men. These schools were different from traditional Islamic learning platforms in Kano, popularly known as *Tsangaya* and *Ilmi* schools,[12] and they offered an integrated education model which combined modern education with study of the Quran and acquisition of basic Islamic knowledge (Bano 2008). From the 1970s onwards, however, these Islamiyya schools began also to attract female students. Today these schools have a higher ratio of female students: on average between 55 and 60 per cent of the student population in the mixed Islamiyya schools in Kano is estimated to be female (ESSPIN 2011; Antoninis 2014).

There are in addition many Islamiyya schools catering exclusively for young or married women of all ages from a range of socio-economic classes. Nana Fatima, a prominent female preacher in Kano, runs one such state-wide network of Islamiyya schools, targeted primarily at married women of all ages.[13] Further, the education in these schools never stops; enrolled students often view themselves as students for life and not for a specified period of time. At the same time, as in the case of the other two countries, even in northern Nigeria there is also a more elite-based Muslim women's movement named FOMWAN;[14] today broader in its scope than its counterparts in the other two countries, the movement's origin is linked to the growing demand for Islamic education among Muslim women in the north.[15]

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[12] Tsangaya schools provide Quranic education to boys mainly between the ages of 5 and 20; Ilimi schools are normally organised around a senior *malam* (Islamic scholar) who is a specialist in a specific Islamic text.

[13] In northern Nigeria, many girls still get married when they are only 14 or 15 years old. Government regulations do not encourage married girls to join government schools, a fact which makes Islamiyya schools a popular choice within this group. Consequently, Islamiyya schools for married women often have a student population ranging from teenage girls to women in their seventies or eighties.

[14] Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria (FOMWAN). Its stated mission is to 'propagate the religion of Islam in Nigeria through da'awah, establishment of educational institutions and other outreach activities' (FOMWAN 2015a).

[15] Its current area of activity is more diverse than that of Qubaysiat and Al-Huda, as its members are now involved in many development projects funded by government or development agencies. As we

These three locations, which represent three distinct regions of the Muslim world, have been my field sites since 2008 or earlier.[16] They are, however, not the only sites to have witnessed the emergence and steady expansion of this demand for the formal study of Islamic texts among Muslim women, starting from the 1970s. A similar phenomenon is observable in most Muslim-majority countries, as well as among Muslim diaspora communities in the West (Bano and Kalmbach 2012). From Indonesia to Morocco, and from Muslim diaspora communities in the United States to South Africa, similar trends in supply and demand for the formal study of Islamic texts, in the form of both formal certified courses and informal study circles, is visible and is on the rise (Bano and Kalmbach 2012). Further, there is no evidence to suggest that the emergence of this phenomenon at one site was triggered by awareness of a similar phenomenon at another site. The women joining halaqas in mosques in Syria whom I interviewed did not know of female madrasas in Pakistan, and vice versa – just as neither of the two groups was aware of the Islamiyya schools in Kano, or they about them.

Other studies show a similar lack of mutual awareness among groups in the other countries (Bano and Kalmbach 2012). The fact that a similar phenomenon emerged at the same time across different sites, without any mutual awareness then or now, makes the emergence and growth of these movements a fascinating topic of research inquiry for social scientists for a number of reasons: one, they have emerged across the different contexts at the same time, mainly the 1970s; two, the rate of expansion has been fast, and the trend is continuing; three, in most contexts, despite their organisational or doctrinal differences, most of these movements follow what is normally categorised as orthodox Sunni scholarship, with due respect for key

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will see in Chapter 3, the emphasis on the study of Islamic texts and modes of engagement with those texts is very similar across the three groups.

[16] In Pakistan, my initial interviews in female madrasas started as early as 2006 as part of the field work that I conducted for *The Rational Believer* (Bano 2012a)— an ethnography of the overall madrasa network in Pakistan.

texts produced by the four Sunni *madhhabs* (schools of Islamic law), as opposed to heeding the modernists' call for independent interpretation of the Quranic verses.[17]

Why a similar phenomenon, namely demand for formal study of Islamic texts among Muslim women, has emerged across different Muslim societies and Muslim diaspora communities in the West at the same time, and why this demand has apparently tilted in favour of respecting and reviving the orthodox Sunni scholarship, rather than adopting the reformist reading of Islamic texts, are critical questions that need to be addressed in order to understand the real implications of these movements for the shaping of Muslim societies. At a deeper level, such a focus acts as a lens to understand the broader institutional mechanisms that have facilitated the emergence and expansion of Islamic revival and reform movements since the 1970s. The emergence of these female Islamic study groups since the 1970s, and their preference for a scripturalist reading of Islam, becomes particularly noteworthy when seen in the context of major cultural transformations that are simultaneously underway in Muslim societies as a result of accelerated processes of globalisation.[18]

In most Muslim societies, inclusive of the three contexts under study, steady growth in access to television and cable network, increased media connectivity through the Internet, and the

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[17] The term 'orthodox' is normally used to indicate groups that adopt a literal interpretation of Islamic texts, while modernist approaches are argued to support more context-bound interpretations, thereby allowing more flexibility in making Islamic dictates adjust to the needs of modern times. This volume finds such a distinction superficial, as even orthodox groups recognise the difference between fixed and changeable rulings in Islam, and some are more literalist than others. The main difference between the two positions is argued to rest in their treatment of the scholarship produced by the four madhhabs. The orthodox approach places this body of shari'a at the heart of the interpretative process; the modernists are often dismissive of it. The core features of the two approaches and their implications for how Islamic law and moral teaching is related to contemporary life will become clear in Chapter 3.

[18] This cultural transformation has not been confined to the last three decades, but was part and parcel of Western colonial rule. For an engaging account of how colonial rule, among other changes, also influenced the cultural sensibilities of the educated Muslims, especially the elites, see Rogan (2011).

rolling out of gender-empowerment programmes supported by the state and funded by Western aid programmes have put religiously inspired gender norms under pressure (Larkin 2008; Bano 2012a; World Bank 2010). An increasing number of Muslim women today are accessing modern education (UNDP 2014); the male-to-female ratio in university enrolment has already been narrowed in many Muslim countries (Klugman et al. 2014; BBC 2015); and, a higher percentage of women are securing employment outside the restricted list of sectors, such as teaching, traditionally viewed as suitable for them (Kelly and Breslin 2010; World Bank 2010; GoP 2012). Women are increasingly visible across the different spheres of economic activity, as well as in the media, and some also enter the political arena. Recent studies also document changing household dynamics and an increasingly assertive role assumed by women in household decision-making among younger couples in Muslim societies (Kelly and Breslin 2010; World Bank 2010; Klugman et al. 2014).

Seen through the lens of modernisation theory, which predicts a decline in religious adherence with the onset of modernity,[19] this relaxation in gender norms within contemporary Muslim societies, which allows for increased socio-economic mobility and opportunities for political engagement for women, is understandable. The broader societal shifts would be expected to reduce religious adherence, especially if the prevalent religion, as is the case with Islam, is seen to be inherently restrictive of female agency (Mernissi 1991, 1992; Ahmed 1992). Further, those who retain the faith would be expected to demand a reinterpretation of particularly restrictive Islamic norms. Such demands for reinterpretation would find natural support in the works of scholars who argue that it is the 'ulama and the dense body of shari'a that evolved over the centuries, and not necessarily the guidelines presented in the Quran, that are responsible for the perpetuation of patriarchal structures within Muslim societies (Mernissi 1991; Wadud 1999; Barlas 2002). The emergence of female mosque- or madrasa-based Islamic study platforms and informal study circles as convened by Qubaysiat and Al-Huda, which permit educated Muslim women to study Islamic texts, could thus be expected to challenge

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[19] For a review of how the founding fathers of sociology expected modernity to lead to the demise of religion, see Stark and Finke (2000).

male interpretation of these texts to argue for more liberal gender norms from within the Islamic tradition. The scholarship available on these movements to date, however, reports otherwise.

What then explains the demand for these apparently orthodox contemporary female Islamic education movements? And how are the readings of Islam that they promote shaping the socio-economic and political institutions within their host societies? This rare comparative study of one form of Islamic associational life across three diverse contexts argues for a major revision to the arguments advanced to date about the causes of expansion and spread of female Islamic movements and their bearing on shaping the public sphere within Muslim societies. It also serves as a lens to understand the broader phenomenon of Islamic resurgence since the 1970s. In order to understand the significance of these movements, and the argument advanced in this volume, it is best to proceed by briefly elaborating the reasons why from an analytical perspective the emergence of these female Islamic education movements and the persistence of Islam in fast-changing domestic and global contexts is not a trivial achievement.

The persistence of Islam: not a trivial achievement

The 'ulama and their attempts at Islamic revival[20] through supporting movements such as these female Islamic education movements are often held responsible for the apparent stagnation of intellectual spirit within Islam and the apparent inability of Muslim societies to experience economic prosperity and political stability in modern times. Such arguments often assume the persistence of Islam to be a product of the weight of history and custom, rather than possibly the product of reason and efficient adaptation by the scholars to demands of the changing times. It is often argued that the doors of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) were closed in the Muslim

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[20] 'Ulama, unlike the modern educated Islamists who often argue for the capturing of state power through the establishment of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-i-Islami, have instead normally focused on Islamic revival movements through encouraging the spread of Islamic knowledge and personal piety (Metcalf 2002; Loimeier 2003).

world from the twelfth century onwards,[21] curbing the intellectual reasoning and associated creativity and socio-economic and political prosperity that marked the period of early Islamic history. The centrality of scientific progress and rational reasoning associated with the Western renaissance and the rise of Western colonial power made many Muslim political elites attribute the decline of Muslim political authority to the nature of Islamic scholarship.[22] It was this conviction that made many post-colonial Muslim leaders embark on major Islamic modernisation projects (Berkey 2007) involving reform of the traditional centres of Islamic authority and learning. Interestingly, such views of the 'ulama and their reading of Islamic texts were not confined solely to Western scholars or the modernising Muslim political elites, but were also shared by the university-educated Islamic reformers, who in the twentieth century increasingly started to challenge the 'ulamas' understanding of Islam. Unlike the secular reformers, these Islamists, such as Maulana Maududi in India and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, did not find Islamic texts incapable of answering modern challenges; they did, however, find the 'ulama and their readings of Islamic texts out of sync with the needs of modern times.[23]

Central to such conceptions of the 'ulama, and the rigidity associated with orthodox readings of Islamic texts, is an assumption of stagnation and uncritical thinking within classical methods of Islamic teaching.[24] 'Ulama as religious elites in this line of reasoning are presented as highly orthodox, lacking dynamism, and capable only of protecting the traditional texts that they know best. The analytical challenge posed by such narratives, however, is major: it fails to account for the reasons why the 'ulama and the orthodox Islamic scholarship that they preserved could survive the major upheavals faced by Muslim societies during the nineteenth and twentieth

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[21] For a review of such positions and their critique, see Saliba (2011).

[22] Attaturk's reforms of the Islamic education institutions under the Turkish Republic (Agai 2007) are arguably the most visible expression of this cynicism towards orthodox Islam and Islamic authority structures within twentieth-century Muslim political elites.

[23] For a review of the different orientations of the Islamists and the 'ulama of Al-Azhar, see Mitchell (1993) and Calvert (2010).

[24] For a review of such positions and their critiques, see Zeghal (2007); Zaman (2010); Pierret (2013).

centuries.[25] Colonial rule not only made Islamic education irrelevant to modern economic and political realities and opportunities, it also came with a Christian civilisational agenda. Yet, Islam survived. In the words of (Geertz 1971: 64): 'Beyond the economic and political, the colonial confrontation was spiritual: a clash of selves. And in this part of the struggle, the colonized, not without cost and not without exception, triumphed: they remained, somewhat made over, themselves.'

While the Muslim political and economic elites failed to defend their turf in the face of Western economic and political institutions introduced by the colonisers, the 'ulama (despite coming under direct state control in many Muslim contexts[26]) successfully defended their authority over the religious sphere and ensured the successful transmission of core tenets of the faith to successive generations of Muslims. The continued demand for madrasa education in Muslim societies,[27] despite the improved provision of modern education systems, the growth of female Islamic education movements, and at times even the more radical expressions of Islam, highlight the success of the 'ulama and traditional scholars in defending their turf and retaining among the majority of Muslims an appreciation of core Islamic values. To successfully perpetuate appreciation of beliefs which are apparently out of sync with the demands of

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[25] When researching how elite families in medieval Damascus (1190–1350) used the demonstration of knowledge and cultural practices to preserve their status, Chamberlain (1994: 176) draws on Charles Maier (1975) to argue the same: 'In an era of upheaval, it is continuity and stability that need explanation'.

[26] Al-Azhar in Egypt being the most studied example (Zeghal 2007).

[27] Even when pursuing modern education, in all three societies under study, the majority of the public at some point either studies in a mosque or a madrasa or is taught at home by a teacher trained in this traditional Islamic education system, to secure basic Islamic education. In Kano, the 2003 government census recorded 23,000 Islamiyya, Quranic, and Ilmi schools, as compared with fewer than 6,000 state primary and secondary schools (GoK 2003); for Pakistan, see Nelson (2006) for an analysis of how even when pursuing modern education, part-time enrolment in the form of evening classes in mosques for both boys and girls remains critical to parental conceptions of what constitutes basic education.

modernity, and to ensure effective transmission of these beliefs from one generation to the next, is not a small feat.

It is therefore not surprising that recent studies of 'ulama and traditional platforms of Islamic authority have focused on highlighting the dynamism shown by the 'ulama in preserving their authority, and retaining adherence to core tenets of Islam, in fast-changing times (Zeghal 2007; Zaman 2010; Pierret 2013). Robinson (2008) similarly has shown how constant attempts at internal reform have been central to 'ulama scholarly tradition and how these trends found a heightened expression during the nineteenth century. Saliba (2011), while documenting evidence of scientific progress in periods between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries otherwise associated with a decline of intellectual thought and rationalist spirit in Muslim societies, has also argued that widely shared claims among Western scholars to the effect that the publication, and subsequent popular endorsement, of Imam Al-Ghazali's (1058–1111) 'Incoherence of the Philosophers' indicated the death of intellectual reasoning within Islamic scholarly tradition are a gross misreading of historical developments.[28] By recording the rapid socio-political changes against which the 'ulama and their reading of Islamic texts have survived, these studies have shown that the persistence of orthodox Sunni Islam cannot be taken as a given, or as a mere persistence of habit: we have to account for the dynamic agency of the 'ulama. They also show that even within its apparently most orthodox incarnations, intellectual reasoning and justification has been very important to the survival of Islam across time. The evidence presented on female Islamic education movements in this volume will

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[28] In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Imam Al-Ghazali, who belonged to the Ash'ari school of Islamic theology (which combined an emphasis on literal readings of the script associated with the Hanbali tradition with Mu'tazila's emphasis on the use of rational argumentation) critiqued aspects of Ibn Sina's and Al-Farabi's works on Islamic philosophy. Its popular reception within the public and scholarly community of the time is often viewed as marking the defeat of the rationalist voices within the Islamic tradition; the assertion that 'gates of ijtihad were closed in the twelfth century' often draws on this as evidence. However, this position is strongly refuted by influential scholars of Islamic history, either explicitly or implicitly: see Saliba (2011) and Robinson (2001) respectively, who show how rational reasoning remained important to knowledge creation in successive generations of Muslims. It is also important to note that Al-Ghazali critiqued only aspects of Ibn Sina's and Al-Farabi's philosophical debates; he did not discredit the importance of philosophical inquiry *per se*.

further pursue this line of reasoning; it will show how attributing the persistence of Islam to processes of religious indoctrination or habit is empirically untenable and theoretically offers too simplistic a reading of processes of religious conviction and institutional persistence (Bano 2012a).

In my own field work, the puzzle posed by the continued ability of the 'ulama to command a large-scale following despite defending tenants of the faith which apparently contradict the demands of modern times, was most forcefully articulated by one of the bishops in Aleppo. He had joined the Director of the Directorate of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) in Aleppo, a prominent scholar and Sufi shaykh, Mahmud Abu al-Huda al-Husseini, in an interview that I conducted with the latter, during the summer of 2010. Responding from a comparative perspective, he added, 'I tell him that he is lucky to have this problem of people flocking to his mosques, we on the other hand struggle to have any followers, because our communities are leaving the churches. I ask him, what is his secret?' The emergence and spread of contemporary female Islamic education movements, and their ability to attract even modern- educated Muslim women, is thus in reality a part of this bigger puzzle regarding the persistence of orthodox Sunni Islam in the face of major shifts in socio-economic and political institutions in Muslim societies which constantly question the utility of traditional beliefs.

Dominant explanations for the persistence of Islam

Dominant narratives concerning the persistence of Islam and more specifically its reassertion in public sphere since the 1970s can be grouped in two categories: the indoctrination thesis and the presumed appeal of Islam. It is best to begin by addressing the limitations of the highly influential 'indoctrination thesis'. A popular explanation among policy makers and academics alike for the persistence of orthodox Sunni Islam, especially the type associated with more conservative Islamic groups, is the flow of Saudi money (Jaffrelot 2002). Saudi Arabia is argued to actively finance the spread of puritanical Islamic movements abroad, fuelling the growth of mosques, madrasas, and radical Islamist groups (Rashid 2010); it is also seen to support proxy Sunni–Shia wars in other Muslim countries. Initially limited to Saudia Arabia

since the so-called Arab Spring, such assertions were made also about Qatar.[29] Such assumptions are, however, inherently simplistic; they place high reliance on the ability of Saudi Arabia to plan and manipulate the complex set of countries and diaspora Muslim communities that adhere to Sunni Islam. To plan conflicts and proxy wars such as Shia–Sunni violence at selected locales or to fund specific jihadi networks might be a manageable feat for the Saudi establishment, but to successfully influence popular readings of Islam across the Sunni Muslim communities globally is another story.

There is little evidence to suggest that money alone can make individuals or communities change their inner beliefs or attitudes; in-depth studies of contexts where externally funded Islamic discourses engage with local understandings of Islam show that embedding a narrowly defined Wahhabi or Salafi[30] reading of Islam across different Muslim communities, following one of the other three Sunni madhhabs, is not an easy process (Bano and Sakurai 2015). The introduction of new ideas, ritual practices, or moral frameworks in a given community does not guarantee their full absorption; even when absorbed, the idea, practice, or moral code more often than not acquires a strong local flavour in the process.[31] The ideas most able to gain roots in a local context are those that show the greatest ability to adapt to local realities. There is a need to move beyond simplistic assumptions that attribute the growth of apparently orthodox Islamic movements to influxes of Gulf money. Such explanations share implicit assumptions

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[29] Western media outlets published extensively on alleged Qatari funding of Syrian rebels after the 2011 uprising; a few selected examples include Khalaf and Fielding-Smith (2013); Blair and Spencer (2014); Dickinson (2014).

[30] For an understanding of the plurality of approaches within Salafism, see (Lacroix 2012); most studies making such assertions, however, ignore these nuances and equate Salafism with Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism.

[31] For a fascinating account of how ideas promoted from abroad are contested, shaped, and reshaped based on the prior modes of believing in the host communities, see Alex Thurston's contribution on returnees of Al-Medina University in Kano (Bano and Sakurai 2015). Chapters 7 and 8 in the same volume (see Shiozaki 2015 and Kushimoto 2015), while explaining the strong influence of Al-Azhari Islam in East Asia, further support this argument by showing that when ideas do get embedded successfully, normally they do so because they fit well with the local tastes, preferences, and interests of the political elites.

that the persistence of Islam is a result of custom and the weight of history, making little allowance for critical reflection and human agency; not surprisingly, then, such narratives more often than not fail to illuminate the realities on the ground. Arguably, such arguments are in reality also disrespectful of ordinary Muslims, many of whom, as we will see, identify Islam's great emphasis on individual and collective reasoning as being its primary appeal (Euben 1999). The behavioural assumptions underpinning such a framework are thus too simplistic.

Opposed to this line of reasoning, there are arguments that explain the persistence of Islam by highlighting its appeal. Such a starting position allows devout Muslims a certain element of conscious choice and initiative, in other words a certain degree of agency. How this appeal is defined is, however, highly contested. Some interpret it purely in terms of economic rationality, or what is often viewed as a functionalist outlook on the study of religious devotion. Here devotion is seen to be a product of the benefits that people acquire from participation in religious activities in the context of the failure of modern Muslim states to deliver on the promises of modernity (Fischer 1982; Sivan 1990). Contrary to the indoctrination thesis associated with influxes of Saudi money and the spread of Wahhabi ideas, studies pursuing this alternative line of explanation attempt to identify contextual factors that can consciously attract people, especially disgruntled youth, to the Islamic movements. The studies pursuing this line of argument vary in their level of sophistication; some have been critiqued for undermining the intrinsic appeal of the Islamic movement (Euben 1999; Mahmood 2012) whereby religion is valued – but only as a means of protest against the modern states which have failed to deliver material prosperity. Others have, however, provided quite convincing accounts of how the political economy of these post-colonial states, which have largely been led by authoritarian leaders who have failed to deliver on the promises of modernity, has played a role in the rise of political Islam (Wickham 2002). Many studies with a more narrow focus on understanding the rise of religiosity among Muslim women, such as increased numbers of young women wearing the veil, have similarly interpreted such actions as a response to contextual factors such as the need for protection against street harassment, or as a sign of political protest against modern authoritarian Arab states (El Guindi 1999).

Studies critical of such readings of Islamic religiosity instead put emphasis on highlighting the inner experiences of the believers and appreciating how restrictive Islamic norms can continue to have a following because of the power of historically inherited traditions. Among studies of the female Islamic movements, Saba Mahmood's (2012) highly influential *Politics of Piety,* with which this volume will engage actively, will fit within this framework. Referring to these Islamic education movements as 'piety movements', Mahmood describes them as part of the Islamic revival process, geared towards the cultivation of an Islamic ethical self 'in which women from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds provided lessons to one another that focused on the teaching and studying of Islamic scriptures, social practices, and forms of bodily comportment considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self' (Mahmood 2012: 2). She attributes the popularity of these groups to a shared concern among their members about the secularisation of Egyptian society: 'Despite differences among the mosque groups, though, the participants all shared a concern for what they described as the increasing secularization of Egyptian society, an important consequence of which is the erosion of a religious sensibility they considered crucial to the preservation of "the spirit of Islam" (*rūḥ al-islām*)' (Mahmood 2012: 43). In advancing this argument, she attributes a unified motivation to women from different socio-economic backgrounds who join these groups. As this volume will show, this is a major oversight; women's motives for joining these groups, as well as the factors sustaining commitment to such groups, are much more complex than an unwavering commitment to the cultivation of an Islamic ethical self. Few members of such groups share such religious fervour; and those from more educated and culturally mixed backgrounds actually appreciate many aspects of Western modernity, while drawing limits around others.

As opposed to seeing the membership of these groups as either purely a reaction to the failure of modern Muslim states to deliver on the promise of modernity, where religious commitment is given little weight in the analysis, or supporting the opposing position whereby a genuine commitment to cultivating an ethical self in line with the demands of orthodox piety, irrespective of any costs associated with it, becomes the overriding concern, this book recognises the importance of both these explanations, while arguing also for recognising the importance of the third explanation: that an appreciation of the benefits of living by the Islamic moral code is more often than not directly linked with a conscious recognition of the superiority of the Islamic way of life. Thus, women seeking to live by Islamic norms, especially those who

have received a modern education and are professional and culturally progressive, develop such a preference not just because the historical or cultural contexts in which Muslim women find themselves make them imbibe restricted notions of agency or make them inherently critical of all that Western modernity has to offer. Instead, the real commitment to cultivating a pious self often results from an intellectual conviction that the Islamic moral and ethical framework is superior to alternative frameworks, including that offered by Western modernity. Such a position aligns well with Euben's (1999) call for taking the intellectual and moral reasoning behind Islamists' ideals seriously.

This volume will show that joining these movements, and staying with them, results not from a fear of Western secularisation taking over Muslim societies, but from a reasoned engagement with what the Islamic ethic and the Western liberal ethic have to offer and deciding how to enjoy many achievements of Western secular society, which many Muslim women enjoy, while adhering to core Islamic principles. There is thus a strong dialectic process between the rational and moral appeal of Islamic moral and legal ethics, whereby the actual impact on human well-being and the real-life consequences of following those moral ethics are actively contemplated. Commitment to Islamic ethics is enhanced on becoming convinced of their perceived superiority over other competing moral frameworks, often through comparative analysis. Women pursuing the study of Islamic texts do not do so because they denounce modernity, but most do come to appreciate the Islamic moral ethic partly by recognising that such a framework can help to limit a major weakness of the Western liberal framework being experienced by Western societies despite their material prosperity, namely the weakening of human ties and the related breakdown of family structures and increased individualism.

This book will thus show how all three elements of Islamic appeal discussed above— the failure of state-led modernisation to deliver on its promises of economic prosperity in post-colonial Muslim societies, the attraction for some of a process for cultivating an inner pious ethical self, and an intellectual conviction concerning the superiority of the Islamic moral framework, which can lead to better human flourishing than Western modernity has achieved— play an important role in understanding the appeal of these movements. In adopting such a position, the book will show that the real challenge is to discern the relative weight of each one

of these three explanations in efforts to understand the persistence of the appeal of orthodox Islam. It is clear that all three dimensions matter, but what we will see in this book is that they are given different weights in the calculations of different women. More importantly, the book will show that the relative weight of a specific appeal in shaping the decision to join a movement is often linked to the socio-economic and educational background of the woman in question. The empirical evidence presented in the book will thus illustrate how different members represent different motivations for joining the group, and only by a careful mapping of the complex set of individual motivations that combine to form the group can we truly understand the real forces shaping the appeal of these female Islamic education movements. Promoting one narrow explanation at the cost of other equally relevant explanations might satisfy scholars' intellectual interests, but it distorts reality and, if used to inform policy, can be particularly damaging.

Female Islamic education movements: the state of existing scholarship

The status of women in Muslim societies and the apparently discriminatory nature of many Islamic rulings regulating gender norms are two of the most popular areas of research within Western scholarship on Muslim societies (Roded 2008; Kelly and Breslin 2010). The reasons for Western scholarly and policy fascination with the status of Muslim women are not difficult to appreciate: all four Sunni madhhabs are largely in agreement that Islamic laws require a woman to submit to the authority of her husband, to inherit half the share of her male sibling, and to maintain a monogamous relationship while her husband has the right to have four wives at a time. Not surprisingly, these rulings sit uncomfortably with the foundational principles of Western feminism (Mernissi 1991; Ahmed 1992; Badran 2009). As has been noted by many scholars, Muslim women and democracy are even today often used as the ultimate barometers to establish the stark difference between the alleged orthodoxy of Muslim societies and the liberalism of the West (Roded 2008; Seedat 2013). This has led some authors, who are critical of the picture of submissive Muslim women presented by Western scholarship, to argue that within Western liberal circles and among feminist theorists there is a resistance to acknowledging that Muslim women could ever voluntarily join Islamic movements (Mahmood 2012; Abu-Lughod 2013). To the liberal Western theorist, Islamic norms are so inherently

discriminatory against women that it is seen to be impossible to believe that any woman could accept them out of choice.

While such assumptions about women in Muslim societies remain dominant within liberal academic circles, as well as in the Western media and among policy makers, scholarship on the conditions of women's lives in Muslim societies as well as the complexity of Islamic law regulating gender norms has, however, over time become well aware of the nuances. Lila Abu-Lughod's anthropological studies of women in Arab societies have in particular attempted to challenge the oppressive image of Muslim expectations of women by convincingly illustrating how women in Muslim societies can lead meaningful lives (Abu-Lughod 2013: 783). Her argument was most forcefully summarised in her paper *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, which she wrote in response to post-September 11 debates in the USA when the need to liberate Afghani women was being used as one of the moral justifications for invading the country; later she developed her argument into a full-length book with the same title (Abu-Lughod 2013). By sharing evidence from her field visits and years of engagement with Muslim women of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds, she argued for appreciating the high authority and status commanded by Muslim women within the household, which these women highly value. As she argued: 'I have done fieldwork in Egypt over more than 20 years and I cannot think of a single woman I know, from the poorest rural to the most educated cosmopolitan, who has ever expressed envy of U.S. women, women they tend to perceive as bereft of community, vulnerable to sexual violence and social anomie, driven by individual success rather than morality, or strangely disrespectful of God' (Abu-Lughod 2002: 788). In the same paper, Abu-Lughod also advanced her argument for recognising the different subjectivities, experiences, and preferences of women across different cultural and historical settings: 'I argue that we need to develop, instead, a serious appreciation of differences among women in the world—as products of different histories, expressions of different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires' (Abu-Lughod 2002). Abu-Lughod's work and related studies thus helped to challenge the assumption that Muslim women are essentially vulnerable and in need of saving from their religious tradition.

Another independent but related body of literature which also has evolved mainly in the 1980s and also questioned Western assumptions about Islam as inherently oppressive of women's agency pushed the debate further by questioning the hermeneutics of Islamic legal tradition. This body of scholarship attributed the apparent biases against women in Islamic legal tradition

not to the Quran but to the patriarchal nature of Islamic authority whereby men have traditionally controlled the interpretation of Islamic texts. Led mainly by progressive Muslim women, many of whom were educated in Western universities and some of whom also held positions there, this line of reasoning became particularly notable in the 1980s and focused on highlighting how Quranic verses, though not necessarily the broader body of Islamic scholarship (Ahmed 1992: Wadud 1999), are open to alternative interpretations. Some of these scholars have questioned the authenticity of many *hadiths* (Prophet's sayings), which are restrictive of female liberties (Mernissi 1991 and 1992). These scholars advocate undertaking personal ijtihad (Barlas 2002); some among them contend that most liberties associated with Western liberal feminism can be defended by situating Quranic verses in their historical context (Barlas 2002; Wadud 1999; Seedat 2013). These scholars have often been labelled as Islamic feminists, as they are perceived to share the aims of their Western feminist counterparts to challenge patriarchal structures of power that restrict women's agency. Given that there are subtle differences among scholars within this tradition concerning the extent to which they find Islamic ethics and legal rulings inherently restrictive of female agency, and the methods that they adopt to critique the orthodox interpretations, some within them actively resist the label of feminist.[32] This has made Margot Badran (2009) argue that today it is important to talk of Islamic feminism*s* (in the plural) to capture the diversity of positions among Islamic feminists, as opposed to talking of Islamic feminism. She herself defines Islamic feminism as being driven by a search for egalitarian roles:

> Islamic feminism argues that the Qur'an affirms the principle of equality of all human beings, and that the practice of equality between women and men (and other categories of people) has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), consolidated in its classical form in the ninth century, was itself heavily saturated with the patriarchal thinking and behaviors of the day. It is this patriarchally-inflected jurisprudence that has informed the various contemporary

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[32] Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud are known to reject any attempts to label their work as 'Islamic Feminism'. Both seem to want to distance themselves from the secular connotations associated with the feminist resistance in the West.

> formulations of the *shari'a*. The Hadith ... have also been often used to shore up patriarchal ideas and practices. (Badran 2009: 247)

These scholars have made an important contribution to highlighting the complexity of Islamic legal tradition, and the protections that Muslim women can find within Islamic law, as opposed to the work of scholars such as Abu-Lughod who have focused on capturing the lived experiences of Muslim women and the richness of their lives. This scholarship, while inspiring further research as well as practical initiatives,[33] has, however, been critiqued for accepting the standards set by Western liberal feminism as the ultimate barometer for measuring gender equality (Seedat 2013). Though shifting the responsibility from Islam as a belief system to the interpreters of the Islamic texts, namely 'ulama, these scholars, by emphasising the need for the reinterpretation of orthodox Sunni debates on gender norms, are seen to partly reinforce the submissive image of a Muslim woman. As we will see during the course of this book, the female Islamic education movements that are under study fail to share the fervour of these scholars for reinterpreting classical Islamic reasoning on gender roles. But, for now, having traced this line of progression of Western scholarship on the lives of Muslim women, it is important to understand how the study of female Islamic education movements that are a focus of this book falls within this broader scholarship on women and Islam.

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[33] *Sisters in Islam*, a civil-society organisation, with the head office in Malaysia, is one example of the close relationship of these scholars with on-the-ground activism. This group lobbies for reform of Islamic law related to women. It is against the implementation of Islamic *hudud* (restriction) penalties on the grounds that 'should all the possibilities and the consequences not be weighed carefully, the implementation of hudud holds within it the potential for enormous injustices'; it is also in favour of equal shares in inheritance for women and maintains, 'Sadly, the interpretations of these verses (the verses outlining due inheritance shares in Surah Nisa) and the laws derived from them have often ignored their egalitarian ethos. Muslim women continue to be denied full inheritance rights based on narrow and misguided readings of the Qur'an.' (Sisters in Islam 2015). Since they question some of the principles outlined with great precision in the Quran itself (such as inheritance rights) which, as we will see in the following chapters, makes them non-negotiable in the view of most Muslims, the platform has limited following.

The scholarly attention paid to studying these female Islamic education movements is actually very recent; research on women in Islamic teaching or spiritual leadership positions had traditionally focused on women operating from within a Sufi tradition (Kalmbach 2012).[34] Studies profiling these movements which focus on increasing Islamic knowledge among women through the study of Islamic texts have actually emerged only in the last ten years, but since then the field has been expanding fast (Bano and Kalmbach 2012; Hammer and Spielhaus 2013). The study that brought these movements to scholarly attention is Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety*. Prior to this, there was some work done on female halaqas by Elizabeth Fernea, who filmed them in Cairo as part of her broader inquiry into the subject of veiling,[35] but she did not make them a focus of a full-length monograph. Mahmood's was one of the very first studies to provide an ethnographic account of a mosque-based 'piety movement' in Cairo, where women acquire knowledge about Islam through participation in study circles; more importantly it posed an important theoretical challenge to Western liberal understanding of Muslim women's participation in these movements and the very notion of agency as used in feminist theory. It is therefore important to spell out Mahmood's argument clearly here, as the evidence presented in this volume, while supporting her emphasis on recognising the agency of the women joining these movements, critiques her position in certain ways that have implications for how we understand agency, knowledge production, and religious conviction, as well as how we interpret the societal impact of these movements.

Noting resistance within Western feminist circles to recognising that Muslim women's support for an Islamist project can be an act of choice,[36] Mahmood draws on field work with members of a women's mosque movement in Cairo to question whether female agency must always manifest itself in opposition to the dominant structures of power. Critiquing the feminist

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[34] Much of that literature is focused on establishing the charismatic nature of religious authority instead of one derived from demonstrating command of complex Islamic texts (Kalmbach 2012).

[35] Elizabeth Fernea was one of the scholars who has actively tried to challenge the Western assumption that the widespread practice of veiling in the Middle East is symbolic of women's oppression. Demonstrating that veiling can be a conscious choice, and an empowering one, was the focus of one of her well-known documentaries: *Women in the Middle East: A Veiled Revolution*.

[36] As opposed to being 'pawns in a grand patriarchal plan' (Mahmood 2012: 5).

discourse, as well as the 'liberal assumptions about human nature' that underlie it (Mahmood 2012: 5), she argues for recognising that the pursuit of piety, even within visibly 'non-liberal movements', can be an agentive act if we take into account the effort required by the conscious disciplining of one's desires and habits. Cultivation of one's actions and desires in line with an ethical framework that one has come to value can thus, in Mahmood's view, be an agentive act, just as it is challenging structures of domination. In Mahmood's own words:

> Put simply, my point is this: if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes "change" and the means by which is it effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms. (Mahmood 2012: 14 and 15).

Mahmood's analysis is focused on recognising the influence of historically shaped desires and aspirations when understanding what constitutes agency in a given context. Failing to do that, the 'secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part' can in Mahmood's (2012: 1) view end up showing the same intolerance for alternative ways of being and doing of which it accuses the Islamists.

In arguing this, Mahmood is promoting an argument also made by Abu-Lughod about the need to recognise the historically shaped nature of women's experiences and desires; however, by using her empirical evidence on these mosque movements to critique the very conception of agency in Western feminist discourse, she ended up stirring active discussion among feminist

and liberal theorists.[37] Her work has also been influential in shaping the popular understanding of the societal influence of these movements. While few studies of the female Islamic education movements that have appeared since 2005 have actively engaged with Mahmood's theoretical discussion on agency, many have supported her basic assertion that Muslim women's participation in these movements must be viewed as an act of choice, not as a compulsion (Kalmbach 2008; Ahmad 2009; Jaschock 2012; Buergener 2013). In general, the scholarship on these movements has been rapidly expanding and continues to do so. A conference on female Islamic preachers leading such movements,[38] held in Oxford in 2009, resulted in a volume (Bano and Kalmbach 2012) featuring 21 such cases from across the Muslim-majority countries as well as Muslim diaspora communities in the West. Noticeably for the majority of the scholars who contributed to this volume, it was a new area of study.

As we will see during the course of this volume, this recent scholarly focus on these movements is partly explained by the fact that in most contexts the movements deliberately worked quietly to establish strong roots before becoming visible enough to be noticed. The dramatic growth in this area of study since their discovery is in turn explained by the fascinating puzzle that these movements present by harbouring an orthodox tradition in a context of rapid societal change. Some scholars were also attracted to a study of these movements by an expectation that they could potentially be challenging the male authority over interpretation of Islamic texts. The fact that Islamic authority that has been exclusively under male control for most of its history has in recent decades opened up to accommodating female authority figures indicated to some both a change in the structure of Islamic authority and a potential source of future contestation within the Islamic tradition on interpretation of Islamic legal and moral ethics, especially

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[37] Her work has been endorsed by some influential liberal feminist theorists, most noticeably Judith Butler, but has also been strongly critiqued by others, see Gourgouris (2008). In a new Preface to the 2012 edition of *Politics of Piety* Mahmood herself acknowledges that '*Politics of Piety* has elicited both the praise and the ire of feminists: some have hailed the book for restoring agency to religiously devout Muslim women hitherto denounced for their patriarchal proclivities. Others have condemned the book for precisely the same reason' (Mahmood 2012: x).

[38] As we will see, not all of these movements are led by female preachers; this particular volume, however, was focused on those movements that are led by women.

concerning gender norms. The consensus in the volume (Bano and Kalmbach 2012), however, was that as for now there is little evidence to suggest that active participation of women in studying Islamic texts is leading to their reinterpretation; instead most women preachers who were profiled as having widespread support followed the traditional Sunni madhhabs and placed heavy emphasis on respecting the traditional corpus of Islamic scholarship. Within the expanding body of literature on these movements, this is the first study to present an in-depth account of the factors shaping the emergence and expansion of these movements across three different sites; it is also one of the first studies to capture the diversity within these groups at any given site, instead of simply focusing on a particular group.

Core argument: knowledge production and social arrangements

This book revisits the dominant academic discourse concerning female Islamic education movements and offers two correctives. The first relates to the perceived influence of these movements on Muslim societies, and the second to the causes of their emergence. In doing so, it engages actively with Mahmood's arguments, summarised in the preceding section, given their influence in shaping existing discourse in the field. This book will argue that the dominant assertion that commitment to cultivating an ethical self is the primary motive and outcome of participation in these movements (Mahmood 2012) is a very selective reading of these movements and is inconsistent with the evidence available on these groups. While the vocalised sentiments of some followers of these movements might be to seek and imbibe personal piety and cultivate a self in line with traditional Islamic conceptions of female piety, demonstrated through a conscious decision to adopt the veil and cultivate appreciation of Islamically valued female virtues of shyness and modesty, the processes shaping women's decisions to join these movements, as well as the ways in which women from different backgrounds interpret traditional Islamic ethics, are much more complex. The rationale for participation in these movements, as well as the level of commitment to inculcating an ethical moral subject, is highly variable, depending on the background of the participants. The particular reading of an Islamic text, legal ruling, or prescribed moral ethic that a woman participating in these Islamic education movements has chosen to follow closely correlates with her socio-economic background, educational level, professional background, and most importantly the cultural orientation of her family. Some women within these movements might be primarily devoted to

cultivation of an Islamic moral or ethical subject; most women, however, try to balance a complex set of impulses whereby they aspire to maximise their worldly interests—shaped by their active participation in modern economic and social institutions—while retaining basic religious virtues. Further, even those who are highly devout at one point in time might not be able to retain that exclusive devotion over a prolonged period of time.

The core argument advanced in this book seeks to establish the need to acknowledge the role of these movements as platforms for knowledge production, and the need to recognise the complexity of knowledge-production processes. By looking at these movements strictly through the lens of piety or agency, existing scholarship on female Islamic education movements ignores a very simple but critical aspect of knowledge creation: namely, that the outcome of any interaction between a teacher and a student is highly contingent on the profile of the student. The result is that the more effective a group is at inducing educated and professional Muslim women, especially from culturally progressive backgrounds, to study Islamic texts, the higher is the probability that women within this group, rather than confining themselves to a very narrow concept of the female Islamic ethical self that is tuned only to 'uphold, a discursive tradition that regards subordination to a transcendent will (and thus, in many instances, to male authority) as its coveted goal' (Mahmood 2012: 2 and 3) will aspire to configure new possibilities which neither neatly fit within the ultra-conservative conception of Islamic piety nor attempt to reinterpret Islam to fit Western sensibilities. Rather, emerging from elements from within these movements are discourses that argue for carving out new possibilities whereby women can exercise most liberties acknowledged by liberal theorists as being essential for human flourishing, yet retain a clearly evident Islamic identity. The efforts of some of these women come closest to what Tariq Ramadan has called the 'radical reform' (Ramadan 2009a: 3): a reform that implies not just making Islamic scriptures meet the parameters set by modernity, but using Islamic ethics to think of new possibilities, with the view that they might provide answers to contemporary problems that are even superior to those offered by the Western rationalist framework. Such a process, which Ramadan calls 'the awakening of Islamic thought' (Ramadan, 2009: 1), involves reconciliation with Islam's spiritual and ethical dimension but also requires a 'renewed commitment and rational and critical reading (*ijtihâd*) of the scriptural sources in the fields of law and jurisprudence (*fiqh*)' (Ramadan 2009: 1). Such efforts help to regain what Ramadan notes has been lost by modern

Muslims: 'the innovative, bold, creative spirit of early times', which in his view has today 'given way to timid approaches that only consider reform in terms of adapting to the world and no longer with the will and energy to change it' (Ramadan 2009: 3.)

As we will see in this volume, many of the women joining female Islamic education movements actually lead very modern lives which are deeply embedded in modern social and economic institutions—a fact that became very visible even in Egypt, in the pro-democracy demands of young hijab-wearing Egyptian women who were active participants in the Arab Spring and the protests that took place in Tahrir Square. These women are highly educated, many are professionals and economically independent, they socialise in mixed-sex settings, travel internationally, and even at home are constantly absorbing the Western cultural tastes and aesthetics to which they are daily exposed through TV networks, films, the Internet, and mobile-based applications. They have inherited the Muslim value system, but they have equally been exposed to Western value systems, which have a bearing on their subjectivities, sensibilities, and aspirations. A predisposition to shun all that secularism or Western modernism has to offer is, for most educated, professional, and culturally diverse women, thus not the main motive or outcome of participation in these movements. Instead, these women value much of what modernity has to offer; initial participation in these movements is often not a result of a strong commitment to imbibe orthodox ways of Islamic life. Often the initial motivation for many women joining these groups ranges from a desire for social networking or acquiring basic knowledge of the Quran, instead of harbouring a serious commitment to dramatically transforming their modern lives in the light of Islamic ethics. Participation in the groups, if sustained, does gradually lead to increased religious conviction; but, as this volume will show, critical to building this conviction is an appreciation of the superiority of the Islamic moral framework compared with what Western modernity, in their understanding, has come to offer. The important role played by intellectual reasoning and contemplation, as opposed to habit, in developing religious conviction is most visible when looking at movements that cater for women who have received a modern education and are economically well-off; it is, however, not entirely absent from the behaviour of women from lower-income groups. The reasoning abilities and the real-life considerations shaping everyday realities differ for women in the two groups, but in both cases the Islamic moral and ethical code that they are taught has to be able to speak to their real-life experiences if it is to sustain conviction.

For the women from low-income groups whose lives are not deeply affected by modern institutions, and whose primary role often remains confined within their households and the bounds of tradition, knowing the complexities of Islamic law concerning gender norms helps them to assert increased authority within the household (Kalmbach 2008; Bano 2012a). Islam, even in its most restrictive interpretations, appears to be more empowering and protective of women's interests than the social norms that prevail in many culturally conservative societies. For the educated women, on the other hand, mixing Islamic knowledge with the realities of their everyday lives enables them to realise that Islamic rulings, if properly understood and applied to the modern context, can allow them to retain all the essential liberties shaping their very modern lives, yet without violating the core of Islamic ethics. These women's efforts to blend Islamic knowledge and everyday realities, however, remain distinctly different from those of the modernists or Islamic feminists. While both groups end up arguing that more liberal gender norms are consistent with Islamic ethics, the two have very different starting positions concerning the importance of orthodox Islamic scholarship, and very distinct methods of reasoning. The modernists take Western modernity as their starting point and work backwards from there. As outlined in the section on Islamic feminists, for them democratising Islamic knowledge often equates to minimising the role of 'ulama and the body of shari'a, and encouraging everyone to interpret the Quran for themselves. The educated women from within the Islamic movements that are studied in this volume adopt a totally different approach. These women take very seriously the complexities of Islamic rulings and the rich debates among the scholars of the four madhhabs. They defend their modern life choices not by discrediting any Islamic injunction seen to be inconsistent with Western conceptions of female agency, or by doing away with the 'ulama and their specialist knowledge of shari'a; instead their focus is on bringing their own knowledge of everyday realities to the experts and engaging in a dialogue to identify modern solutions from within the tradition. These women as a result become better equipped to develop a hierarchy of rulings in order of their importance in Islamic legal or moral reasoning, enabling them to better appreciate both what is core to Islamic ethics and must not change and also what is flexible and open to change. The conception of Islamic gender norms resulting from such efforts is actually quite striking: it allows for preserving more or less all the liberties argued as being essential to female empowerment within Western feminist debates

– except one: that of sexual liberty.[39] In Chapter 3, we will see how this one difference ensures that – while the interpretations of Islam adopted by modern educated women allow them to live their contemporary lives while preserving most of the liberties defended by Western feminists – their interpretations would still produce very distinct societal outcomes from those produced by Western feminism. Further, we will see how these distinct societal outcomes could have defenders even within Western philosophical thought (Euben 1999; Taylor 2007).

Situated vis-à-vis Mahmood's (2012) reading of these movements, when it comes to her basic critique of the failure of liberal Western theorists to recognise the willing adherence of Muslim women to an Islamic ethical framework, the evidence presented in this volume is in full harmony with her assertions. Where the argument advanced in this volume diverges from Mahmood's position is that, unlike *Politics of Piety*, this project opts not to assume that Islamic movements are inherently 'non-liberal' (Mahmood 2005). She is keen to show that adhering to non-liberal movements can be an act of choice, in that what people choose to actively pursue is a product of historically shaped values and desires. This volume, on the other hand, shows how deliberation and conscious reasoning about the optimality of those ethical or moral guidelines is central to retaining (and often even building) conviction in historically inherited religious norms, especially in contexts of rapid societal change. Most importantly, such a position shows that, while defending the agency of the women in these Islamic movements, Mahmood in reality ends up taking all agency away from them by refusing to recognise that their adherence to an apparently non-liberal movement could be a result of conscious appreciation of the ideals proposed by a moral framework alternative to that of Western liberalism. This volume, thus, questions whether agentive acts can ever purely be products of habit divorced from conscious reflection on the optimality of what is desired. Can conviction

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[39] Mahmood (2012) also builds her arguments by focusing on debates among the members of the mosque movement around the need for sexual piety; for her the discussion, however, gets narrowly focused on establishing how orthodox Islamic readings place on women the onus of responsibility for inciting sexual emotions among men. In Chapter 3, we will see how women within Islamic educational movements instead focus on highlighting the prohibition on sexual intimacy outside the bond of marriage for both men and women and defend it as being beneficial for both the sexes, as well as for society as a whole.

in religious dictates persist, especially in times of rapid change and among educated men and women, without finding them optimal in everyday life experiences or being intellectually convinced of their logic? Can Islam's persistence among Muslim women be assigned simply to habit, rather than recourse to reason or intellectual conviction that Islamic ethical and moral frameworks can not only appeal to reason but can also contribute to human flourishing more effectively than anything that Western modernity has come to offer? The answer that this volume provides to the above questions is no;[40] in doing so it defends a conception of agency where deliberation on the effectiveness of the goals pursued and not just the freedom to pursue a given goal is seen as central to its definition (Sen 1995; Kabeer 1999).[41]

Here it is also important to note that the realisation that habit alone cannot explain persistence of religious adherence, or for that matter religious conviction more widely, especially in periods of fast-changing societal contexts, has a long history in anthropology, despite its emphasis on recognising the influence of historically shaped institutions and customs on conceptions of self, individual preferences, and future action. Geertz's (1971) *Islam Observed,* a classic anthropological text, which traces the comparative evolution of Islam in Morocco and

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[40] It is important to acknowledge here that Mahmood (2012) herself recognises that women interpret the Islamic norms in the light of their everyday realities, and their socio-economic and educational background has a direct bearing on how they relate to Islamic texts. She reasserts this claim in the new preface for the 2012 edition. She, however, fails to sustain this analysis by getting too quickly focused on how women absorb orthodox norms, instead of fully exploring what creates the conviction within them to do so. Thus, as this volume will illustrate, her assertion that her critics misread her work when they critique her for denying these women's real agency remains unconvincing; the actual analysis that she presents of the way, in her view, women in these movements imbibe orthodox Islamic precepts says otherwise.

[41] Differentiating three critical components of female empowerment, namely, resources, agency, and achievements, Kabeer (2009) argues that ultimately the latter element, which places emphasis on women engaging in a reflective process which helps them to assess whether the achievements being pursued are truly beneficial for them, is most critical to women's empowerment. Similarly, Amartya Sen (1995) has placed heavy emphasis on understanding the deliberations and reasoning behind selected choices to evaluate their optimality, instead of imposing universalist claims which often are heavily embedded in Western tradition.

Indonesia in colonial and the immediate post-colonial periods, is fundamentally concerned with understanding how fast-changing contexts put old patterns of believing into question. Asking ' "How do men of religious sensibility react when the machinery of faith begins to wear out? What do they do when traditions falter?" ', he responds, 'They do, of course, all sorts of things'. However, knowing this, he argues, is not interesting in itself: what we most want to know is 'by what means, what social and cultural processes, are these movements towards scepticism, political enthusiasm, conversion, revivalism, subjectivism, secular piety, reformism, double-mindedness, or whatever, taking place? What new forms of architecture are housing these accumulating changes of heart?' (Geertz 1971: 3 and 4). Recognising this tension between fast-changing societal contexts and the persistence of habitual practices and conviction in inherited beliefs helps us to understand that, while in traditional societies or those pockets of society that are still least integrated into modern forms of living, habit and history rather than reflection on choices might explain religious conviction, it is not so in societies caught in major flux, as are contemporary Muslim societies, where old patterns of believing are constantly rivalled by Western liberal ideals. In such contexts, as Geertz has argued, even among the men of religion, all kind of responses emerge, rather than the perpetuation of a single orthodox response. Further, as we will see, the responses of those who have received a more modern education and often as a result are more integrated into modern institutions often differ from those who lack access to higher education.

This latter argument about the role of higher education in changing one's conception of self, religion, nation, and politics, and the creative potential that it can unleash within the religious imagination of an individual within contemporary Muslim societies, has also been forcefully advanced by Dale Eickelman (1992). As he notes: 'Many scholars have noted linkages between advanced education and religious activism, but many take at face value the claims of religious activists, or "fundamentalists," that they are reinstituting older forms of religious understanding and action rather than creating, even if inadvertently, new ones' (Eickleman 1992: 643). Mahmood's (2012) ethnography to some extent falls into the same trap. She takes at face value the stated commitment to an orthodox sense of piety among members of these movements, and their critique of secularism, assuming that such commitments translate into imbibing orthodox ways of living. In doing so, she fails to recognise the new possibilities being envisaged by the more educated and culturally progressive members of these movements. To quote from

Eickelman (1992: 643) again, 'What is my religion? Why is it important to my life? and, How do my beliefs guide my conduct?' while seen as generating a uniform or monolithic response by many scholars, are in fact 'distinctly modern' questions; 'For something like religion to be objectified in people's consciousness, it must be discussed, and this entails discourse. If, for reasons of political intimidation or social deference, people do not discuss it directly, then it is discussed publicly *for* them by "experts" with whom they may or may not agree.'

This is precisely what we will find verified in this study of female Islamic education movements. We will see how the assertions made by Eickelman in his 1992 essay[42] about mass education and mass communication changing the style and scale of possible discourse within Muslim societies and reconfiguring the nature of religious thought and action, encouraging explicit debate over meaning, have become all the more pronounced twenty years later. The evidence presented on the diverse backgrounds of the members of these movements and how they engage with the texts will be very much in line with his assertion: 'Even when mass higher education is used to sustain old patterns of belief and authority, its very structure engenders new "authoritative" ways of thinking about self, religion, and politics' (Eickelman 1992: 645); 'In short, older styles of understanding religious authority coexist with newer ones' (Eickelman 1992: 648).

In order to fully appreciate the impact of modern education in shaping religious imagination, it is also important to situate the emergence of these Islamic education movements within a historical context. It is well established that colonial rule led to the separation of knowledge within Muslim societies into modern and Islamic knowledge (Metcalf 1982; Robinson 2003; Hefner and Zaman 2007); it also led to the flight of Muslim elites from Islamic learning institutions (madrasas) to Western colleges and universities, which became the main conduits for upward economic mobility under colonial rule. These changes in Muslim societies that were triggered by the displacement of Muslim political authority by Western colonial rule meant that both the state and society stopped actively drawing inspiration from the Islamic moral and ethical code to provide answers to everyday societal concerns. Western liberal frameworks became the dominant frame of reference for shaping the state and society in most Muslim

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[42] 'Mass Higher Education and Religious Imagination in the Arab World.'

countries. The emergence of Islamic education platforms which bring the Muslim elites or affluent classes (whether men or women) back to study of traditional Islamic scholarship is thus in reality a step— thought for most an unconscious one— towards reviving the older patterns of Islamic knowledge creation within Muslim societies, where the social elites promoted innovation and mixing of all forms of knowledge to find optimal answers to societal concerns, but the societal consensus ensured that all innovation and creativity respected the Islamic moral and legal framework (Hodgson 1977a; Saliba 2011).

What societal shifts have thus led to the emergence of these Islamic education platforms that are helping revive the older democratic spirit of knowledge production in Muslim societies, whereby all fields of knowledge and everyday realities informed the development of Islamic ethical and legal reasoning to meet the needs of the time? Understanding this is just as important as studying their impact. It has been argued that historically 'rational sciences,…, tended to flourish when Muslims were confidently in power: … transmitted sciences, …., tended to flourish when Muslims felt that Muslim state power, either because of compromises with non-Muslim forces within or because of compromises with non-Muslim forces from without, was threatened or destroyed as the upholder of Islamic society….' (Robinson 1997: 172). In this volume, we will see how, while the confidence of the leaders of Muslim states has not revived, nor has Muslims' confidence in the states, yet a number of societal and global shifts are making modern educated Muslims, trained in modern Western scholarly tradition, re-engage with the study of Islamic texts with due respect for the tradition as well as its custodians. In the process they are creating new modes of being modern, while staying within the tradition.

Efficiency or weight of history? Understanding institutional persistence

The tension outlined above, between Mahmood's emphasis on understanding the persistence of Islamic norms as due to the weight of history and this volume's emphasis on recognising the role of deliberation and reasoning in understanding such persistence, is in reality reflective of two different theoretical approaches, often associated with two different disciplinary traditions to understanding institutional persistence. The former approach is associated primarily with sociological and anthropological theory, which places emphasis on the power of inherited societal structures in shaping individual action; the latter stems from economic theory, which in turn places primary emphasis on recognising the centrality of individual action and human will in creating those societal institutions to begin with. Recent theoretical advancements in

both these disciplines have highly nuanced the original positions,[43] leading to a shared middle ground; the original disciplinary positions, however, do continue to influence the relative emphasis placed on the power of inherited tradition versus the power of the individual to shape and reshape that tradition. Given that these foundational debates in turn inform how we define agency and determine to what factors we attribute institutional persistence, it is important to review these competing positions briefly, to show how they illuminate our understanding of female Islamic educational movements and their societal impact, while also being further tested through the empirical evidence presented in this volume.

Institutional persistence: the importance of incentives

The most popular explanation for institutional persistence in theories drawing on an actor-oriented approach, which this study also adopts,[44] is 'path-dependence'. It has been defined as

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[43] The importance of agency is now well established within anthropological and sociological theory, which traditionally emphasises the role of institutions over human agency; within economic theory, where the starting assumptions are reversed, there is now a well-established tradition, often referred to as New Institutional Economics (NIE), which recognises the role of institutions albeit with an emphasis on seeing them as the product of actions taken at the individual level. These shifts mean that often the middle positions advanced in the two disciplines are quite similar (Ensminger 1997), although the different vocabulary often makes these cross-disciplinary similarities difficult to recognise. See Greif (2006) for a useful discussion on this. Within sociology (though not in anthropology) the individual-actor approach associated with rational-choice theory has in fact become rather influential; see Coleman (1994), which makes a strong case for what sociology is to gain by starting with the individual instead of the institution. Gambetta (1987) and Goldthorpe (1998) advance similar positions.

[44] This preference is based on the reasoning that starting with individual actions helps researchers to better understand what individual-level actions that they can observe collectively lead up to the institutional-level arrangements (Coleman 1994). Similar justification is provided in North (1990: 5): 'Building a theory of institutions on the foundation of individual choices is a step toward reconciling differences between economics and the other social sciences. The choice theoretic approach is essential because a logically consistent, potentially testable set of hypotheses must be built on a theory of human behavior. The strength of microeconomic theory is that it is constructed on the basis of assumptions about individual human behavior….. Institutions are a creation of human beings. They evolve and are altered by human beings; hence our theory must begin with the individual.'

a process whereby 'what happened at an earlier point in time will affect the possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring at a later point in time' (Sewell 1996: 262–63). The adoption of the notion of path-dependence within individual actor-based theories shows the recognition of the broader structural forces, traditionally highlighted by disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, acting on individual choices and collective societal outcomes.[45] The debate, however, is still ongoing to determine whether path-dependence is a result of 'lock-in by historical events', leading individuals to opt for sub-optimal choices even when they have access to more efficient alternatives (Arthur 1989; Libecap 1989; Pierson 2000), or whether the path chosen, even if apparently sub-optimal, was actually the best option available in the given circumstances, i.e. it was efficient given the context (Liebowitz and Margolis 1995). The latter approach places greater emphasis on institutional efficiency in explaining institutional persistence; it also allows greater scope for recognising that when circumstances change, more optimal paths might develop or revive, because individuals will work towards achieving the optimal path as long as the broader institutional arrangements provide incentives to pursue the superior outcome by rewarding it. The emphasis in this approach thus comes to rest on understanding the importance of incentives that motivate individuals to either work towards institutional persistence or change. We shall see in Chapter 2 why appreciating the role of incentives created by socio-economic and political institutions in adopting a particular reading of a religious tradition is very important for understanding why many conservative Islamic movements emerged under colonial rule, and why in the current climate many progressive— yet loyal to the tradition— Islamic movements are emerging.

Institutions and organisations

In studying institutional persistence it is also important to be clear what is meant by an institution. Are religious dictates and the organisations that represent that religious tradition one and the same thing? More specifically, are Islam and the Islamic movements that claim to speak in the name of Islam the same, or are the latter better conceptualised as organisations which have their own distinct agenda and whose members both shape the institution by their

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[45] For a detailed treatment of religious behaviour within a New Institutional Economics approach, see Bano (2012a).

action and are in turn also shaped by it? Institutional theorists are divided on this. Douglass North (1990) is a prominent proponent of the need to differentiate the institution from the organisations that come to represent it; in his view, 'while the purpose of the rules is to define the way the game is played, the objective of the team within that set of rules is to win the game—by a combination of skills, strategy, and coordination; by fair means and sometimes by foul means. Modelling the strategies and skills of the team as it develops is a separate process from modelling the creation, evolution, and consequences of the rules' (North 1990: 5). He further argues: 'Both what organizations come into existence and how they evolve are fundamentally influenced by the institutional framework. In turn they influence how the institutional framework evolves' (North 1990: 5). North maintains that organisations are created with purposive intent as a response to the opportunity set 'resulting from the existing set of constraints ….. and in the course of attempts to accomplish their objectives are a major agent of institutional change' (North 1990: 5). For him, 'Separating the analysis of the underlying rules from the strategy of the players is a necessary prerequisite to building a theory of institutions' (North 1990: 5).

Greif (2006), on the other hand, finds such a distinction between institutions and organisations difficult to sustain. He argues for a more comprehensive definition of institutions which includes 'systems of interrelated rules, beliefs, norms, and organizations, each of which is a man-made, nonphysical social factor …' (Greif 2006: 39). He contends it is better to include the organisations within the institutional elements instead of focusing on them separately, as this enables the reviewer to study their motivation to follow the rules, and consequently beliefs and norms. In his view such a definition captures the essence of multiple definitions of the term 'institutions' used in economics, political science, and sociology. This volume, however, finds North's proposed distinction between institutional and organisations important for precisely the same reasons that he justifies: such a distinction helps us better understand that the organisations that come to represent Islam at any given point in time are shaped by the Islamic moral and ethical code, but they are also a product of the broader societal context in which they evolve and the personal motivations and aspirations of the individuals who lead them.

Thus, in this volume Islam is defined as an institution— a moral and legal framework drawing from the scripture— while the movements being studied are the organisations; these organisations while shaped by the institutional framework also play a critical role in defining it. Differentiating the movements from the institutional framework of Islam enables us, as North argues, to map the strategies that these group use to advance their goals and the implications of those goals for shaping the dominant face of Islam in the given context. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 2, historically the organisations that were most successful in representing Islam in any given period of time were those that best tailored their responses to the socio-economic context in which Muslims found themselves at that time.

Institutional change and elite incentives

Looking at organisations as distinct from the institution that they represent also helps us better appreciate the role played by institutional elites and their motivations in shaping institutional persistence. In the case of the project at hand, such an analytical undertaking helps us understand why female Islamic education movements, despite potentially posing a challenge to male Islamic authority, have in reality been supported by the 'ulama. Studies of organisational elites and institutional change tell us that since organisational elites will generally be interested in preserving the status quo, or further consolidating their interests when faced with societal transition, in contexts where broader changes threaten their existing privileges, elites are likely to make small concessions that might divert large-scale institutional shifts. This argument is advanced in particular by Acemoglu and Robinson (2000) in their paper entitled *Why Did the West Extend the Franchise*? Considering nineteenth-century initiatives that led to the extension of voting rights in most Western societies, they argue that these political reforms are best understood as strategic decisions by the political elite to prevent widespread social unrest and revolution. They ask, 'If democratization is likely to lead to increased taxation and redistribution…., why should the elite extend the franchise?' (Acemoglu and Robinson 2000: 1168). The answer in their view is that the elite were forced to extend the franchise because of the threat of revolution; 'extending the franchise acted as a commitment to future redistribution and prevented social unrest'. This analytical reading of the calculated responses of institutional elites when faced with a challenge is quite consistent with what we will learn about the contributions of orthodox 'ulama to the emergence of female Islamic

education movements. As we will see in Chapter 4, from the 1970s, the majority of these 'ulama supported women's involvement in the formal study of Islamic texts; for many conservative 'ulama this was a conscious effort to prevent Muslim women's mass defection to Western feminist ideals, which they found were being promoted by the post-colonial state as well as by global forces.

This volume, in fact, argues for further refining our analysis of organisations and how they shape institutions that they claim to represent by drawing a distinction between formal and informal organisations. Mapping the different organisational forms representing female Islamic education movements shows that the formal and informal organisations operate in different ways. Within these movements, informal organisations are ones that are most loosely structured, are less formal in their demands for regular attendance, and can allow for greater mixing of students from different profiles. Formal organisations, on the other hand, might also not be formally registered, but they follow a more structured curriculum, require full participation, and are driven to issue clear formal certificates of participation. The two types of organisation end up attracting different kinds of follower. The informal organisations because of their flexibility can attract large numbers and more diverse groups of members and can arguably have more wide-reaching impact because they can be more conducive to generating 'bridging ties'.[46] Formal organisations, on the other hand, have a narrow focus on those who are formally registered; they provide more intensive training and thereby generate more

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[46] Bridging and bonding ties are here defined as outlined in Mark Granovetter's (1973) influential paper entitled '*The Strength of Weak Ties*'. In an attempt to link micro and macro levels of sociological theory, Granovetter argues that study of social networks helps to translate small-scale interactions into large-scale societal patterns. Arguing that the strength of an interpersonal tie intuitively depends on the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services that characterise a tie, he differentiates between bonding and bridging networks; the former refers to ties that are part of one's core social networks, while the latter refers to weak ties that are formed among people from different social groups. These bridging ties, as he argues, can expand one's opportunity set dramatically, as they connect an individual to diverse sets of social groups; the bonding ties, which are stronger in terms of mutual dependence, on the other hand lead to greater trust than can be generated by bridging ties. Each form of tie thus has its own role to play in 'diffusion of influence and information, mobility opportunity, and community organization' (Granovetter 1973: 1360).

'bonding ties'. Knowing whether an institution is mainly represented by formal or informal organisations can thus help to predict the likely face of that institution and how it will spread its influence. The organisation relying on formal participation is likely to have fewer but more exclusively committed members, while an organisation which is more informal is likely to have a larger number of members, although the members will be more loosely associated with it. An institution that is represented by a plurality of organisational forms is thus likely to have a wider pool of adherents and is more like to persist over time, because it can build on both bonding and bridging ties.

The institutional literature currently differentiates between formal and informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Bano 2012a[47]) but does not appreciate how differentiating between formal and informal organisations can further improve our ability to predict how specific organisational forms will shape a given institution. A few other studies, such as North et al. (2009), have also noted the importance of recognising how different organisational[48] platforms can have a direct bearing on the kind of institutional composition that they might support. In line with their work, we will see that recognising the differences between various types of organisations can be analytically meaningful in understanding how a specific organisation will influence the institution. However, given the different types of organisational category that the two studies have argued for recognising, it might prove difficult to generalise any sub-categories of organisational types between which we must differentiate when seeking

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[47] North (1990: 36) identifies informal institutions as 'codes of conduct, norms of behavior, and conventions'. See Helmke and Levitsky (2004) for further discussion on the treatment of informal institutions within the literature.

[48] North et al. (2009: 16), in their influential study of what helps the creative emergence of democratic societal order, make a distinction between an a*dherent organization*, 'characterized by self-enforcing, incentive-compatible agreements among its members' and *contractual organizations*, which 'in contrast utilize both third-party enforcement of contracts and incentive-compatible agreements among members'. They further note the importance of *perpetually lived organisations* in creating open access: 'These organizations facilitate impersonal exchange and relationships. Contracts and agreements become more secure because they are made with the organization, not with individual members of the organization. Those contracts also extend beyond the life of any individual member' (North et al. 2009: 152).

to understand the nature of the relationship between the institution and the organisations that have come to represent it.

Incentivising optimal institutional shifts

The approach to the study of institutions outlined above has argued for acknowledging the importance of incentives generated by socio-economic and political institutions at any given point in time in determining how organisational elites representing an institution will respond to and define that given institutional framework. This in practice means that, if we are finding that the female Islamic education movements that cater for educated, professional, and culturally progressive Muslim women are being creative yet traditional in how they relate to Islamic moral ethics and the demands of modernity, we need to understand what this creativity looks like in practice, as well as understanding the changing socio-economic and political institutional framework that has provided incentives for finding such creative answers. The importance of societally induced incentives for creative knowledge creation is best illustrated by Josiah Ober's *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens.*

In a bid to understand what enabled the old Greek city-state of Athens to outshine its rivals and ensure that 'No other city-state was as rich, as resilient, or as influential', Ober (2008) argues that the secret of Athens' glory rested in having state-sponsored institutions that provided incentives to both the lay people and the technical experts to share their respective knowledge in order to find optimal answers to societal challenges. Ober argues for recognising the power of 'dispersed knowledge in the society' by learning to appreciate the importance of mixing *social* and *technical* knowledge to find optimal outcomes[49]. The former draws on knowledge

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[49] Ober (2008) acknowledges taking inspiration for his analysis from Hayek's (1945) influential paper, *The Use of Knowledge in Society,* in which he argued for recognising the importance of lay knowledge for optimal economic planning: 'Today it is almost heresy to suggest that scientific knowledge is not the sum of all knowledge. But a little reflection will show that there is beyond question a body of very important but unorganized knowledge which cannot possibly be called scientific in the sense of knowledge of general rules: the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place'(Hayek

of real-life situations, while the latter refers to the knowledge of the specialist in that field. His position is that useful knowledge is held not only by the expert but by every individual in society, because of the knowledge that he/she possesses of the actual on-the-ground realities; answers provided by experts that are not based on knowledge of the real-life realities are unlikely to prove feasible for any society. Efficient policies, he argues, require platforms for the free mixing of expert and social knowledge, and in his view Athens was particularly good at mixing these different types of knowledge to address contemporary socio-political and economic challenges. The challenge for any society, Ober notes, therefore, is how to incentivise such mixing of knowledge, because such efforts have a cost, and people need an incentive to share their knowledge in finding answers to shared societal challenges. He argues that this is best presented analytically as a coordination problem whereby the challenge is to find the right kinds of incentive that will motivate people who possess these different forms of knowledge to come together and share their knowledge in search of an optimal answer. He argues that a society has to have in place institutional arrangements that facilitate three processes essential for incentivising such mixing of knowledge:

Strategy 1: *Aggregation*—a process of collecting the right kinds of dispersed knowledge in a timely manner for purposes of decision making.

Strategy 2: *Alignment*— enabling people who prefer similar outcomes to coordinate their actions by reference to shared values and a shared body of common knowledge.

Strategy 3: *Codification*—the process by which implemented decisions become action-guiding rules, capable of influencing future social behaviour and interpersonal exchanges.[50]

1945: 521). He maintained, 'And the problem of what is the best way of utilizing knowledge initially dispersed among all the people is at least one of the main problems of economic policy— or of designing an efficient economic system' (Hayek 1945: 520).

[50] In the case of Athens, he gives examples of specific organisational platforms that facilitated all three processes. *Aggregation* was facilitated by networking and teaming, whereby Athenian institutions fostered the growth of a dense and large-scale knowledge network by interconnecting small-scale social networks by both weak and strong ties. They arranged for much of the work of governance to be conducted by small teams of amateurs who learned basic routines and had easy access to expert

Ober argues that such an institutional arrangement created incentives for a large number of experts, as well as ordinary people, in Athenian society to participate in knowledge production in the process leading to the democratisation of knowledge. This framework is very useful for understanding the impact of the kind of mixing that is happening between modern and Islamic knowledge within the female Islamic study groups catering for modern educated Muslim women, especially when we study them in a historical context: studies of knowledge production in pre-colonial Muslim societies indicate comparable processes facilitating the mixing of lay knowledge and specialist Islamic knowledge in generating the creativity that led to the rise of a distinctive Islamic-civilisation identity (Hodgson 1977a-c; Berkey 2002). To understand the relevance of this framework for this study, it is important to note that the suggestion is not to equate Athenian democracy with the nature of governance under various Muslim empires; the conceptual contribution of Ober's framework for this volume rests in understanding the importance that he ascribes to mixing lay knowledge (knowledge possessed by people concerning their everyday realities) and specialist knowledge (knowledge possessed by the expert) for finding optimal answers to given challenges in any sphere of activity, and recognising that such a framework is very useful for understanding the creative potential within the female Islamic education movements under study, some of which are introducing Western-educated, culturally progressive, and economically affluent women from within the societal elites to a specialist study of Islamic texts. Ober himself has applied this framework in a very different context, namely enterprise development.[51] Similarly, his emphasis on trying to

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knowledge. *Alignment* of common knowledge among citizens was facilitated via heavy publicity through the construction of public monuments, notices, and ritual performances. These activities and platforms built common knowledge about matters of public concern. *Codification* led to the standardisation of rules and exchange practices and wide dissemination of knowledge of them. Public and well-enforced standards, especially enshrined in commercial law, but also in a reliable coinage, built trust and ensured a relatively secure exchange environment.

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[51] For an interesting analysis of how such mixing of specialist knowledge with knowledge of ground realities is central to harnessing creative energy in all forms of societal organisation, see Manville and

understand the institutional framework that incentivises such mixing of knowledge is very useful, as it helps us to understand the importance of mapping the socio-economic and political shifts within Muslim societies that are leading to the emergence of female Islamic education movements, some of which are proving very effective in mixing lay knowledge of everyday realities with specialist knowledge of the text to find effective ways to participate fully in modern socio-economic and political institutions while respecting the Islamic ethical and legal framework.

The periods of Muslim history that are associated with the rise of a rich Islamic civilisation similarly record how the state and societal institutions provided concrete incentives which motivated not only Muslims of all sensibilities but also non-Muslims, Jews, Christians, and (in the case of South Asia) Hindus to contribute to finding answers to societal challenges by drawing on local knowledge while respecting the Islamic ethical and legal framework (Alam and Subrahmanyam 2000; Robinson 2003; Saliba 2011). Second, since such mixing of knowledge involved all members of the society in question, including the 'ulama, the knowledge created was disseminated across the society by means of central platforms, including mosques and madrasas and Friday *Khutbas* (sermons). This facilitated the alignment of knowledge between different sections of society and the embedding of that knowledge within the society to shape future action. Islamic political authority, because tied to Islamic shari'a, in turn also supported codification of the newly created knowledge in ways that were suitable for the needs of the time, yet which did not explicitly violate any central rulings of Islam (Abou El-Fadl 2007; Feldman 2008). Thus, these three-fold societal arrangements ensured that what became identified as Islamic civilisation with a clear Islamic identity was in fact a product of democratic processes of knowledge production in early Muslim societies

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Ober's (2003) application of this framework to the study of enterprise development. They show how an enterprise rooted in strong values yet open to change can excel in the global market, following the same principles of democratic knowledge production as were observed in the city-state of ancient Athens. Within the field of international development, similar arguments in favour of recognising local knowledge possessed by rural communities (as opposed to exclusive reliance on the technical knowledge of international experts) in shaping development interventions have in recent years, gained much credence.

where all members of that society, whether expert or non-expert, Muslim or non-Muslim, were all able to contribute to the identification of optimal solutions to the needs of the time while not violating any essential core of the Islamic ethical or legal framework (Hodgson 1977a; Berkey 2002). Chapter 2 will elaborate on these arguments with additional evidence from historical accounts of knowledge production in pre-colonial Muslim societies.

Colonial rule, by displacing Islamic political authority and changing many socio-economic institutions, disrupted incentives that facilitated this democratisation of Islamic knowledge production within Muslim societies. Islamic experts no longer were asked to inform contemporary institutions, while the educated Muslims who led the modern socio-economic and political institutions, having been trained in Western educational institutions, and having absorbed Western cultural and moral sensibilities, no longer engaged with the Islamic moral framework in shaping everyday policies (Hefner and Zaman 2007). The result was that Islamic knowledge creation lost its vitality and creativity: education in madrasas in this changed context, which also saw the flight of Muslim societal elites to Western educational institutions, largely took an inward turn, focusing primarily on deliberations on issues of piety rather than issues of socio-economic and political significance (Metcalf 1982; Robinson 2003). The contention of this book is that the female Islamic education movements are one of the many platforms to have emerged in recent decades which have potential to contribute to the re-democratisation of Islamic knowledge production. It is, however, important to understand that *democratisation of Islamic knowledge* as used in this volume is not a comment on the contemporary politics of Muslim societies[52] (though democratisation of knowledge in the long term would be expected to contribute to democratisation of political authority too); instead it is referring to a process of knowledge creation where not only the expert, in this case the 'ulama, but also experts in other fields of specialisation, and those with knowledge of real-life issues, find answers to given challenges based on some degree of mutual deliberation[53]. The Western-

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[52] Establishing a causal relationship between democratisation of Islamic knowledge and democratisation of political authority in Muslim societies will require a different nature of empirical study; though if empirically tested, I am of the view such a hypothesis will be supported.

[53] This methodological approach to making Islam relate to modernity is very close to one promoted by Tariq Ramadan (see chapter 7).

educated, professional, and culturally progressive Muslim women whose lives are heavily embedded in modern institutions, on coming to the study of traditional Islamic texts with due respect for the 'ulama and traditional body of shari'a, end up being able to create new modernities which in conception have much in common with Western modernity yet retain a distinct Islamic identity.

It is this responsive nature of Islamic knowledge production, whereby societal institutions create incentives for Muslims from many different backgrounds to engage in Islamic knowledge production by actively engaging with the scholarly classes to understand how their real-life choices and Islamic moral ethics can be reconciled that is here being referred to as democratisation of Islamic knowledge. The book sub-title *The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge* is simply a reminder of how this mixing was central to periods associated with the rise of Islamic-civilisation identity— not just the 'ulama, but Muslims of all orientation and non-Muslims contributed to it (Hodgson 1977a; Abd-Allah 2006). Wherever Islam went, it adapted and absorbed local knowledge and created new cultures by harnessing that local knowledge within a clearly defined Islamic ethical and legal framework (Hodgson 1977a-c; Robinson 2003; Abd-Allah 2006). Given the well-recorded isolation of Islamic knowledge with the rise of Western educational institutions in the three countries under study (Metcalf 1982; Naniya 1993; Hefner and Zaman 2007; Pierret 2013), the question is what broader societal shifts are creating incentives for modern educated Muslim women to engage with Islamic scholarship through platforms that have potential for reviving the old pattern of mixing lay knowledge of everyday realities and specialist Islamic knowledge to find answers that are optimal in terms of everyday needs but also respect the Islamic moral and legal framework? Answering that is precisely the focus of the second half of this volume.

Methodology and field sites

Despite growing scholarship on the female Islamic education movements that are emerging across the Muslim world, as well as within Muslim diaspora communities, there is still no

cross-country comparative study that helps to systematically map the factors that have contributed to the emergence of this trend since the 1970s.

INSERT MAP 1: The Field Sites: Pakistan, northern Nigeria, and Syria

Further, most existing studies do not even cover the variation within these movements within one context. Most studies focus on one specific movement or preacher, making little reference to the plurality of organisations operating within the field[54]. For example, in Pakistan these movements take the form of madrasas, house study circles, hotel-based weekly sermons, etc. This book argues for considering the plurality of these organisations within a given country context and then comparing that plurality with what is observable in other contexts, to see if some common trends explain the emergence of these movements across different contexts, and whether their societal impact can be identified. In proposing to study the whole field, as opposed to a specific movement, this volume shares Pierret's concern (2013: 8):

> Western bibliography on Syrian Islam therefore suffers from two major deficiencies …..: first, by focusing on major figures of official Islam or the Muslim Brothers, it ignores the significant portion of the local religious elite that belongs to neither of these categories; second, by focusing on personalities or groups viewed in isolation, it does not offer an overall analysis of the structuring of the clergy and of the challenges it faces.

This volume similarly aims to capture the broader sphere in which these movements operate in each of the three countries under study, as opposed to focusing on only one of them.

Comparative analysis of Islamic movements is generally quite rare. Most comparisons are confined to edited volumes. This is partly a result of limited opportunities for multi-sited field

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[54] See contributions in Bano and Kalmbach (2012) and Hammer and Spielhaus (2013).

work; however, it also reflects the fact that it is not always possible to find comparable cases across different contexts. The emergence of female Islamic education movements, due to the commonality in their time of origin and the similarity in their approaches, ensures that despite their different organisational forms, across different Muslim countries it is not a problem to find comparable groups. The primary motivation for selecting Pakistan, northern Nigeria, and Syria as the field-work sites for this project was that they represent three important regions of Islam and cover the cultural and geographical diversity associated with the global Muslim community. Practicality of access, however, was equally important.

Within the Middle East, Syria made an easy choice. Being far less studied than Egypt, it offered a greater learning opportunity; further, between 2008 and 2010, when the primary field work was carried out, Syria was an easily accessible site for me.[55] Given my prior research in Pakistan, it became an obvious choice within South Asia (Bano 2012a); it was, in fact, during my previous field work in Pakistan that I had first become aware of the birth and growth of female madrasas in South Asia – a discovery which acted as a prompt for initiating this larger comparative project. Northern Nigeria became the third comparative case, because Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, and the north remains an important representative of the rich history of West African Islam. The actual field-work sites within each country varied, depending on the way the country's geographical regions were organised. In Syria primary field work was carried out in Damascus and Aleppo, given the centrality of both to Syrian society.[56] In northern Nigeria, primary field work was conducted in Kano, the most populous

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[55] Even though I knew of some fellow researchers, especially north Americans, who had had difficulty securing Syrian visas during 2008 and 2009, I personally faced no such problems. Further, I had very easy access to major Syrian religious institutions such as Al-Fatih Institute and Abu-Nour Islamic Centre. It was, however, very clear that I was not meant to mention the Muslim Brotherhood in any of my interviews, because it would put my respondents at risk of state persecution.

[56] In his study of Syrian 'ulama, Pierret (2013: 12 and 13) makes a similar selection, arguing that there is 'no such thing as a unified "Syrian" religious scene; there is only a juxtaposition of local clergies. This is the main reason for my decision to concentrate on the country's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo–in addition to the fact that the once-vibrant centers of Islamic scholarship such as Homs and Hama never recovered from the repression of the early 1980s insurgency.'

northern Muslim state, where almost 99 per cent of the population is Muslim. Over the years, I have also had opportunities to undertake research visits to the neighbouring northern Nigerian states of Jigawa and Kaduna, but the data shared in this volume focus primarily on field work conducted in Kano. A northern Nigeria state proud of its rich Islamic history, Kano[57] presented a complex landscape of Islamic education provision, where again platforms for female Islamic education had emerged and expanded fast since 1970s. In Pakistan, because I was building on my prior field work with the male madrasa network, which had taken me across the country[58] between 2006 and 2009, I was able to draw on experiences and observations from across the four provinces.

The actual field work has consisted of repeat visits to these countries between 2008 and 2014; in the case of Pakistan, as discussed above, the field work by default started from 2006. In Syria, the main field work was conducted in the summer of 2010; I left Damascus in mid-October and then could not return.[59] I have succeeded in staying in touch with some of the core respondents; but, given the scale of devastation in Syria, and in particular the major exodus of Syrian refugees towards Europe since July 2015, I am of the view that tracing ongoing developments in Syria is largely irrelevant to this project, or for that matter for any project aspiring to understand settled platforms of social organisation in Syria prior to the conflict. The extent of devastation has been so vast, especially in the rebel-held cities such as Aleppo, which continue to be bombed by Syrian and Russian air forces, that, until some degree of stability is achieved, trying to keep track of changes to the everyday forms of social organisation has

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[57] Kano had historically been the largest of the seven Hausa states under the control of one of the most powerful of West Africa's Muslim dynasties, the Sokoto Empire. Kano city is the oldest city in West Africa; it was a major city on the western African trade route and later was also on the West African travel route to Mecca. Nigeria is a constitutionally secular federal country, in which some of the Muslim-majority states, including Kano, have adopted shari'a law though with limited enforcement mechanism (Lubeck 2011).

[58] Pakistan has four provinces: Balochistan, Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh.

[59] I returned from the field in mid-October. The visa issued in April 2011 could not be used, because of growing unrest on the ground. Since then I have stayed in touch with contacts within Syria as well as with some who, since then, have sought asylum in the UK.

become irrelevant for scholarly studies of long-term patterns of social change. That does not make the analysis of these movements as they existed prior to the revolution irrelevant. Rather, it is these accounts, such as the one presented in this volume, which draw on rich field work just before the outbreak of the resistance, that in the long term will be important for understanding Syria, whatever the outcome of the present conflict. Whenever things do stabilise, the analysis presented in this volume will act as a baseline of how things were; it is this that in the long term will enable us to trace whether the female Islamic education activities and platforms in post-conflict Syria, whatever shape it might take, will demonstrate a continuity from the past or a major rupture with the past.

The initial phase of research in all three countries consisted of mapping the different types of mosque- and madrasa-based women's Islamic education platforms. After that the emphasis moved to developing a relationship with different types of group within each context. Interviews were conducted with the female preachers and scholars leading the halaqas in mosques or other venues. The most essential part of the fieldwork, however, was developing profiles of the learners, carrying out individual interviews with as many of them as possible, and participation in the actual group activities. Observing the dynamics within each group and the core themes discussed helped inform the arguments I advance as did a review of their curriculum or preferred texts. Since the volume is equally focused on mapping the context that has given rise to these movements, interviews were also conducted with prominent 'ulama in each national context to understand how they view these female Islamic education movements and how they explain their emergence. Similarly, in each country context, I would meet government officials within the ministry of religious affairs and the ministry of education and speak to representatives of feminist NGOs to see how the state and the secular groups associate with these movements.

In case of Pakistan and Nigeria, between 2008-2016, I have on the average spent two months per year in each country. This repeat contact has enriched my understanding of the context that has led to the emergence and spread of these movements while also allowing me to nurture long term relationships with many of my respondents. In case of Syria though I could not return after 2010, my initial fieldwork had been quite productive; fortunately, my introducers (or

gatekeepers, as they are officially called in graduate classes on research methods) had helped me embed in some key networks in Damascus as well as Aleppo, quite quickly: staff and students at Damascus University and at Al-Fatih Institute in Damascus and Shaykh Mahmud's followers in Aleppo. Through these networks, I had access to women of different ages attending different mosque study circles as well as many former and current members of Qubaysiat (and on occasions even their husbands or fathers).

The data generated during the field work thus primarily drew on interviews and ethnographic observations. However, the analysis presented in this volume has benefited enormously by interpreting those data in the light of historical evidence. Chapter 2, which sets out the framework for the remaining chapters, primarily draws upon rich historical scholarship on the emergence and consolidation of Islam in the three societies under study. It helps to establish the importance of situating these movements in a historical context if we are to fully understand their implications for the future of Muslim societies. In the same vein, Chapter 6 undertakes a distinct but related historical inquiry into the factors that contributed to the rise of Western feminism. Both chapters mainly present an analytical synthesis of existing historical scholarship on the subject, rather than sharing some original archival data. Nonetheless, both these chapters are critical to establishing the importance of the argument advanced in this volume, because each chapter shows how we can end up interpreting the same contemporary evidence in a different light if we situate it in a historical context instead of looking at it as a standalone phenomenon. Fortunately for this project, both fields of inquiry – the emergence and spread of Islam and the rise of Western feminism – have generated a solid body of historical scholarship. This enabled the project to situate the evidence from the field work in a historical context and also to compare the developments in the Muslim societies against experiences in the Western world. The latter approach is particularly in line with studies aimed at understanding the causes of the different nature and pace of institutional evolution across different cultural or geographical contexts (Greif 2006; North et al. 2009; Kuran 2012). As the popularity of some of these studies has shown, such efforts at comparative analysis can be extremely powerful, even though such grand narratives are bound to ignore some of the nuances of each context.

The structure of this book

The book is organised in three parts. Part 1 (Chapters 2 and 3) establishes the creative energy within female Islamic education movements and shows how the engagement of educated, professional, and culturally progressive Muslim women with Islamic texts leads to a mixing of modern-day realities with Islamic moral ethics in ways that create new possibilities that are arguably as protective of essential liberties as Western liberal feminism yet retain a distinctly Islamic identity, which in their view enables them to overcome many of the societal anxieties faced by Western societies. Part 2 (Chapters 4, 5, 6) moves on to analysing the changing institutional context within Muslim societies that has created incentives for such platforms to emerge and has motivated these women to study Islamic texts. Part 3 (Chapter 7) situates these movements within other similar initiatives that are emerging, to establish how these movements are unconsciously part of a bigger shift taking place within Muslim societies and Muslim-diaspora communities towards a more intellectually engaged understanding of Islam.

Chapter 2 sets the analytical framework by outlining the institutional arrangements that historically facilitated a blending of Islamic and lay knowledge within Muslim societies, and which resulted in the emergence of a distinct Islamic civilisational identity and ability to outrival their competitors. In line with Ober's theoretical work, the chapter shows that critical to this success was the creation of incentives to motivate everyone – Muslims of whatever intellectual or ideological orientation, and non-Muslims alike – to find the best societal outcomes across all spheres of collective life, while staying within a clearly identifiable Islamic ethical and legal frame of reference. It then shows how the institutional arrangements that facilitated such a mixing of Islamic and modern knowledge were disrupted during the colonial period, leading to religious education becoming isolated from modern knowledge in Muslim societies, and the withdrawal of Muslim elites from the sphere of Islamic education altogether. This process, the chapter notes, was responsible for the strengthening of routinisation of learning within the Islamic education tradition, with the focus moving exclusively to the study of the 'transmitted sciences' (*'Ulum-i-Naqliyya*). The loss of Muslim political power dramatically changed the institutional arrangements that had historically created incentives for all Muslims, especially the societal elites, to engage with Islam in order to find answers to

everyday societal concerns. Islam was preserved during the colonial period, but mostly in matters of piety and personal law.

Chapter 3 builds on the conceptual framework introduced in the previous chapter to show how it is important to differentiate between two distinct organisational platforms, formal and informal, that are emerging within female Islamic education movements across all three contexts under study. The formal platforms take the shape of female madrasas in Pakistan, Islamiyya schools in northern Nigeria, and formal mosque-based certified courses in Syria; these groups primarily cater for Muslim women from lower- and middle-income groups. The informal platforms, on the other hand, take the form of halaqas which meet on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and which attract women from highly diverse backgrounds, including women from very affluent, educated, culturally progressive elite Muslim families. The core of the chapter demonstrates how women from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds engage with the same Islamic texts in very different ways and seek answers to very different real-life questions when doing so. The chapter shows that women in both formal and informal groups do not interpret the Islamic positions as given; instead they constantly relate these rulings to their everyday lives, to see how best they can live the life they want and yet not violate the Islamic frame of reference. The emphasis is thus on learning not to violate what is core to the Islamic frame of reference; it is not on adopting a narrowly defined, ultra-conservative conception of Islam that, for most, is incompatible with their everyday lives and their preferences and aspirations. However, the chapter also shows that the same intention when engaging with Islamic texts yields quite different societal outcomes, depending on the background of the women in the two groups. For women from lower- and middle-income backgrounds, core concerns revolve around a better understanding of their rights and obligations within the household, since this remains their primary concern. For educated, professional women, on the other hand, many of whom are involved in economic, cultural, and political activities outside the home, similar efforts to engage with Islamic texts lead to active reflection on concerns related to women's involvement in broader societal spheres. The chapter shows how such reflection leads many educated women to argue that Islam in fact allows for all the liberties that Western feminists fought for – except for one: sexual liberty. But even here, they look for logical reasons in defence of this restriction, rather than accepting it without question as 'divinely ordained'. The chapter argues that the ability of these movements to

attract the educated, professional, and culturally progressive women from elite Muslim families is thus an important step towards a revival of the earlier tradition of blending Islamic and lay knowledge to create optimal societal institutions, which if sustained could have important implications for the future of Muslim societies and popular understanding of Islam.

Chapter 4 situates the emergence of female Islamic education movements in Pakistan, northern Nigeria, and Syria within the context of broader institutional shifts in these three societies, to identify the factors that have encouraged different forms of these movements to develop. The chapter shows how the 'ulama, whose authority over interpretation of the Islamic texts could be seen to be challenged by these movements, in fact played a critical role in their emergence. The fact that 'ulama of all orientations, those culturally conservative as well as those more progressive, have supported these movements helps to explain why these groups have been able to attract women of varying socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Not surprisingly, ultra-conservative 'ulama mostly supported the formal groups which as we will see in Chapter 3 remain largely under their supervision, while progressive 'ulama played a more important role in supporting the emergence of informal groups established by independent female preachers or scholars. The broader societal shifts that have incentivised the 'ulama to create such platforms for women include state-led discourse on development and modernisation, which has been supported by international development agencies; and the rapid invasion of Western cultural norms into society through increased access in most households to television, cable TV networks, and the Internet. The support of ultra-conservative 'ulama for female Islamic education movements was thus intended to mitigate the influx of Western values into Muslim society. On the other hand the more progressive 'ulama, who in any case believed in the need for female education, have supported educated Muslim women in establishing their own independent movements, such as Qubaysiat in Syria, Al-Huda in Pakistan, and the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN). Thus both the challenges and opportunities created by the state rhetoric of modernisation, and by the increasing invasion of Western cultural norms through rapid processes of globalisation, have created incentives for 'ulama of all intellectual inclinations to invest in the provision of Islamic textual education for Muslim women from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Chapter 5 changes the focus from analysing the institutional shifts that led to the emergence of these movements to analysing those that have helped their expansion. The chapter shows how the same forces that created incentives for the emergence of these movements also facilitated their spread. It also shows how the specific institutional shifts that have encouraged women from lower- and middle-income backgrounds to become involved differ from those that attract more affluent and educated Muslim women, just as these two groups differ in the concerns that they bring to the study of the Islamic texts and how they engage with them. For women in madrasas and Islamiyya schools, the main incentive for joining these more formal platforms has been the lack of institutional co-evolution that has resulted from a mismatch between the state rhetoric of modernisation and development and the actual reality on the ground. The chapter shows how all three countries' governments have failed to deliver on their promises of modernisation. The result has been a change in people's aspirations, but with no means of realising those aspirations. While recent literature on the educated unemployed within developing countries shows how this mismatch creates frustrations for educated, jobless men, as well as for their parents, by generating expectations of white-collar jobs that are simply not available, this is one of the first studies to demonstrate how similar consequences are being faced by women and their parents in Muslim societies. From the 1960s onwards, an increasing number of girls from lower- and middle-income families in Pakistan, northern Nigeria, and Syria have gained access to modern education; but this improvement in education has not translated into economic empowerment, as the jobs were simply not there. As with earlier generations, marriage remained the only opportunity for upward mobility, but there was one big difference: these girls were educated and had higher aspirations. The chapter explains how enrolling daughters in formal Islamic education programmes became an effective option for parents: in teaching them to value their role as mothers and home-makers, they sought to minimise the risk of girls becoming frustrated with their life options. For the girls themselves such an education proved appealing, because the Islamic conception of gender norms gave them confidence, social recognition, and an appreciation of the roles that were available to them in real life.

The chapter, however, argues that the explanation for the spread of these movements among elite Muslim women is totally different. The same institutional shifts that created challenges of unmet aspirations within lower- and middle-income groups created many new opportunities

for women from affluent and educated Muslim families. In these circles, improvements in women's education did link up to increasing access to professional roles; changing attitudes towards marriage; and increasing exposure to Western societies, not just through the media but through travel, opportunities for foreign education, and overseas employment. For women in this category, ironically, it is the increased exposure to Western society that has facilitated a re-engagement with the Islamic texts: while appreciating the civil and economic liberties achieved by Western feminism, and exercising similar rights themselves, many remain unimpressed with what they see as the negative effects of sexual liberty on women's own well-being, as well as that of society. The chapter shows how this increased access to Western societies has, in fact, created a confidence among educated Muslim women in Islam's ability to create better societal institutions than Western liberalism can.

If one way to test a theory is to apply it to cases across time, another is to study it across different regional and cultural contexts. In line with scholarship that argues for learning from cross-societal institutional analysis, Chapter 6 traces the institutional shifts that led to the rise of Western feminism, to assess if this improves our ability to predict whether or not the reservations that educated Muslim women evince concerning sexual liberty are likely to be preserved in the foreseeable future. While autonomy over one's own body and sexuality is central to most ideas of Western feminism today, this was not the case to begin with. It was not only Christian traditionalists who shunned sexual liberty but, more importantly, also many early Western feminists; as a result, scholars studying this period draw a clear distinction between 'civil-rights feminists' and 'free-love feminists', even though this distinction was eroded during the course of the twentieth century. Thus the evolution of Western feminism provides an interesting counter-factual scenario which can help to illuminate the case in hand. This is not to say that the two cases are exactly alike, but attempting to compare the two experiences could be mutually illuminating. This chapter draws on the work of scholars of Western feminism who have tried to trace the key institutional shifts that are known to have contributed to the evolution of Western feminism and the gradual acceptance of sexual freedom as being essential to it as a concept. Supporting the findings from the previous chapter, this chapter argues that in the case of the West the co-evolution of institutions was critical to the rise of feminism. This process was helped by the fact that the Western feminists, unlike the educated Muslim women with increased access to Western societies, had no societies ahead of

them to illustrate how at times small steps can end up having entirely unexpected outcomes in the long term. The chapter argues that this last difference, while appearing to be insignificant, might play an important role in resisting moves toward sexual liberty among educated Muslim women, since increased exposure to Western societies leaves many of them unconvinced by the arguments for sexual liberty for men and women alike.

Chapter 7 reverts to the bigger question of what kinds of knowledge platform can harness the creative spirit within contemporary Muslim society: platforms which enable individuals to engage with confidence with the demands of modern times, rather than opting for complete disengagement (as do Islamic radicals or ultra-conservatives) or for complete submission to Western cultural norms (as do modernists). Bringing the focus back to the importance of engaging affluent, educated, and culturally progressive Muslim men and women in the study of the Islamic texts, the conclusion situates the female Islamic movements within an array of Islamic intellectual revival movements emerging in the West: movements which are attracting both men and women of similar profile, and which argue for modern readings of Islam while retaining a very distinct Islamic identity. By situating the female Islamic movements in the contexts of these broader shifts in patterns of Islamic knowledge production in Muslim societies, the chapter shows how these movements are not standalone phenomena; rather they have an important bearing on the future of Muslim societies.