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Teaching Interfaith Relations at Universities in the Arab Middle East: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract: This study explores the present state of teaching Interfaith/Interreligious Relations at universities in the Arab Middle East. First, it considers the definition and various approaches to teaching Interfaith Relations by leading proponents of Interreligious Studies in the West such as Oddbjørn Leirvik and Marianne Moyaert within a theoretical framework that is sensitive to the Arab Middle Eastern context. It explores several key factors in Arab society that have prevented the teaching of Interfaith Relations in universities. The discussion then turns to the unique Dar Al-Kalima University (Palestine) Interreligious Dialogue Inter-Regional Curriculum initiative and its significance for teaching Interfaith Relations in the university. Finally, the study examines the case study method of teaching developed by Diana Eck at Harvard University, which can be adapted to a Middle Eastern context and offers two unique case studies for university teachers.

Keywords: interfaith studies; interreligious studies; interfaith dialogue; disruptive education; teaching interfaith studies; interfaith relations

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1. Introduction

This study explores a number of fundamental issues in teaching Interfaith Relations (IR) at universities in the Arab Middle East and proposes several strategies and solutions that promote a more inclusive Interfaith Studies curriculum. The field of Interreligious Studies (IS) in the West emphasizes the methodological and epistemological aspects of Interfaith Relations as an interdisciplinary field, whereas in the Arab world Interfaith Relations has been taught as a subsidiary topic often within the context of Comparative Religion within Shari'a faculties and Theology departments and colleges. In fact, the Middle Eastern context is characterized by a focus on interfaith dialogue in non-University settings. "Interfaith Relations" (IR) and "Interreligious Studies" (IS) are employed interchangeably herein when referring to the academic study of inter-religious relations in the Middle Eastern university.

This study is itself an act of epistemic disruption as it challenges both traditional approaches and the absence of critical approaches to Interfaith Relations at universities in the Arab world. Faculty members, who are wedded to outdated curricula in Comparative Religion while "honouring tradition", look upon interfaith dialogue with the utmost suspicion or at least with great ambivalence. The emerging academic field of Interreligious Studies both in the West and particularly in the Middle East is still unknown and little understood. Interreligious Studies does not exist as an independent field of inquiry at universities in the Arab Middle East but is integrated within the curricula of Theology and Shari'a faculties where courses on Christian–Muslim relations or on the Abrahamic faiths are taught. In other regions of the Islamic world like Indonesia and Malaysia Interreligious Studies is part of Religious Studies or Islamic Studies programs.[1] One misconception that persists is that it is merely synonymous with interfaith dialogue or constructive dialogue[2] or it is merely a thematic area within Comparative Religion or Religious Studies. While it is essential to recognize the central role that dialogue continues to play in the academic study of Interfaith Relations, it is but one dimension that overshadows attempts to promote

Interfaith Relations as an academic discipline of continued relevance and urgency in an increasingly interconnected world. In fact, dialogue initiatives and programs promoting interfaith relations on all levels of society are ubiquitous to the Middle East landscape, especially in Palestine, Qatar, Lebanon, and Jordan.[3] Interfaith dialogue has become the norm in pluralist Muslim-majority societies; yet the form that dialogue and related activities take depends on the organizations and individuals involved. In discussing these initiatives in teaching, we reaffirm their continued significance to the field of Interfaith Relations, particularly in its Middle Eastern and global contexts. After a discussion of perceptions of the study of Interfaith Relations (IR) and its meaning in popular discourse, this study will consider Interreligious Studies as a discipline with its fundamental terms and concepts, followed by a discussion of some inherent problems typically encountered in teaching Interfaith Relations in the Middle East. The choice of approaches to be discussed is necessarily selective, and the framework is theoretical. Next it will discuss several solutions to teaching Interreligious Studies, including the Dar Al-Kalima University (Palestine) Interreligious Dialogue Inter-Regional Curriculum initiative. Finally, this study will explore how the case study method developed by the Harvard University Pluralism Project can be effectively deployed at universities in the Middle East.

2. Current State of "Interfaith" in the Arab World

While scripture and Theology are at the heart of the study of Interfaith Relations in the Arab world, traditionally Interreligious Studies have been taught as part of Christian and Islamic theology, whether *'ilm al-lahut, 'aqeedah, fiqh* or Islamic thought. Each of these disciplines has its role in traditional curricula in Shari'a faculties and theological colleges. This study does not advocate for abandoning traditional curricula across the Arab world but for adopting a multidisciplinary approach to Interreligious Studies that employs both theoretical studies and analysis and historical analysis. In this way, students will benefit from foundational courses in a discipline whether in Theology, the Humanities, Social Sciences or Law. In the Arab world certain humanistic fields like the History of Religion, Comparative Religion or Interreligious Studies have not emerged as independent disciplines in their own right. This contributes to a lack of understanding of Interreligious Studies as a field of study. In fact, a false dichotomy is created between Islamic Studies and Comparative Religion on the one hand, and the Humanities and Social Sciences on the other. This lack of synergy and dialogue between fields is more pronounced in the Arab world due to several factors: (1) Disciplinary silos; (2) Lack of background and training in the Humanities and Social Sciences; (3) The overemphasis on the edition and studying classical texts. While the latter is important in reproducing authentic knowledge within a largely Islamic context, the connections between knowledge production in other contexts are absent; (4) Bias and perceived bias. Perceived bias refers to the perception that Western scholarship is flawed in its entirety. This has the effect of hindering the building of meaningful synergies between researchers working in the same field in the West and the Middle East.

The concept of "we vs. they" or "I vs. you," to use Buber's terminology, does not exist as a highly developed concept in interfaith dialogue circles in the Arab world. Religious commitment informs the way instructors approach their materials often to the detriment of an analytical discourse which considers differing viewpoints. For instance, what baggage does a Sufi, Shi'i or Salafi Muslim or a Catholic, Orthodox or Baptist Christian bring to the table? This so-called baggage is an important part of the learning process, which involves recognizing the differences among and between groups. Just as important is recognizing the commonalities that exist among faiths.

Interpretation is an integral element of Interreligious Studies. While in the Arab world theological affiliation is the default mode of teaching at university, in the West interdisciplinarity informs the comparative study of religions and, by extension, Interreligious Studies. In the Arab world, Interreligious Studies is an emerging field; yet recent regional political developments have cast a shadow over the success of the interfaith enterprise

and galvanized scholars of religion to focus on how to better deliver an Interreligious Studies course. The question often heard repeated among university colleagues is to what extent can one be both a person of faith and a critical scholar, and suspend, transcend, or engage one's religious commitment? The three categories proposed by Moyaert are not mutually exclusive. One may be a theologian, academic, and interfaith activist (Moyaert 2020, pp. 50–58). Yet each of these categories is subject to redefinition based on geographical location and the unique scholarly environment that exists at any given academic institution. To fully answer this question would take us farther afield. Religiously committed Muslims and Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere may engage with an array of materials in multiple ways. However, one fundamental problem is the language barrier as most of the theoretical and analytical research is written in English and occasionally in other western European languages and neither students nor lecturers have sufficient command of English to engage fully with the critical frameworks that inform the field of Interreligious Studies. Secondly, in more traditional circles, there continue to be an outright questioning and rejection of Western methodologies in Religious Studies and Comparative Religion because it is believed that they serve an Orientalist agenda. Moreover, some Muslims studying Interfaith Relations regard it as irrelevant except within the context of Shari'a, '*aqeedah* or *fiqh*. Finally, there is a genuine concern among Muslim students and faculty that Interreligious Studies are too closely affiliated with proselytizing or with normalizing ties with the Israeli government. An equally difficult challenge in the academy is the increasing rate of STEM-ification at Arab universities, while at the other end Shari'a and Theology faculties exist. The result in both cases is marginalizing humanistic and social–scientific inquiry.

Such a situation has led to a re-evaluation of Arab identities, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. Such approaches have informed collective thinking about why it is that academics study and teach Interfaith Relations as an academic subject in the Middle East. As Hans Gustafson and Paul Hedges indicated, Interreligious Studies is a "self-implicating" field (Gustafson 2020, pp. 142–43; Hedges 2014, pp. 13–14). This is as true of the West as it is of the Arab Middle East. In other words, one cannot divorce one's own religious affiliation and religious and cultural identity from the study of Interfaith Relations.

Universities subsume Interfaith Relations within the framework of Christian and Islamic Theology and thought. One oft-cited historical example is that of the Patriarch Sophronius surrendering the keys of the Holy City of Jerusalem to the second caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab in 637; another is that of coexistence in Al-Andalus during the 10th century. Scholars need to problematize the study of Interfaith Relations and read between the lines, neither accepting narratives of perfect harmony nor interpreting history in terms of the ideological baggage that has dominated much of the discourse. Universities in the Arab world simply teach students about the success of the Andalusian model of *convivencia* (Ar. *ta'ayush*, lit. coexistence) or about how governments and leaders in the region have promoted interfaith relations or have partaken in major interfaith initiatives without context and analysis. Each of these examples has its role in the larger Interreligious Studies enterprise. However, the emphasis should be placed on a discourse that seeks to include Muslims, Christians, and Jews within a historical framework and that also addresses social, political, cultural, and legal aspects of the historical encounter between the communities.

At the university level, "interfaith" does not merely mean interfaith dialogue or what is often referred to as constructive dialogue, which is but one important component of Interfaith Relations. In the Arab world, "interfaith" can have several interrelated meanings that have their equivalents in the West. Just to be clear, the following generalizations are often echoed at higher education institutions, not necessarily in society at large:

* Interfaith engagement is about compromising one's religious beliefs and being forced to convert to another religion. (This view is not as prevalent as in the past but is currently discussed in various university contexts).
* The Zionist and Western agenda is about bringing Arabs and non-Arabs together to sell us the Israeli narrative.

* In the West, it is merely about the feel-good factor and liberals getting together.
* The study of Interfaith Relations is about us forgetting our Muslim/Christian identity.
* The professor has an agenda; he/she wants to secularize knowledge.
* The instructor is an Orientalist whose work goes against Islamic unity.
* There is only one truth. Why should I even bother?

Conflating dialogue with the academic study of Interfaith/Interreligious Studies remains a major hurdle that must be overcome through redefining, re-contextualizing, and refocusing efforts toward teaching Interreligious Studies. How does one translate the basic ideas across boundaries while the field of Interreligious Studies is only emerging as a legitimate field of study at university? Indeed, Interreligious Studies should be an integral part of the curriculum at Arab universities.

In spite of these factors, instruction in Interfaith Relations exists. Setting it apart from other universities in the Arab world, St. Joseph University in Lebanon uniquely offers an M.A. degree in Christian–Muslim Relations with Arabic and French tracks. In fact, the French track of the program was founded in 1977 and the Arabic track in 2007, making the program the first and oldest program in Interfaith Relations in the world. The program attracts students from the Arab world and Europe. Although the degree is offered by the Theology faculty and is taught by Christian and Muslim theologians and scholars who are experts in their fields, it also incorporates the study of interfaith dialogue and includes a practical training session during the second semester. The course also tackles sensitive theological issues such as the nature of Christ, salvation, and the crucifixion, which are integral to interfaith dialogue in the Middle East. Another aspect of the course is a focus on Christian–Muslim dialogue in Lebanon. At the B.A. level foundational courses in Christian and Islamic theology are taught by Christian and Muslim scholars.

The College of Islamic Studies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, a postgraduate college, had previously offered the M.A. course on "Islam and Its Relations and Dialogue with Other Faiths," which focused only on Islam and other faiths, including dialogue and relations between the world's religions. Since 2018, an interdisciplinary thematic approach has been adopted that recognizes the social and historical diversity in Interreligious Studies and includes a practical training component within an academic context that aims to look at practical issues in Interreligious Studies. The present version of the course which focuses on Islam and the Other explores the use of language and incorporates discussion of conflicts and coexistence throughout history in different geographical.

Currently no Palestinian or Jordanian universities offer a program or courses specifically in Interreligious Studies at either the undergraduate or postgraduate level. Seizing the opportunity to address the knowledge gap is Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, leading Palestinian academic, theologian, and President of Dar Al-Kalima University, who is overseeing the production of an Interfaith and Intercultural Understanding Curriculum for undergraduate teaching in consultation with academics and practitioners in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Qatar. This initiative will be discussed later.

3. Contending with Perceptions and Misconceptions

The origins of the study of modern "Interfaith Relations" in the Middle East and North Africa are rooted in the historical encounters between European and American Christian missionaries and the local Muslim and Christian populations during the 19th century, a reality of which Christian and Muslim Arabs studying Interfaith Relations are only too well aware.[4] The legacy of colonialism and its aftermath dominate the public discourse, as do, more recently, elite political initiatives that have employed interfaith dialogue for political objectives. The proliferation of such initiatives and activities generated by governments and think tanks does not define Interreligious Studies as a field of study. Quite the contrary, it shows the great sensitivity involved in the instrumentalization of religion and its effects on the region. As such, it may be useful for a political scientist, for instance, to study the impact of such initiatives on the academy and on Arab public opinion without making a value judgment about the motivations behind such initiatives. The consequence of not

objectively studying such initiatives and the political acts associated with them has the potential to impact negatively not only on interfaith initiatives but on Interreligious Studies as a field.

Traditionally, Interfaith Relations continues to be taught from the disciplinary perspective of Comparative Religion, which historically is not free of its colonial legacy rooted in romanticized 19th century views about the Orient. Similarly, in the Arab world instructors must contend with the perception that studying and teaching about Interfaith Relations and engaging in dialogue groups, particularly with participants from a Jewish background, means an acceptance of governments normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel and abandoning the Palestinian struggle for independence. Despite this, the study of Judaism and the Jewish communities of the Arab world in linguistic, philological, historical, cultural, and theological contexts is of increasing importance, especially in Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt. While this study will not address Middle Eastern politics in any meaningful way, separating political issues from the academic study of Interfaith Relations is not always possible, nor is it desirable.[5] As Abu-Nimer mentions, discussion of controversial issues like the Palestinian–Israeli conflict should not be avoided.

As a humanistic field of study, Interreligious Studies offers one solution, which aims to transcend the perceived difficulties for it to gain wider acceptance within the academy and within the Middle Eastern region. It fills the void between interfaith dialogue on the one hand and Religious Studies, Comparative Religion, and Theology on the other by offering interdisciplinary possibilities for understanding Interfaith Relations within an academic context. After a brief introduction to the academic field of Interreligious Studies, this article will focus on the current state of Interreligious Studies in the Arab Middle East and explore academically rigorous teaching strategies that are as sensitive to cultural and religious contexts as they are to the variety of academic discourses that inform and transform Interreligious Studies.[6] It will discuss the Harvard Pluralism Project established by Diana Eck and propose a potential model for adoption at the undergraduate and graduate levels that is rooted in and sensitive to the Middle Eastern context.[7] The Middle East is not a homogenous discourse space; rather, it encompasses a variety of customary social norms and sensibilities that must be considered in the design and implementation of courses in Interreligious Studies.

4. Defining the Field of Interreligious Studies

Interreligious Studies has emerged as a distinct discipline in the West but intersects with the fields of Religious Studies and Comparative Religion, and draws upon methodologies and insights from both fields.

The Harvard Pluralism Project, directed by the renowned Indologist and scholar of Comparative Religion Diana Eck, defines “interfaith” and “interreligious” as follows:

> Interfaith and interreligious are terms that have come to common use in the late 20th century to describe efforts at dialogue, understanding, and cooperation among people of different religious traditions—Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, for example. Interfaith and interreligious movements are premised on respecting the distinctiveness and particularity of each faith tradition and are not attempts to create a new faith.[8]

Interreligious Studies also encompasses the study of religious pluralism. Although the pluralist dimension emphasizes a level of engagement, which, on the surface, is more difficult to relate to a more homogeneous Middle Eastern context, it offers a discourse that any serious endeavor to teach Interreligious Studies needs to consider. Pluralism and diversity are two distinct but interrelated phenomena. The distinction is:

> “Pluralism” and “diversity” are sometimes used as if they were synonymous, but diversity—splendid, colorful, and perhaps threatening—is not pluralism. Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that diversity.[9]

Another complementary approach is a multidisciplinary one that recognizes a dynamic and ever-changing discourse. The Belgian scholar of Interreligious Studies, Marianne Moyaert, defines Interreligious Studies, as a:

> multidisciplinary scholarly field that includes those scholars who are dedicated to the study of the dynamic encounter (intentional and non-intentional, harmonious and conflictual, collective and individual, and historical and contemporary) between religions and their adherents in a variety of historico-cultural and socio-political contexts (Moyaert 2019a, p. 3).

This essential definition offers a window into the world of Interreligious Studies without imposing a unified methodological framework on the field. It does not purport to support only a single definition. In fact, Moyaert normally addresses multiple audiences of students in her lecture courses, including Christian theologians. Thus, the academic practitioner of Interreligious Studies has to step out of institutionally and disciplinarily proscribed boundaries, as will be discussed later. One fundamental problem in the Arab Middle Eastern context apart from Lebanon, which is a unique case, is the near homogeneity of the student body, namely, Muslim undergraduate and graduate students of different backgrounds who have had little or no contact with other religions or Christian peers in any interfaith or interreligious context, whether at university or outside. This is true of Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries, where most Christians hail from the Philippines, India, and elsewhere, with a minority from other Arab countries. In Qatar, undergraduate institutions in Education City welcome students from eastern Europe and Asia, Russia, Africa, and elsewhere, while Hamad Bin Khalifa University admits international graduate students mainly from the Middle East and Islamic countries and from Qatar, but more significantly from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

The genesis of Interreligious Studies as an academic discipline in the West occurred nearly 30 years ago.[10] The Norwegian Lutheran academic Oddbjørn Leirvik of the University of Oslo confidently dates the emergence of the field to the late 1990s (Leirvik 2014, p. 7). Leirvik's studies, most notably *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism*, are a primer for those interested in Interreligious Studies. Leirvik is one of the founding scholars of the European Society for Intercultural and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS), which was initiated by the late Hendrick Vroom of the Free University in Amsterdam. The University of Oslo, the Free University of Amsterdam, and the University of Birmingham were among the first theological faculties in Europe to employ the term "Interreligious Studies."

Following Eck in her adoption of "interreligious," Kate McCarthy attempts to situate Interreligious Studies within the context of the secular field of Religious Studies. Yet, one may ask whether such a model is applicable to an Arab Middle Eastern context in which religion remains far more central? As McCarthy states:

> The scholarly and religiously neutral quality of interreligious studies is what establishes its place in the academy. Interreligious studies therefore must underline its commitment to critical inquiry by including, among other things, systematic analysis of conflict, domination, and contestation in historical and current interreligious encounters (McCarthy 2018, p. 21).

In a Middle Eastern context, Interreligious Studies does not exist as such with the same orientation toward epistemology as well as the study of practice and encounter in a humanistic and social–scientific framework. Rather, Interfaith Relations are taught through the lens of Shari'a Colleges or Christian theological colleges, which privilege theological considerations. Thus, Interfaith Relations continue to be marginalized. The challenge is to offer courses that are inclusive of the values, ideas, and history of a religious tradition(s) but at the same time engage the other traditions in a neutral fashion. In the North American context, this would be in the framework of "secular higher education" as McCarthy and others have discussed (McCarthy 2018, p. 10). In a university course Theology must be de-centered and brought into dialogue with other disciplines in such

a manner that acknowledges and respects the interdisciplinary and fluid nature of the field of Interreligious Studies and highlights the historical role of Theology in shaping and transforming the religious, social, and cultural identities of Christians and Muslims in the Arab world.

What approaches might one employ? McCarthy identifies 13 salient features of universities with Religious Studies and Interreligious Studies programs and courses that help to understand the approaches one may adopt in Interreligious Studies:

1. Scholarly method,
2. Multidisciplinary method,
3. Comparative method,
4. Explicitly neutral, objective, or critical method,
5. International or global scope,
6. Religious literacy as purpose,
7. Promoting dialogue as purpose,
8. Understanding diversity as purpose,
9. Contributing to citizenship or the public good,
10. Fostering empathy, sympathy, or appreciation of other religions,
11. Personal development or critical self-awareness,
12. Professional preparation,
13. Attention to nonreligious perspectives. (McCarthy 2018, p. 17)

Not all these features apply to all programs and, similarly, it may not be helpful to incorporate them into teaching without careful consideration of the parameters of a course or program. Indeed, most of these categories can also be adopted in professional development or certificate courses.

McCarthy proposes an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates bold concepts, yet deciding on what to include in an Interreligious Studies curriculum depends not on a seemingly inclusive definition of Interreligious Studies but on the disciplinary backgrounds of the instructors, institutional requirements, and the nature of the student body and the language(s) to be employed. McCarthy's proposed operational definition poses several challenges for academic practitioners of Interreligious Studies, such as whether regional conflicts should be taught as part of Interreligious Studies or whether themes more closely allied to historical concepts such as *convivencia*, commensality, and symbiosis should be an integral part of the discourse.[11]

The aforementioned approaches are theological or assume that Theology is a cornerstone of Interreligious Studies. Yet, in order to attract students to the study of Interreligious Studies in the Middle East, Theology, if it is to be a part of an advanced undergraduate or graduate course, must be only one element, not the overriding paradigm.

A multi-faceted approach that includes theoretical, conceptual, and practical elements should be incorporated into curricula at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In the American context, McCarthy proposes setting medieval Córdoba against ISIS and the anti-gay Westboro Church (McCarthy 2018, p. 21). Yet, is it appropriate to choose episodes from history and juxtapose them against modern-day events? On what basis is a comparison made and to what ends? Do comparisons function to problematize categories or do they allow instructors to argue for a deeper, more profound, and relevant engagement with the past? In a North American and European context, current events become increasingly relevant to defining the direction and sustaining the momentum of Interreligious Studies on a local and community level and in a university context. A similar dynamic exists in the Middle East, but the issues are often influenced by local considerations (e.g., sectarianism and interfaith marriage) and global considerations (e.g., sustainability, the environment, racism, hate speech).

Until recently in Qatar, as in the rest of the Middle East, core courses in Interfaith Relations (Muslim–non-Muslim Relations) have not been taught as a distinct subject but interfaith dialogue has been incorporated in course offerings in '*aqeedah*, Religious Studies, and Comparative Religion. The latter two specializations, as they are presently defined in

Shari'a and Islamic Studies faculties, present further challenges for defining Interreligious Studies.

One major obstacle to the adoption of "Interfaith Relations" in the Middle East, which must be overcome, is the perception that Interfaith Relations and, in turn, Interreligious Studies are largely Western projects borne out of the needs of Western societies to engage with Arab Muslims, Christians, and Jews[12] not on their own terms but through a missionary and colonial mindset. Such a legacy prevents, or at least makes difficult, active engagement with Muslims and Arabs in a constructive environment.

5. The Vocabulary of Interfaith Relations

Without a core dictionary of terms and concepts translated into Arabic, Interreligious Studies remains a marginal and unknown discipline. Such an academic undertaking must not succumb to political and ideological considerations.

Fundamental terms in the study of Interfaith Relations need to be translated, particularly for an Arabic-speaking audience, and a comprehensive lexicon produced in order to encourage "interfaith literacy," not only in universities but also in Arab societies. UNESCO has until now focused on intercultural dialogue, thus limiting the effectiveness of interfaith engagements. By not engaging in religion, religious identities—which are an integral aspect of the identities of Arab Muslims, Christians, and Jews—continue to be marginalized. The importance of religion cannot be underestimated. Thus, producing a dictionary for Interreligious Studies, not merely interfaith dialogue, is essential. However, the task is made difficult by the lack of consensus about which words and concepts belong in the dictionary. Essentially, a bilingual English–Arabic and Arabic–English dictionary is required. Faculty at Dar Al-Kalima in Bethlehem, Palestine—under the leadership of its president, Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb—have been discussing with colleagues establishing such a dictionary, which could potentially have contributors from Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere. It is important that this is an Arab initiative with input from colleagues across the Middle East. First, such a dictionary, as it has been pointed out, would have to consider political considerations without compromising the content, quality, or integrity of the work. Second, how can the terms frequently employed in the Western academy be translated into Arabic in order to better serve the needs of the majority of Arab students who study in the Arabic language while not marginalizing students who study in English or both languages? At universities where Arab and non-Arabic students are taking seminars together, the English language still serves as the medium of instruction. Other exceptions are Shari'a and Theology colleges where the Arabic language is the medium of instruction. Frequently recurring terms occur in Interreligious Studies, such as the following: Interfaith Studies, Interreligious Studies, Interfaith Relations, minority, majority, pluralism, tolerance, toleration, and coexistence. What do these terms mean in different contexts? What is the origin of the term "minority" (Ar. *aqalliyya*)? Are Christians merely minorities (*aqalliyyāt*) or a minority within a minority (*aqalliyya dākhil aqalliyya*) or are they a religious community (*jamāʿa dīniyya*)? How have Middle Eastern Christians historically viewed themselves and how has that definition changed over time and space, indeed in the late 19th and 20th centuries with Arab immigration to the West? Such sensitive issues need to be discussed within a framework that recognizes the historical and contemporary contexts in which certain terms are used. For instance, when do Palestinian Christians consider themselves a minority and when do they consider themselves a religious community? This issue is deeply rooted in Palestinian identity as it is a question of demographics. Thus, it is necessary that a dictionary considers contextual usages in a clear and cogent fashion and gives abbreviated references for those who wish to consult the relevant primary and secondary sources. Palestinian University Dar Al-Kalima's interfaith dialogue initiative aims to dismantle an antiquated epistemological framework or, as one of the main project participants puts it: "to dismantle the traditional paradigms"[13] through which Interfaith Relations are understood.

An example of a dictionary entry would be:

Religious Pluralism
Arabic
Al-Taʿaddudiyya Al-Dīniyya (religious pluralism)
In the context of Interreligious Studies, pluralism "taʿaddudiyya al-dīniyya" refers to: The active seeking of understanding across lines of difference.

(a) Acceptance of all religions.
(b) Also included are *al-Taʿaddudiyya al-Ibrāhīmiyya* (covenantal pluralism), a term which was recently coined in the Templeton Project by American political scientists W. Christopher Stewart, Chris Seiple, and Dennis R. Hoover.

> Covenantal Pluralism entails the obligation, the responsibility, and intentional pledge to engage, respect, and protect the other's liberty of conscience, without necessarily lending moral equivalency to the other's resulting beliefs and behavior.
>
> Covenantal Pluralism requires a faithful patriotism that seeks an entrepreneurial competition—i.e., a cooperative competition that is loving, spirited, and constructive—that stands against the monopoly of religious nationalism (Seiple 2018).

What do these concepts mean in a Middle Eastern rather than a Western context? Covenantal pluralism is a single approach that underscores the shared values between the Abrahamic religions.

How useful is this concept for explaining the distinct nature of religious pluralism in the Arab Middle East?

The Templeton Religion Trust has been funding projects related to the theme of Covenantal Pluralism, which the Trust defines as: " ... the responsibility to engage, respect, and protect people of all faiths, and people of none, without necessarily lending moral equivalency to their beliefs and behavior" (Chen 2019). This concept itself is not controversial because it is bound with the more problematic and highly-politicized issues of religious freedom and human rights, which are but two important elements in a diverse interconnected network of elements that constitute social cohesion. However, when one element is emphasized over another, social cohesion is marginalized and trust is lacking.

Another concept that is central to Interreligious Studies, but is nonetheless problematic, is the notion of the "other" (Ar. *al-akhar*). One common idea proposed by one of the participants in a recent meeting I attended is that we should substitute "brother" (*akh*) for "other" while pointing out one would simply drop the last consonant (r) in the word. While for interfaith or constructive dialogue, promoting brotherhood or sisterhood and the feel-good factor are routinely encouraged, particularly among university students and youth, one should not avoid discussing what the term "other" means in different contexts: historical, political, and social. No civilization or society can be liberated from the notion of the "other" nor should we attempt to marginalize its importance to Interreligious Studies. What are we, as individuals and communities, if not the "other"? This is what contributes to the dynamisms of society. We should embrace "otherness" as an important part of how we interact with others. In fact, discussion of "other" should be front and center in the first week of an undergraduate university course dedicated to Interfaith Relations or Interfaith Studies.

6. Approaches to Interfaith Relations in the University

Herein we will briefly explore a number of complementary approaches to teaching Interfaith Relations that may be employed in a Middle Eastern context depending upon the subject being covered and the specific context. First is the relational approach advocated by Oddbjørn and which builds on and greatly expands Paul Hedges' interpretation of the concept as it relates to Comparative Religion:

> In relation to the well-established field of comparative religion, interreligious studies are "more expressly focused on the dynamic encounter and engagement

> between religious traditions and persons." (Hedges 2013, p. 1077; Leirvik 2014, p. 10).

Leirvik (2014, p. 10) adds that the choice is between a purely descriptive and analytical field on the one hand or "a more constructive [one] akin to systematic theology." Further elaborating on this paradigm, he highlights three primary features: (1) Interreligious Studies is relational by nature; (2) Teachers, students, and researchers are "agents" in the space between religion and secularity and in between the disciplinary spaces, such as between Religious Studies and Interreligious Studies; (3) The agent being transparent about normativity in the "search for meaning and obligation across traditions, through what we conventionally call interreligious dialogue."(pp. 11–12).

By emphasizing the diverse and pluralist experience that is reflected in Interreligious Studies, the field is brought into focus. Dunbar mentions that:

> The academic study of religion was intended to be non-sectarian and impartial as an alternative to theological studies; in contrast, interreligious dialogue presupposes religious commitments because it involves at least two persons from different religions conversing together about issues of religious significance. (Dunbar 1998).

Comparison is not the only approach in Interfaith Relations, nor is intertextuality and the study of texts. In fact, a multifaceted approach that is informed by a neutral framework is called for. The default position in the academy is to start from the vantage point of looking at Muslim relations with Christians or Jews or Christian relations with Muslims or Jews.

The first problem is of binary categories in Interreligious Studies that are deemphasized in favor of fluid categories and thematic approaches. When, for instance, Muslim–Christian or Muslim–Jewish relations are seen from the disciplinary perspectives of Theology, Shari'a or *'aqeedah* Theology becomes the prism through which to view such relations. Discussing and employing such artificially constructed categories is an essential part of mapping the field of Interreligious Studies, whether for Middle Eastern or European and North American students.

Marianne Moyaert (2019b) adopts a hermeneutical approach to Interfaith Relations. Such an approach weds interfaith thinking with practice and emphasizes "promoting understanding between self and other relying on the approach of hermeneutical self-reflection." This includes "critical consideration of the way one's own profound assumptions and convictions affect how one experiences, understands, and relates to those of other faiths." An alternative is creating an interdisciplinary framework informed by history of which Theology is a component; then self-reflection may not occupy a major part of this endeavor. Until now a distinctly Arab-Islamic approach to the study of Interreligious Relations did not exist in the University, though a number of important studies have appeared over the years by scholar activists that contribute to the important dialogue about interfaith within society.[14] Traditional approaches based on Islamic and Christian theology and thought are important as they are part of the broader discourse that must be expanded to include Interreligious Studies in a variety of contexts and in conversation with other fields. Recognizing this, the Dar Al-Kalima initiative, led by leading Palestinian theologian and academic Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, seeks to address this issue by integrating intercultural and interreligious dialogue into an inclusive interdisciplinary framework through the contributions of Palestinian, Lebanese, and Jordanian academics and cultural experts. The curriculum aligns with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #16 (Promote Just, Peaceful and Inclusive Societies) and Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18.

Such an approach is beneficial for creating a dynamic framework that recognizes the diverse Arab-Islamic and Christian experiences across time and space.

Such approaches offer instructors a number of choices based on subject matter and context. The focus of the curriculum is on "Muslim–Christian dialogue, and . . . the plurality of its forms/types (theological, institutional, spiritual, dialogue of common action, natural dialogue/dialogue of life)."

The Dar Al-Kalima curriculum includes six modules for a second year or upper-division (3rd or 4th year) undergraduate course: history, institutional dialogue, theology and religious studies, spiritual dialogue, natural dialogue, dialogue of life, and dialogue of common action. Instructors can customize the modules depending upon their needs.

The focus is largely on history and the varieties of dialogue, though theoretical considerations are discussed during the first week and throughout the course. The curriculum can be adapted for M.A. study.

7. Challenges to Creating a New Discourse on Interreligious Studies in the Arab World

Challenges to creating a truly interdisciplinary field of Interfaith Relations in the Arab Middle East can be categorized as follows: Academic, religious, contextual to the culture and society, and political.

The academic challenges are twofold. First, who is qualified to teach and what disciplinary or personal biases could they potentially introduce into the classroom environment? The first step in legitimating the Interreligious Studies enterprise is for scholars to acknowledge those biases constructively, which will then generate discussion among students and among colleagues in colleges and departments who have a vested interest in creating a meaningful dialogue about what form the study of Interreligious Studies should take.

Second is overcoming resistance to the study of Interfaith Relations within the academy and thus gaining acceptance. Even in countries in which interfaith dialogue is a regular occurrence, such as Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, universities in the Arab world have fallen woefully behind in promoting Interreligious Studies. Faculty and administrators have traditionally dismissed IS as subversive, un-Islamic or promoting a Christian, or Western–Orientalist agenda. Equally detrimental to IS as well as to the Humanities and Social Sciences of which IS is a part is the push by administrators for STEM-ification of the curricula without appreciating the intrinsic value of engagement. Yet an even more central reason lies in the willingness of departments to embrace courses that more accurately reflect the religious, cultural, and social landscape of the Middle East.

Third is the lack of qualified instructors who have the necessary disciplinary training. Imtiyaz Yusuf offers a critical assessment of religious studies scholarship in the Islamic world today that is relevant to the discussion of Interreligious Studies. He states:

> Today, there are only a handful [of] Muslim academics trained in the modern academic study of religion who engage in the modern and postmodern philosoph[ical] theories of religion. The majority of universities in the Muslim world, shun or view modern approaches to the study of religion as well as other religions, dangerous to the Muslim faith. Thus they teach Islam and Comparative Religion through confessional, apologetical and exclusivist modes. While on the other hand, the majority of Muslim social scientists adopt reductive or functionalist approaches to study and research about religion as cultural fact. This [polarized] Muslim approach to knowledge is unable to offer scientific perspectives on social crisis that cause intra and interreligious misunderstandings, conflicts and violence in different countries. Moreover, this modern bifurcated approach to knowledge is unable to build bridges between religions, cultures and communities nor it offers to carry out systematic analysis hence failing to solve the social crisis (Yusuf 2014).

The problem is twofold: First, as Yusuf emphasizes, there is a lack of training. Second, the subsistence of "confessional, apologetical and exclusivist modes" also applies to the study of Interreligious Studies.

Another problem suggested by this is the bifurcation of knowledge in Islamic societies into Islamic thought and non-Islamic thought.

Religious considerations emerge from personal convictions and thus can impact on the study of Interfaith Relations. For instance, for a Syrian Christian or Palestinian Muslim instructor one's religious identity becomes relevant insofar as one is teaching about interfaith or constructive dialogue. Yet it is more often than not that devout Muslims and

Christians are reluctant to teach Interfaith Relations outside the disciplinary framework of theological studies, particularly in more homogeneous Arab societies. Most Arab scholars have trained in Shari'a, Christian theology, Arab and Islamic thought, philosophy, or religious studies in Malaysia or Indonesia or in their countries of origin, with few studying in the United States and Europe. An appreciation for true interdisciplinary teaching in Interreligious Studies has yet to emerge. Instead of universities taking up the mantle of interdisciplinarity, academics invoke interdisciplinarity for the sake of expediency and in the face of growing STEM-ification of universities in the Arab world.

The religious context is linked to the cultural and social context. Some Muslims and Christians do not believe that dialogue is necessary. This reflects larger concerns within society and misapprehension about dialogue groups and activities. However, high school and college youth have been more actively involved in interfaith dialogue.

Both the academic and social contexts are linked to the political context. One example of this is the Abraham Accords implemented by former president Donald Trump's officials, which aims at normalizing relations with Israel. In the popular perception, this view has blurred the boundaries between interfaith and diplomatic initiatives. Even countries that have diplomatic relations with Israel find this problematic. A disconnect exists between people and governments. The goal of this article is not to explore this disconnect, but to look at how Interreligious Relations can be studied meaningfully and contribute to promoting broader discussions related to the role of Interfaith Relations in society at large.

8. Concepts

The following themes recur in interfaith dialogue in the Middle East and seemingly define how Interfaith Relations is to be taught in the classroom: salvation, the nature of Christ, and the resurrection. One traditional approach characteristic of medieval disputations and modern-day discussions between Muslim and Christian theologians is to focus on the nature of Christ and his relationship to God in both traditions.

While these three issues define Christian–Muslim and Christian–Jewish dialogue, the set of issues discussed depends on the interlocutors themselves. In *Muslims, Christians and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* (2007), Jane Idelman Smith notes that American Christians recognized the need for a pluralistic approach to Islam. This emerged from both the Protestant and Catholic denominations of Christianity.

Students should experience diverse approaches to analyzing interfaith encounters. In the Middle East, teaching and thinking in an interdisciplinary fashion has not been put into practice as there is often institutional resistance and a predisposition to STEM. STEM-ification has cast a long shadow over the need for students and faculties to teach with a vision of where they would like their students and their disciplines to be and to realize that vision. Complicating matters is an internal perception that if a particular subject like the study of Interreligious Relations does not fit into a particular mold, then it is not regarded as legitimate. A backward mentality exists about the usefulness of studying Interfaith Relations in an academic context.

Concerns about missionary agendas, institutional hierarchical rejection of innovation, the infiltration of Orientalist thought into scholarship and teaching, and pro-Israeli bias are factors working against developing Interreligious Studies as a serious academic discipline in the Middle East and North Africa. This is true of the countries of historic Syria (Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan). Yet, as mentioned earlier, Interreligious Studies is not merely dialogue.

However, the classroom represents a learning laboratory in which students learn and experiment, but within an academic framework that challenges perceptions and interrogates categories. Creating that space in-between (to use Leirvik's (2014, p. 10) designation). rests on honing students' analytical skills by getting them to read and critique texts with which they are unfamiliar. Another issue of equal importance is how to get students to engage with permeable disciplinary boundaries when instructors often do not have the disciplinary background or perquisite training to be able to teach across

boundaries. Some universities in the Arab world lack the vision and the courage to give equal weight to the Humanities and Social Sciences. They are seen as second fiddle to Science and Engineering, Finance, and Business Management, which traditionally enroll students and who do not have to constantly prove their relevance to administrators outside of their field.

Who decides what is taught and for what purpose? Interfaith Relations could potentially be perceived as an attempt to undermine Islamic teachings, given that the field is new. Like other humanistic and social–scientific fields of study, its value is questioned because it disrupts traditional structures of learning and scholarship by offering alternative ways of learning about the past and present. Yet such alternatives are often perceived as threats to the hegemony of a traditional Islamic or Christian discourse.

As Cope and Kalantsiz eloquently argue concerning the need to disrupt such traditional structures:

> Interdisciplinary approaches often need to be applied for reasons of principle, to disrupt the habitual narrowness of outlook of within–discipline knowledge work, to challenge the ingrained, discipline–bound ways of thinking that produce occlusion as well as insight. Interdisciplinary approaches also thrive in the interface of disciplinary and lay understandings. They are needed for the practical application of disciplined understandings to the existing world. Robust applied knowledge demands an interdisciplinary holism, the broad epistemological engagement that is required simply to be able to deal with the complex contingencies of a really integrated universe (Cope and Kalantzis 2009).

Is such an approach transferrable to Arab institutions? An all-inclusive curriculum must consider the primary sources for the study of Middle Eastern and Islamic history and societies. An undergraduate course might engage with Arabic autobiographical writings by Muslims, Christians, and Jews, with scripture and the writing of leading religious thinkers. The role of secularism is also crucial, particularly in studying intercommunal relations in the Middle East.

As Father Nabil Haddad, a prominent Jordanian Melkite Catholic priest and founder of the Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, says:

> Common values are celebrated while differences in beliefs are acknowledged and respected.
>
> The philosophy of our model isn't found at universities, research centers, or think-tanks—you find it in our villages, neighborhoods, and homes ... That is what makes Jordan different (Luck 2018).

The interfaith moment depicted here illuminates the role of religious experience and communicating that experience across boundaries in a classroom setting. This may include inviting an interfaith speaker to address Muslim or Christian students or indeed the instructor leading a visit to places of worship where students would have a discussion with religious leaders.

The versatile case study model, which will be discussed shortly, can be adopted to address the conceptual and the experiential in a way that is intelligible.

9. Language as a Barrier to Internationalization of the Subject Matter

Unlike the field of Comparative Religion, where several canonical works in Comparative Religion and the History of Religion have been translated from English and French into Arabic, most relevant studies employed in teaching are in English.[15] Translation presents a major challenge when the field itself is interdisciplinary.

Studying texts in their original languages allows students to gain a greater understanding and appreciation for the primary and secondary sources that define the field of Interreligious Studies. An even bigger challenge is the cross-fertilization of ideas. A mix of international and local students enriches the conversation and contributes to deeper discussions. In more homogenous contexts where the majority of students are international

students with no or little Arabic, emphasis should be on instruction in English or French in the case of Francophone countries. At institutions where there is a mixture of students, one case in point is Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU), the question of where to position interdisciplinary Interreligious Studies suggests that English would be the main language of instruction but with certain modules that can be offered in Arabic to native speakers. HBKU is uniquely positioned because in the Humanities and Social Sciences, along with contemporary Islamic Studies, it offers instruction in both English and Arabic to M.A. and Ph.D. students. In 2019 HBKU had an enrollment of 60 percent international students.[16] Another important program taught in French and Arabic is the M.A. in Christian–Muslim Relations at St. Joseph University in Beirut, which was discussed earlier.

While translating key texts is one possible solution that is achievable, understanding the connections between these texts in different contexts is imperative. While a text on tolerance in the United States may not seem useful to the student or the instructor, understanding how tolerance operates in the United States allows students to explore parallels within their own society and allows instructors to engage with texts outside of their own narrow remits.

10. Case Studies

Case studies are models of the past and present meant for the here-and-now with which undergraduate and graduate students may explore the complexity and dynamic of interfaith communal/interreligious relations, whether during the Middle Ages or the 19th century. The case study method is a student-participant-centered approach that involves students in the decision-making process about issues of concern to two or more faiths, often on the local and national levels. However, it may be adapted to international contexts. Diana Eck, a scholar of Indian religions, who founded the Pluralism Project at Harvard University in 1991, developed and refined the case study model. The project's aim is as follows:

> Our Case Initiative is an experiment to bring a more engaged pedagogy to the study of religious diversity and interfaith relations. Our starting points are the real dilemmas and decisions that emerge in our multireligious society. With an emphasis on the development of decision-based case studies, we provide resources to energize class discussion and create opportunities for critical thinking. [Its objective is] "to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources." (www.pluralism.org, accessed on 1 February 2021)

While most of the case studies are specific to the American context, they expose international students to diverse scenarios to which they would not otherwise be exposed while developing their critical thinking skills. Usually case studies are employed in Religious Studies, Comparative Religion or Religious Education classes. Yet within a university context, students need to have a background in and an appreciation for at least one religious tradition. Instructors should be in the business of disrupting the disciplinarily proscribed ways of thinking about the past, present, and future.

The Harvard Business School has successfully employed case studies in their teaching.[17] Sigalow and Cadge (2017) showed the effectiveness of employing case studies in the North American classroom.[18] What would a model of case studies for the Arab Middle East look like?

One case study which might be incorporated in teaching concerns Emir Abdelkader El-Djazairi, the 19th century Algerian freedom fighter and proponent of Muslim–Christian relations. The case study (Part A) is available at the Harvard Pluralism Project website.[19] One might ask why it is important to read about the life of Emir Abdelkader El-Djazairi (1860). His story is an excellent model for studying Interfaith Relations and conflict resolution. The moral example afforded by the case of Abdelkader is one of tolerance and coexistence even in times of adversity. It touches upon how Islam as a religion was

employed by a pious Muslim leader to diffuse tensions. It also brings into focus communal identity within a historical framework.

Such case studies emphasize the role of faith in action and interfaith cooperation as well as contribute to an understanding of the principal of social cohesion and how it operates within a Middle Eastern context. Emir Abdelkader was an Algerian national hero, an anti-colonialist figure and freedom fighter who settled in Damascus and sought to perfect his own faith in the best possible way by defending Damascene Christians and Europeans who would have died otherwise. Students learn about contexts outside of an Arab Muslim or Christian cultural and religious sphere. Why else are these interactions important? They stress human interaction and experience and interaction with other cultures, societies, and religions with which students would not necessarily be familiar. Case studies also empower students to take decisions based on cases of local, national, and international importance while promoting interdisciplinary thinking, particularly among students from different backgrounds and experiences.

While having a fundamental understanding of Interfaith Relations in the United States is a prerequisite to developing a deeper understanding of interfaith scenarios, developing case studies for the Arab Middle East is challenging because of political considerations. The case study may employ both historical and contemporary events, or focus on particular episodes from the life experiences of interfaith pioneers in the Arab world.

A holistic approach to Interreligious Studies that explores various themes in an interdisciplinary context is called for. Indeed, exploring contemporary historical themes, discussing the historical roots of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict should not be avoided.

Appendix A introduces a new case study of the famous Algerian-born Rector of the Paris Grand Mosque Si Kaddour Benghabrit, who saved the lives of North African Jews and resistance fighters during World War II. Appendix B looks at an episode from the life of the Palestinian Christian Wasif al-Jawhariyya (d. 1973) at the turn of the 20th century.

11. The Role of Online Learning

Online learning has expanded the possibilities in teaching Interreligious Studies but has also restricted them. It has disrupted traditional classroom learning by forcing instructors to think outside of the box and devise new and creative ways of looking at a given subject. Teaching Interreligious Studies online does not differ from any other Humanities and Social Sciences specializations. For undergraduates, virtual field trips to holy places such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock, or Assisi are possible in an online environment. Such an approach would also be useful under normal circumstances as students familiarize themselves with diverse contexts and disciplinary approaches. An online component can be beneficial as it allows students to experience certain materials, such as audio and video recordings. An online sense of community, particularly for undergraduate courses, is necessary. Interreligious Studies disrupt intolerance, backwardness, and the inability or lack of experience in reaching out across the divide to create meaningful spaces for students. The problem is as acute in the Arab Middle East as it is elsewhere. In Islamic societies an appreciation for the central role of faith in Interreligious Studies is called for, but not at the expense of academic rigor when discussing secular themes. The contribution of Muslims, Christians, and Jews to the history of the Middle East is an equally important consideration. Merely focusing on Muslim or Christian thought is inadequate to successfully deliver an Interreligious Studies curriculum that takes a broad view of the past. The second term of importance is "disruptive innovation," which is innovation that breaks with established patterns of teaching only about Muslim-centric or Christian-centric themes in isolation. One instance is teaching about the relevance of intercommunal relations and dialogue in the West to students in the Middle East or taking the often uncomfortable discourse to the next level by exploring the role of violence in history. Such themes will be met with resistance by colleagues in different faculties, as they do not conform to preconceived notions of Interfaith Relations and are often not understood by colleagues whose training is in such traditional disciplinary backgrounds as *'aqeedah*, *fiqh*,

and Islamic thought. Thus, in implementing a balanced course of studies in Interreligious Studies requires engagement with methodologies outside of one's comfort zone and an acknowledgment that there are mutually compatible approaches and methodologies that can be employed that are as valid as one's own. Teaching about the history of religions and Interreligious Studies is not merely about *convivencia* and the so-called golden ages of Islam. In discussions with students, we problematize these categories and explore alternatives. Alas, academics and writers continue to be obsessed with this idea to the point of not realizing that history itself is composed of disruptions: political, social, economic, spiritual, cultural, and linguistic. No single disruption can account for a lack of knowledge about Interfaith Relations.

The goal of the instructor, the student, and the participant in dialogue is to contribute to transforming traditional knowledge systems and enriching the ongoing dialogue in the university context and outside.

12. Conclusions

This study highlighted several complementary approaches to transforming perspectives on Interreligious Studies in the academy in the Arab Middle East and offered a way forward. Comparative and reflective modes can easily complement other approaches. The most effective approach to teaching Interreligious Studies in the Arab Middle East is an integrated approach that takes into account the diverse interests, abilities, and skills of faculty members and students, critically engages with interdisciplinary themes, and does not avoid the past in favor of a feel-good outcome to discussing difficult issues or an iconoclastic approach that privileges scripture and Theology, or Cultural Studies, for that matter, over other disciplines such as History, Sociology, Anthropology and Political Science. Theology plays a far more central role in courses with interfaith content in the Middle East than it does in university courses in the United States. Despite this, Interreligious Studies stands to draw upon the uniqueness and diversity of the Arab Middle East. One pillar of the emerging field of Interreligious Studies is the case study model, which helps students to go beyond facile paradigms. In this we find living examples of situations that instructors and students now confront and are likely to confront in their lives and that also help them relate to the past, present, and future. The Dar Al-Kalima University Interreligious Dialogue Inter-Regional Curriculum initiative and the forthcoming dictionary for Interreligious Studies will finally bring an Interfaith Relations curriculum worthy of implementation throughout the Middle East, a curriculum that is sensitive to the Arab Middle Eastern context as well as to understanding text, context, and experience in the study of past and present.

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Appendix A

World War II Paris, 1941
Part A
Case study:

Many North African Muslims and Jews emigrated to France since the French occupation of North Africa during the 19th century (Algeria and Tunisia) and Morocco in 1912.

The Nazis are closing in on a number of Arab Jews of North African origin who are seeking refuge in the Grand Mosque. You are Si Kaddour Benghabrit (d. 1954), the Algerian-born founder of the Paris Grand Mosque. You gather the mosque officials to discuss with them what to do.

Suddenly, Nazi officers barge into the mosque wearing their boots. They are suspicious of you and make demands to hand over Jews and stop issuing Muslim identification cards.

1. Berate the Nazis for wearing their boots in the mosque and desecrating its sanctity.
2. Deny this is happening.
3. Tell the Nazis to leave.
4. Tell the Nazis you will be on the lookout for Jews and get in touch if they come to the mosque.

Part B

Whichever answer you chose, how you arrived at it is more important than "choosing a right answer."

Take a moment to share with the group how you arrived at the answer you did. What factors did you take into consideration? What role does your religious identity and your personal view play in the decision?

Si Kaddour Benghabrit saved the lives of approximately 100 North African Jews by issuing them with false identification papers attesting to their status as Muslims. One of those whom he saved was the Algerian Jewish singer of Arabic songs Selim Hilali. Benghabrit also hid close to 2000 French resistance fighters in the underground caverns beneath the mosque. While the heroism of Benghabrit is acknowledged, in a Middle Eastern context it exemplifies the values of Islam toward people of other faiths and demonstrates the commandment embodied in the Qur'anic verse:

> ... We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whosoever slays a soul—unless it be for another soul or working corruption upon the earth—it is as though he slew man kind altogether, and whosoever saves the life of one, it is as though he saved the life of mankind altogether (5:32).

This is an instance of Abrahamic hospitality, of welcoming the stranger. Today the United States once again welcomes immigrants and refugees by upholding the principles of the United States as a nation of immigrants.

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Robert, Satloff. 2006. The Holocaust's Arab Heroes. *Washington Post* October 14. Available online: https://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/10/06/AR2006100601417_pf.html (accessed on 1 January 2021).

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Appendix B

Part A

Muslim or Not?

You are Ramy Khaleel, a Palestinian Christian living at the time the Ottomans were defeated by the British, who established a Mandate over Palestine. Previously your Muslim friends invited you onto the grounds of the Haram Al-Sharif (or Noble Sanctuary) in Jerusalem for a picnic. Today, something has changed. You notice the British-appointed Indian guards posted at Bab al-Amood (Damascus Gate). The Indian guard admits you and your Muslim friends, but not Abdallah. The guard tells your friend that he is not a

Muslim. Your friend insists he is Muslim and says the *shahada* (or declaration of faith). The guard insists that your friend not be admitted. What do you do? Why?

(1) Vehemently protest and insist that Abdallah is a Muslim more so than you.
(2) Proclaim that Abdallah is Muslim and try to reason with the guard.
(3) Threaten to tell the guard's superior if he doesn't admit Abdallah.
(4) Enter without Abdallah.

Part B

How would you characterize Muslim–Christian relations in Palestine during the early 1900s based on this episode?

If you were a Muslim friend of Ramy, what would you do if Ramy were not admitted onto the grounds of the Haram Sanctuary?

This is based on a real incident that the Palestinian Christian Wasif al-Jawhariyya (d. 1973), a poet and performer of classical Arabic music, describes in his Memoirs:

> We stood at one of the gates of al-Haram al-Sharif and noticed that a police force had been stationed at each one of the main gates. It was made up of bigoted Muslim members of the Indian army who asked everyone who wanted to go in, "Musliman?" If the person in question was Muslim, they were allowed in. If not, they were denied entry. So each one of us answered, "Musliman" to the question. When it was my turn, the Indian officer asked me, "Musliman?" I answered "Musliman, thanks be to Allah." Behind me was Uncle Abu Eid al-Dallal, who used to wear a turban. Since he was a loyal friend of my father's, he shouted at the top of his voice, "I swear to Allah that he is Musliman." Imagine, dear reader, Wasif, the son of Jiryis Jawhariyyeh, standing as a Muslim before God. So to my luck, after the Indian made a gesture at me and mumbled some words, I went through the door and got in.

When it was our friend al-Zardaq's turn, the Indian officer denied him entry without any discussion, threatening him with his bayonet rifle. Al-Zardaq went out of his mind and turned all red with anger while everyone laughed.

He began shouting at me at the top of his voice, "My name is Muhammad and I was banned from al-Haram al-Sharif. But you Wasif, you're a graduate of al-Azhar and a devout Muslim!" We laughed so hard we almost passed out.

But there was no way around it, and when al-Zardaq tried to enter through another door, the Indian officer blew his whistle and gestured to his colleagues not to let him in.

And so we all threw ourselves on the grass in the court of al-Haram al-Sharif, eating the green almonds, while al-Zardaq stayed outside, thundering and fuming.

Further reading:

Wasif, Jawhariyya. 2014. *The Storyteller of Jerusalem: The Life and Times of Wasif Jawhariyyeh, 1904–1948*. Translated by Salim Tamari. Northampton: Olive Branch Press.

Notes

1 The excellent contributions of Malaysian and Indonesian scholars to the study of interfaith dialogue in the last 20 years, particularly in their Southeast Asian context, must be acknowledged. However, they do not offer a direct parallel to the Arab Middle Eastern context as dialogue generally involves Muslim and Christian Arabs and the teaching of Interfaith Relations occurs in both Christian and predominantly Muslim universities.

2 For a discussion of constructive dialogue, see for instance (Kessler and Ahmad 2016).

3 Noteworthy are the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialog (DICID)(Qatar), Adyan (Lebanon), and the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (RIIFS)(Jordan), which promote local, national, and international interfaith initiatives that include youth. One important center operates outside of Saudi Arabia—King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID).

4 Concerning Christian missionaries and their involvement in the Middle East, see for instance (Sharkey 2013; Makdisi 2008; Newberg 2011, pp. 582–90).

5 See (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, pp. 21–22), where he highlights a number of key issues.

[6] Many excellent youth programs are regularly hosted at Lebanese universities like St. Joseph University and NGOs like Adyan, but such programs are not geared toward university students in the main but rather aim at social engagement and awareness.

[7] Harvard Pluralism Project, pluralism.org (accessed on 1 December 2020).

[8] "Interfaith," Pluralism Project, Harvard University, https://pluralism.org/interfaith (accessed on 29 September 2020).

[9] "From Diversity to Pluralism." Pluralism Project, Harvard University, https://pluralism.org/from-diversity-to-pluralism (accessed 2 February 2021). See also UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), Articles 1 and 2: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (accessed on 2 February 2021).

[10] It should be indicated that in the Arab world interfaith initiatives and outreach that include workshops, short courses, and lectures for high school and college students are developed outside university frameworks in the context of interfaith organizations like Adyan (Lebanon), Royal Institute of Interfaith Relations (RIIFS) (Jordan) and Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialog (DICID). Also, the intergovernmental Saudi organization King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, founded in 2012, has offered online courses that have attracted participants from the Arab world and internationally.

[11] For a discussion of these terms, see for instance (Meri 2016; Gustafson 2020, pp. 131–54).

[12] Arab Jews or "Al-Yahud Al-'Arab" is a term employed by some Jews of Middle Eastern origins. The literature is fairly extensive. See for instance, (Shohat 2017; Behar 2009, pp. 747–71).

[13] The author of this contribution is an advisory board member of the Dar Al-Kalima initiative aimed at producing an interfaith curriculum for the Arab world.

[14] See for instance the important work by Daou and Tabbara (2017).

[15] The works of Mircea Eliade and sociologists like Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Auguste Comte have been translated into Arabic.

[16] Hamad Bin Khalifa University. *The World University Rankings*. Available online: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/hamad-bin-khalifa-university (accessed on 1 February 2021).

[17] See for instance the excellent websites: (Harvard Business School n.d.a,b).

[18] See (Sigalow and Cadge 2017, pp. 251–63). Also useful for understanding the case study approach is Sigalow and Cadge (n.d.).

[19] Rumors in Damascus, Harvard Pluralism Project. Available online: https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/pluralism/files/rumors_in_damascus_a.pdf (accessed on 8 February 2021).

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