

## Islamic Studies in Germany – A cultural bridge between the East and the West

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### Abstract:

One of the largest and oldest factors in the convergence of cultural intellect between East and West in general, and between the West and Islam in particular, is the factor of academic studies that have touched Islamic studies, Islamic civilization and the Arabic language and its characteristics in the West. Universities since the seventeenth century. From now on, the term "Orientalism" has emerged. The goals and contents of the Orientalist studies were varied, and so were the tours of Western travelers in our Islamic world. One of their most important goals was to pave the way for colonization and proselytism. Some of these goals ultimately served Arab and Islamic cultural heritage through scholarly debates, some of which were fair and equitable, others were abusive and arbitrary.

Orientalism has long been characterized by East-West relations for centuries, during which many stereotypes of the East have emerged. Perhaps the most important criticism of this science is what the writer and thinker Edward Said mentioned in his famous book Orientalism, where he analyzed how the West "makes" the idea of the East as a fixed and unchanging identity. When Edward Said wrote about Orientalism, he pointed at the balance of power that existed in the past between colonial West and colonial East. He saw that the West was dominant and superior, and determined the directions and topics of studies, while the East was preoccupied with resisting the West politically instead of studying it. So, for example, there was no equivalent science through which the East could study the West - that is, the "West" - as if the East had realized that the West cannot be simplified to such an extent. Dr. Rudi Barrett posed the same question in his book on Arab-Islamic Studies and asked if Muslims in the present era can study the West?

### Keywords:

Islamic studies, a cultural bridge, Germany.

### Introduction

One of the largest and oldest factors of cultural convergence between East and West in general, and between the West and Islam in particular, is the factor of academic studies that have touched Islamic Studies, Islamic civilization, and the Arabic language and its characteristics in Western universities since the seventeenth century. From here onwards emerged the term 'Orientalism.' The objectives and contents of Orientalist Studies were diverse, and so were the tours of Western travellers in our Islamic world. Their most important aim was to pave the way for colonialism and proselytizing. Some of these objectives eventually served the Arabic and Islamic cultural heritage through scientific discussions, from which some were fair and equitable, and some others were offensive and arbitrary.

Orientalism has long characterized East-West relations for centuries, during which many stereotypes of the East have emerged. Perhaps the most important criticism against this

science was what the intellectual Edward Said<sup>1</sup> mentioned in his famous book *Orientalism*, where he analysed how the West “manufactured” the idea of the East as a fixed and unchanging identity. When Edward Said writes of Orientalism, he referred to the balance of power that existed in the past between the colonial West and the colonial East. He saw that the West was dominant and superior, and determined the directions and the subjects of the studies, while the East was busy resisting the West politically rather than studying it. So, there was, for example, no equivalent science through which the East could study the West — i.e., ‘Occidentalism’ — as if the East realized that the West could not be simplified to that extent. Dr. Rudi Paret posed the same question in his book about Arab-Islamic Studies and he wondered whether Muslims in the present era could study the West.<sup>2</sup>

### **Orientalism and Germany as a special case**

Orientalist schools have varied according to their origins in the West. Many scholars believe that Orientalism in Germany escaped the subjectivity of many of its French and English counterparts. German Orientalism focused on linguistic sciences and provided solid scientific analyses of the Arab-Islamic heritage, and was not politicized, as Germany was not a colonial power. As for French and English Orientalism, some of its scholars fell into the trap of serving the colonial powers, presenting a somewhat false picture of the Arab and Islamic world, while Germany remained “mostly conservative of impartiality and scientific spirit. If some deviation in opinion or any scientific mistakes appears in some German Orientalist studies, then this cannot be generalized in all studies.”<sup>3</sup> Since 1921, Germany has been holding an international conference every three years called “Orientalistiktag” the first of which was held in Leipzig.

In addition, the scientific spirit of neutrality and logic prevailed over the Oriental Studies in Germany, which were characterized by depth and comprehensiveness. They catalogued Arabic manuscripts and ancient texts. Mentioned below are the most famous German Orientalists who influenced the history of Orientalism in general and the Arab studies and Islamic history in particular, like Wustenfeld (1899-1808), who wrote more than 200 books in Oriental Sciences, including translations of some important historical books, such as *Athar al Buldan* (History of Lands) and *Akhbar Qibt Masr* (History of the Copts); Johann Jakob Reiske (1774-1716), who is considered the founder of Arabic studies in Germany; Brockelmann Carl (1956-1868), who received his doctorate in philosophy and theology, and whose most famous books are *Tareekh al Sho'oub al Islamia* (History of Islamic Nations) and *Tareekh al Adab al Araby* (History of Arabic Literature); Jullius Wellhausen (1918-1844), Professor of Islamic History and Islamic Schools of Thoughts. One of his most important works is the study of the *History of Tabari*; Theodor Noldeke (1930-1836), Professor of Islamic History at the University of Tübingen.

In the field of Philology, some other orientalists can particularly be mentioned. The most significant of them are Freitag (1788-1861) who wrote the Latin-Arabic dictionary in four parts, Fischer (1865-1949) who developed a dictionary of classical Arabic, Hans Wehr (1909-1981) who published his famous Arabic-German dictionary of contemporary Arabic, and Dr Ullmann who started work on the huge dictionary of classical Arabic at the University of Tübingen in 1931. Fortunately, thousands of Arabic and Islamic manuscripts have found their way into German libraries. Perhaps if they remained in place, they would have been

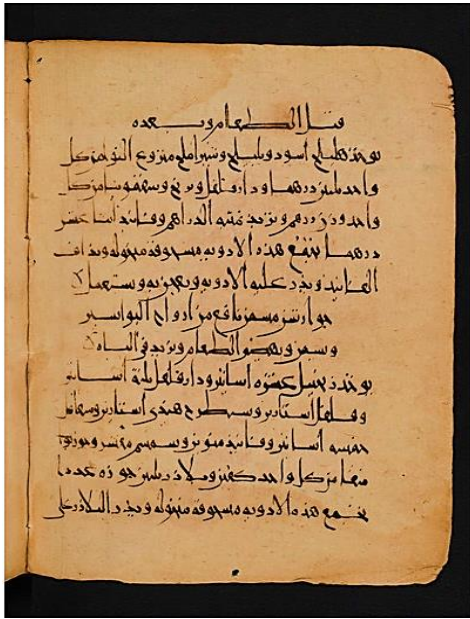
demolished. Researchers in the development of German Orientalism argue that philology is no longer merely dictionaries and Lexicons,

“but It has become a fundamental part of the mainstream as the main pillar of historicism since the late twelfth century AH (eighteenth century AD). In his study entitled *From Wellhausen to Becker, the Emergence of the Trend of Cultural History in Islamic Studies*, Josef Van Es referred to the contributions of Wellhausen, Becker, Hartman, Schacht and Kahle and others in the first quarter of the fourteenth century HA (twentieth century AD), in that they gradually changed the orientalist tendency from History to the Sociology of Islam. The most prominent scholars of Semitic and Orientalist Studies (Arabic and Persian) also depended on the science of textual criticism developed by the historians who wrote comprehensive autobiographies based on new critical publications of the Greek and Roman historians and philosophers.”

Amani Saleh, Professor at the German department of Ain Shams University in Cairo refers in her research to the beginnings of Arabic studies in Germany, which are closely linked to manuscripts, which had reached the library of the Elector of the Palatinate. Jacob Chrisman (1554-1613) provided a list of the titles and contents of each manuscript and published a book on Arabic script in 1582. Chrisman pointed out the necessity of the Arabic studies and suggested to establish a chair for Arabic and to have philosophy and medicine taught from the sources. In 1585 he was commissioned to represent Arabic at Heidelberg University.<sup>4</sup> When we talk about the great works that were written on Arabic manuscripts in modern times, we have to point out the works of William Ahlwardt (1887–1899) and Carl Brockelman (1937–1949). William Ahlwardt is known for his monumental catalogue of the Arabic manuscripts in the Royal Library in Berlin (*Verzeichnis der arabischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*). His catalogue consists of ten large-format volumes, which were published between 1887 and 1899. Brockelman’s work, who wrote a history of Arabic literature (*Geschichte der arabischen Literature*), in which he listed all the works known to him, citing evidence from manuscript libraries all over the world. After the deduction of some recent works according to his calculations around 23,000 works from the Arab manuscript era are likely to remain.<sup>5</sup>

Related to the libraries in Germany which are interested in collecting Arabic manuscripts we can mention the Berlin State Library (*Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin*) which own a huge department of Arabic manuscripts with approximately 11,100 volumes. The collection represents the diversity of literary production in the Arab world over many centuries, from early fragments of the Koran to illuminated manuscripts to consumer literature from Islamic educational institutions.<sup>6</sup>

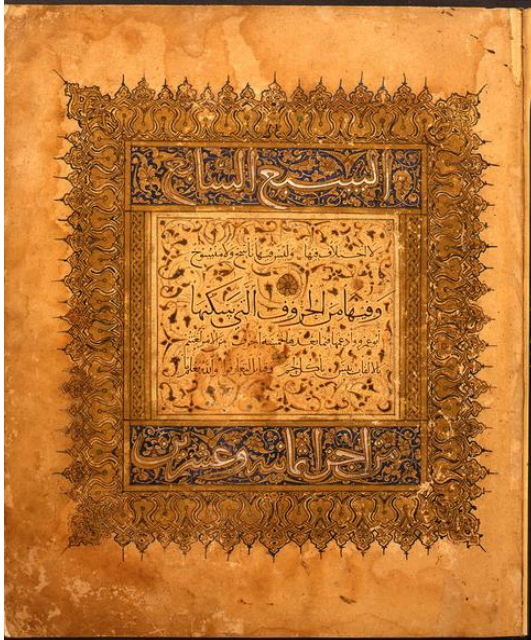
In the following three examples of Arabic manuscripts from the Berlin State Library:



pharmacy book of Sabur Ibn-Sahl, Anfang 10. Jh. (Ms. or. oct. 1839)



History of King Jaliad and his Vizier Schimas, Egypt, 16. /17. Century (Ms. or. Fol. 2564)



Abbasid Quran Commentary, Iraq, Copy in 1203 (Lindbergh 822)

In the midst of all these advantages and disadvantages that surrounded the science of Orientalism in Western countries, a new term emerged holding a new, positive Western approach to Islamic affairs at the academic level, namely 'Islamic and Arabic Studies.' The term was used as the title for a number of institutes concerned with the study of Islamic sciences and the Arabic language. This led some to ask if there was a new Orientalism in

Germany. Some argued that Orientalism in its violent form does not exist in Germany: “Researchers are pursuing their studies in universities and institutes known as Islamic studies, which publish many magazines and bulletins dealing with these studies. Today the number of those Researchers reach 150 approximately.”<sup>7</sup>

This important historical development related to the new term ‘Islamic and Arabic Studies’ reflects two things: Firstly, the specialization in the study of Islam as a religion, and not merely the East as a major civilization, as well as the interest in the Arabic language as an indispensable tool in the study of this religion (Islam), which considers the Holy Koran as its core and centre. Secondly, the development of teaching and research in academic institutions, which went directly to specialized Islamic sciences such as Islamic Law, Hadith and even philosophies of these sciences such as the principles of jurisprudence, the history of legislation and the terminology of Hadith. It is noteworthy that many professors who teach at Islamic and Arabic Studies institutes in Germany do not like — or rather refuse — to be called ‘Orientalists,’ indicating that what they teach is different from what Orientalism once was. Here is the logical question: What is the difference between ‘Orientalism’ and Islamic and Arabic Studies in the German context? More precisely: What is the difference between the teaching content and research orientation in the Orientalist institutes currently in Germany, such as the Orientalism Department in Freiburg and Cologne, and the content of the syllabuses and the perspectives of research in other Islamic and Arabic institutions present in many universities, such as the institute located in Münster? No matter what the differences are, the relevant part is that this development can be considered to be a great enrichment in the relationship between the rich East that embraces the Islamic religion and its Arabic language, and the West with its desire to learn of this religion more deeply.

This enrichment is manifested in the wide variety of subjects that have become available to the students who wish to study Islam, after having the opportunity for studying more specialized content in the institutes of Islamic Studies such as principles of jurisprudence and Hadith and Islamic Law. For example, Professor Schöller was appointed as a ‘Chair Professor’ for the subject of Hadith in Münster, which therefore granted students an opportunity that wasn’t available before to study the subject. On the other hand, Professor Johanna Pink, for example, on the Orientalist side, is interested in the interpretations of the Quran issued in Southeast Asia and held a number of agreements with universities in Indonesia and Malaysia and also with Al-Azhar University in Egypt.

### **The Study of Islamic Theology in Germany**

The third and final development of the relationship between Islam and the West in the new millennium on the level of academic studies and research happened in 2010, when the German government announced the establishment of five institutes of Islamic Studies or so-called ‘Islamic Theology Studies,’<sup>8</sup> thereby adding further depth to the richness I referred to previously. The term “theology” is originally a Christian Expression which is used in the academical scientific context and related to the catholic, evangelic or orthodox biblical Studies. There are many Christian faculties in Europe, which are called the theological faculties. The Arabic translation of the term sounds “*lahût* لاهوت” and wasn’t used in the Islamic scientific context. The equivalent colleges in Arab Islamic regions are called the Fundamentals of Religion Colleges. In Germany they were given the western, Christian

cultural title: theological institutes. They are confession-oriented teaching facilities where the teacher or lecturer as well as the students must be Muslim.

The professors working in the old institutes of Islamic and Arabic Studies asked about the feasibility of this decision and repeated the question asked by Orientalists in the past about the difference between the content provided by the old institutes and the new theological institutes, especially after the presence of three types of institutions dealing with the study of Islam and its sciences.

The aim of establishing these theological institutes was for German Muslim professors to train Muslim scholars, in order to counter the recruitment of teachers and imams from abroad who are not fluent in German language and are not sufficiently familiar with German culture, history and heritage. About that the German federal ministry of education and research (BMBF) published on its official Website, that “The aim is to train Islamic religion teachers for confession-oriented school lessons and to enable science-based studies of religious scholars in the state university system in German.”<sup>9</sup> But the second question posed by scholars of Islamic studies was the extent to which research studies offered by theological institutes would be characterized by a rigorous scientific methodology, especially the research methods that many Muslims have reserved to apply to their sacred texts, such as the historical monetary approach.

The debate and controversy in the German scientific community led to a 2012 conference inaugurated by a number of ministers and attended by a large number of professors of Islamic Studies and Theology to discuss “The Relationship of Islamic Studies with Islamic Theology” (Das Verhältnis zwischen Islamwissenschaft und islamischer Theologie). In her speech, Gudrun Krämer asked a clear question: Does the study of Islamic theology offer us something that Islamic studies does not? (Was leistet die islamische Theologie, was die Islamwissenschaft nicht leistet?).<sup>10</sup> What is new is that the institutes of Islamic Theology have become obligated to adopt programs to graduate imams of mosques, and teachers of Islamic religion in schools, as did the institute of Münster. These programs were not offered by either Oriental or Islamic Studies Institutes. It is also good that the Institutes of Islamic Theology present a contemporary theological vision of the Islamic religion which has received a great resonance in the German intellectual circles, which was reflected in a large number of the publications issued by these institutes.

I would like to emphasize that there is a strong and deep relationship between Islam and the West at the academic level, accompanied by events that push for further development not only at the level of establishment of new institutes and renewal of curricula, but there are modern events affecting this academic relationship such as extremism, hatred speech, the issue of integration, the niqab, mixed swimming lessons in the schools where Muslims learn. All these subjects imposed themselves on the scientific research arena in all institutes dealing with the study of Islamic affairs. These institutes that no longer focuses the Orientalism, which studies the Far East, but raise the banner of Islamic Theology which deals with the Islamic religion in Europe. At the level of dealing with Islamic sciences, the distance between East and West has shrunk.



## Conclusions

1. Academic studies and research have been one of the most important factors affecting the relationship between East and West since the sixteenth century.
2. Orientalist Studies carried out by the West aimed primarily at serving political colonialism and religious proselytizing.
3. German Orientalism was largely neutral compared to other European countries such as France and England.
4. German Orientalism was interested in the sciences of the Arabic language, the editing of Islamic historical manuscripts, and the history of the Koran, leaving a great heritage which signifies a scientific bridge between East and West.
5. German universities established institutes of Islamic and Arabic Studies that specialized in the study of the sciences of Islamic religion in order to critique historical religious texts and pay attention to the interpretation of the Koran.
6. A number of German professors working in Islamic and Arabic Studies institutes refused to be described as 'Orientalists,' indicating that they distanced themselves from the negative connotations of the term.
7. The establishment of Islamic theological institutes in Germany, in which only Muslim professors and Muslim students teach and study, indicates a very positive development in the history of the relationship between East and West concerning of Islamic and Arabic studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said was born in a conservative Christian family in Jerusalem in 1935. He started his education in Cairo in 1941 at a British Council school. Then, he moved to Cairo School for American Children in 1946, before moving to Jerusalem with his family to continue his education at St. George's School. Said graduated from Princeton University in 1957, where he studied humanities. He graduated with a degree in literature from Harvard University. His thesis on Joseph Conrad influenced his scientific structure and intellectual personality. Said worked as a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University in 1963. Edward Said died at the age of 67 in September 2003. He wrote several books, most notably his book *Orientalism* in 1978, translated by Dr. Kamal El Deep in 1981, and Dr. Mohammed Anani 2006. (Al-Dhafiri, Turki bin Mohammed, *Al-istishraq ind Edward Said "Orientalism at Edward Said"*, Jeddah, Al-Taasif Center for Studies and Research, 2015, pp. 15-32.)

<sup>2</sup> Bart, Rudy, *Arabic and Islamic Studies in German Universities*, translated by Mustafa Maher, Cairo, National Center for Translation, 2011, p 18.

<sup>3</sup> Compare: Abdullah, Raed Amir, *German Orientalists and their efforts towards Arab-Islamic manuscripts*, Mosul University, Journal of the Arts of Mesopotamia, 2013, p. 8.

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<sup>7</sup> Rawabit-Center for Research and Strategic Studies, *Colonial Orientalism and Contemporary. Was the German model different?* in: <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/99922>.

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