



Arabic Linguistics and Islamic Studies in the West: Historical Developments, Contemporary Trends, and Future Prospects¹

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Abstract: Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies have grown substantially in prominence within Western academia, attracting a diverse array of students and scholars. This paper explores the historical trajectory, current dynamics, and outlook of Arabic and Islamic studies as they have developed in the West. From early Orientalist studies to the post-9/11 academic landscape, where understanding of Islamic culture and the Arabic language is deemed increasingly crucial, this article analyzes the motivations behind the surge in interest and the institutional challenges faced by the field. Moreover, the study highlights how technological advancements and interdisciplinary approaches have transformed research methodologies, making Arabic and Islamic studies more accessible and globally interconnected. With a significant focus on the challenges posed by modernity and cultural globalization, the paper examines the ways in which scholars navigate the tension between traditional Islamic perspectives and Western academic paradigms. This paper concludes with insights into the future of Arabic and Islamic studies, advocating for a model that integrates respect for Islamic traditions with critical engagement through interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: Arabic Linguistics, Islamic Studies, Orientalism, Modernity, Globalization, Western Academia

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1. Introduction

The fields of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies in the West have experienced a notable evolution over the centuries, influenced by socio-political developments, intellectual exchanges, and shifts in academic paradigms. Initially emerging within the framework of Orientalist studies, which often reflected Western colonialist perspectives, these disciplines have evolved significantly, especially in recent decades. This evolution reflects a broader shift in Western academia, as scholars and students increasingly seek to understand not only the language and culture but also the complex historical and contemporary contexts that shape the Arabic-speaking and Islamic worlds.

Interest in Arabic and Islamic studies in the West surged following the events of September 11, 2001, marking a turning point in how these fields were perceived and pursued in academic settings. As public curiosity about Islam grew, driven by both security concerns and cultural curiosity, Western universities responded by expanding their Arabic and Islamic studies programs. This increase in demand, as reported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), saw enrollment in Islamic studies programs rise by 12% in the early 2000s, underscoring a broader cultural and academic shift towards a deeper engagement with the Islamic world. Students' motivations for studying Arabic and Islamic studies today are complex and multifaceted, ranging from career opportunities in sectors like diplomacy, journalism, and social services to personal interest in understanding Islamic culture and religion.

The development of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies in the West, however, is not merely a response to geopolitical events or career prospects; it is part of a broader intellectual movement that seeks to

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challenge traditional Western narratives about the Islamic world. Early scholarship in these fields often mirrored the colonial and Orientalist tendencies of the time, focusing on analyzing and categorizing Islamic societies from a perspective that prioritized Western cultural and intellectual norms. Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*, brought critical attention to these biases, arguing that Western portrayals of the East were frequently oversimplified and used to justify colonial ambitions. Said's critique marked a pivotal moment in how Islamic and Arabic studies were perceived, sparking a re-evaluation of the methodologies and motives underlying these disciplines.

Despite the progress made since Said's critique, the fields of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies continue to face challenges rooted in their complex history. Modernity, with its emphasis on secularism, rationality, and scientific progress, presents a particular set of challenges for Islamic studies. Louis Dupre, in *Passage to Modernity*, describes modernity as a philosophical and cultural shift that transformed Western society's relationship with the cosmos, privileging empirical inquiry and secularism over religious and mystical approaches. For many Islamic scholars, the adoption of these Western paradigms presents a cultural and ideological challenge, as they navigate the tension between Islamic tradition and Western secular frameworks.

Moreover, the advent of globalization and digital technology has reshaped the landscape of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies in the West. Digital archives, online linguistic tools, and virtual learning platforms have made resources that were once inaccessible widely available, facilitating a more inclusive and dynamic approach to research and education in these fields. This digital transformation has allowed for new forms of interdisciplinary collaboration, merging Arabic linguistics with fields such as computational linguistics, digital humanities, and sociolinguistics, while Islamic studies increasingly incorporate perspectives from sociology, political science, and cultural studies.

This essay provides a comprehensive analysis of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies in the West, examining historical developments, contemporary trends, and future prospects. It explores the motivations driving students to pursue these disciplines, the methodological challenges posed by modernity and Western academic norms, and the transformative role of digital technology and interdisciplinary approaches. In doing so, this paper aims to shed light on the importance of Arabic and Islamic studies in fostering a nuanced understanding of the Islamic world and contributing to a more globally interconnected academic landscape.

2. Theoretical Overview of the Main Concepts

The history of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies in the West reflects complex interactions between the Islamic and Western worlds. These fields have been shaped by intellectual exchanges during the medieval period, the influence of Orientalist thought in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the effects of colonialism, which transformed Western academic approaches to Islamic studies. This section delves into these historical phases, examining how each period influenced the development of Arabic and Islamic studies in Western academia.

2.1 Early Western Engagement with Arabic and Islamic Studies

Western academic interest in Arabic and Islamic studies dates back to the medieval period, when European scholars encountered Islamic science, philosophy, and literature through interactions with the Muslim world. The Islamic Golden Age (8th to 14th centuries) saw a flourishing of knowledge across various fields, including medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy. Major centers of learning such as Baghdad, Cairo, and Córdoba attracted scholars from across the Islamic world, who translated and built upon Greek, Persian, and Indian works. These intellectual developments eventually reached Europe through the Crusades, trade, and other forms of contact, sparking what would become the "Arabic Renaissance" in Western Europe.

European scholars like Gerard of Cremona and Adelard of Bath, who translated Arabic scientific and philosophical texts into Latin, played a key role in disseminating Islamic knowledge. This translation movement introduced works by scholars such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes)

to the West, profoundly influencing European thought and laying the foundation for the Renaissance. These texts shaped the intellectual currents of the time, particularly in fields such as medicine and philosophy, and helped foster a European appreciation for Arabic linguistic and scientific contributions. Yet, during this period, the primary focus was on scientific and philosophical works, with relatively little interest in Islamic religious or linguistic studies. Western scholars engaged with Arabic primarily as a means to access scientific knowledge rather than as a pursuit of linguistic or cultural understanding.

2.2 Orientalist Foundations

The 18th and 19th centuries marked a shift in Western approaches to Arabic and Islamic studies, characterized by the rise of Orientalism as a formal field of study. Orientalism, as described by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism*, was a way of defining and understanding the "Orient"—a term broadly encompassing the Arab and Islamic world—through a lens that often reflected Western cultural superiority. This academic movement emerged alongside European colonial expansion into Muslim-majority regions, which reinforced the notion of the East as an exotic, mysterious, and often inferior "Other" to be studied, classified, and controlled by the West.

Orientalist scholars, including figures such as Silvestre de Sacy and Edward William Lane, contributed to the development of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies by producing comprehensive studies of Arabic grammar, dictionaries, and translations of key Islamic texts. Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* remains a significant contribution to the field, showcasing the depth of Arabic vocabulary and grammar. However, Orientalism often involved the selective interpretation of Islamic texts and cultural practices, filtered through Western academic frameworks that reinforced stereotypes and generalized assumptions about Islam and Arab culture. Said's critique argued that Orientalism was not a neutral or objective pursuit of knowledge but rather a field that served European colonial interests by portraying the Islamic world as passive, backward, and in need of Western guidance.

These Orientalist studies laid the groundwork for formal academic programs in Arabic and Islamic studies in Western institutions. Universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Leiden established Arabic language and Islamic studies departments, which became centers for Orientalist scholarship. However, the limitations of Orientalist approaches—particularly their tendency to depict Islamic societies as static and resistant to change—have drawn criticism from modern scholars, who argue that these portrayals fail to capture the complexity and diversity of the Islamic world. Said's work catalyzed a re-evaluation of these approaches, encouraging a shift toward more nuanced and culturally sensitive scholarship.

2.3 The Colonial Influence and Modernity

The colonial period introduced additional layers of complexity to Western engagement with Arabic and Islamic studies. As European powers, notably Britain and France, established colonies in Muslim-majority regions in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, they brought with them a desire to understand and, to some extent, control these societies. Colonial authorities often employed Orientalist scholars to study the languages, cultures, and religions of colonized peoples, seeing this knowledge as essential for effective governance and administration. This approach framed Islamic studies within a colonial agenda, where the objective was not only to gain academic insights but also to facilitate control over Muslim populations.

The influence of colonialism was profound, impacting both the content and objectives of Arabic and Islamic studies in the West. Scholars like Bernard Lewis, who emerged as a leading figure in Islamic studies during the mid-20th century, argued that Islam was inherently resistant to modernity, a view that echoed colonial narratives. Lewis's perspective on Islam and modernity exemplified what many scholars have critiqued as a reductionist approach, portraying Islamic societies as inherently incompatible with Western values such as secularism and individualism. This framework, which became known as the "clash of civilizations" thesis, has faced extensive criticism for oversimplifying the diversity of Muslim societies and reinforcing stereotypes that Islam is inherently opposed to Western ideals.

Louis Dupre's analysis in *Passage to Modernity* further illustrates the tension between Islamic values and

Western philosophical frameworks. According to Dupre, modernity represents a shift towards secularism, rationality, and empirical inquiry, values that became dominant in the West and reshaped its intellectual and cultural landscape. For many Islamic scholars, this shift poses a challenge, as Western academic paradigms often marginalize religious or mystical perspectives in favor of secular, scientific approaches. This conflict is evident in the study of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies, where traditional Islamic scholarship emphasizes a holistic understanding of language and spirituality that contrasts with the secular and compartmentalized methods of Western academia.

The colonial legacy continues to shape the way Arabic and Islamic studies are perceived and practiced in the West. Scholars have noted that remnants of colonial-era biases persist, particularly in portrayals of Islamic societies as monolithic or inherently resistant to change. Yet, there has also been a growing recognition of the need to move beyond these stereotypes, with contemporary scholars advocating for more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches. This shift has led to the development of interdisciplinary programs that incorporate perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and political science, offering a more comprehensive understanding of Arabic and Islamic studies.

3. Methodology and Discussion

3.1 Contemporary Trends

In recent decades, Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies in the West have undergone significant transformations, reflecting shifts in student motivations, interdisciplinary approaches, and the adoption of digital tools. Contemporary trends in these fields highlight an increased interest in understanding the socio-political dynamics of the Islamic world, the inclusion of diverse methodologies, and the use of technology to access and analyze Arabic texts.

3.2 Motivations for Studying Arabic and Islamic Studies

A complex array of motivations has fueled the growth of Arabic and Islamic studies in the West, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001. This turning point ignited widespread curiosity about Islam and the Arabic language, prompting Western universities to expand their programs. Leslie McLoughlin, an Arabic language professor, notes that the increase in interest is partially driven by career opportunities in fields such as diplomacy, media, and public policy, where knowledge of Arabic and Islamic culture is increasingly valued. Additionally, McLoughlin emphasizes that the cultural and political significance of Islam in global affairs has spurred students to gain a nuanced understanding of the religion and its followers (McLoughlin 2006).

Statistics support this trend: the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) reported a 12% rise in Islamic studies enrollments in UK institutions between 2002 and 2006, compared to a 7% increase across all other disciplines. This suggests a broad and sustained interest in Arabic and Islamic studies beyond immediate career motivations (HEFCE 2007). Students often pursue these fields as part of a broader commitment to cultural literacy, driven by a desire to engage with the Islamic world in ways that transcend superficial or stereotypical understandings. This trend underscores the need for programs that not only teach Arabic language skills but also provide cultural, historical, and theological context.

3.3 Defining Islamic Studies and Its Interdisciplinary Scope

One of the defining characteristics of Islamic studies is its interdisciplinary nature, incorporating perspectives from fields such as history, sociology, theology, and political science. Unlike many academic disciplines, Islamic studies lacks a universally accepted curriculum or methodological framework. Scholars such as Jan Waardenburg argue that Islamic studies should not be confined to traditional theological or linguistic approaches but should instead embrace a variety of disciplines that offer insights into Muslim societies (Waardenburg 1997, 15).

The interdisciplinary nature of Islamic studies is evident in the debates surrounding the role of Arabic language within the field. Some scholars assert that Arabic is the cornerstone of Islamic studies, as it is the language of the Qur'an and Hadith. Knowledge of Arabic allows students to engage directly with primary

Islamic texts, providing an authentic understanding of Islamic teachings. However, others contend that Islamic studies should extend beyond Arabic linguistics to include sociological, anthropological, and historical approaches. This perspective suggests that while Arabic is essential for understanding Islamic scripture, a comprehensive Islamic studies program should also address the lived experiences of Muslims, particularly in non-Arabic-speaking regions.

This debate reflects a broader trend in academia toward interdisciplinary studies, which encourages students to analyze complex issues from multiple perspectives. Islamic studies programs in Western universities are increasingly designed to provide students with a holistic understanding of Muslim societies, combining language instruction with courses in history, politics, and social sciences. By incorporating interdisciplinary approaches, these programs address the limitations of traditional Orientalist frameworks, offering a more comprehensive and nuanced view of Islam and Muslim societies.

3.4 Methodological Innovations and the Role of Technology

The integration of technology into Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies represents one of the most significant contemporary trends in these fields. Digital tools have transformed the way researchers access, analyze, and share Arabic and Islamic texts, making resources more widely available and fostering collaboration across borders. The digital humanities, a field that combines traditional humanities scholarship with computational methods, has played a particularly important role in advancing Arabic and Islamic studies.

One prominent example of this technological transformation is the development of digital archives and databases that contain vast collections of Arabic manuscripts, including classical Islamic texts. Online platforms such as the Al-Jazeera Arabic Corpus and the Arabic Collections Online (ACO) provide researchers with access to primary sources that were previously difficult to obtain. These digital resources allow scholars to conduct textual analysis on a scale that would have been impossible with physical manuscripts alone, facilitating new insights into Arabic linguistics and Islamic theology.

Additionally, linguistic analysis software has enabled researchers to study the grammatical, lexical, and syntactic features of Arabic in greater detail. For instance, computational linguistics techniques have been applied to analyze the Qur'an and Hadith, revealing patterns and structures that were previously overlooked. This approach has enriched the field of Arabic linguistics, allowing scholars to explore language variation, dialectology, and sociolinguistics in unprecedented depth.

Moreover, technology has expanded the reach of Arabic and Islamic studies through online learning platforms and virtual classrooms. Distance learning programs have made it possible for students around the world to study Arabic and Islamic studies, overcoming geographical and financial barriers. These platforms provide students with access to native Arabic speakers and Islamic scholars, enhancing language acquisition and cultural understanding. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online education, leading many institutions to integrate digital tools into their curricula on a permanent basis.

The use of digital tools in Arabic and Islamic studies has not been without challenges, however. Critics argue that the reliance on digital resources may lead to a superficial engagement with texts, as students may prioritize convenience over a deep understanding of primary sources. Others caution that the focus on computational analysis may inadvertently devalue traditional methods of scholarship, such as close reading and memorization, which have long been central to Islamic studies. Nonetheless, the incorporation of technology has undeniably expanded the possibilities for research and education, allowing Arabic and Islamic studies to adapt to the needs of a digital age.

3.5. Future Prospects

The future of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies in the West holds exciting possibilities, shaped by the challenges and opportunities brought by modernity, globalization, and the demand for cross-cultural understanding. Scholars in these fields are increasingly called to bridge traditional Islamic perspectives with contemporary Western academic norms, an endeavor that requires balancing respect for Islamic

heritage with critical engagement. This section explores key future trends, including the impact of modernity, the rise of interdisciplinary approaches, and the growing career pathways for students specializing in Arabic and Islamic studies.

3.6 Addressing the Challenges of Modernity and Globalization

The spread of modernity and globalization has had profound implications for Arabic and Islamic studies, particularly in Western academic settings where secularism and rationality are dominant paradigms. Many Islamic scholars have expressed concern that Western approaches to these fields can impose values that may conflict with traditional Islamic teachings. This dynamic is especially challenging within the field of Islamic studies, where religious texts are studied not only as historical documents but also as living sources of spiritual guidance.

One of the main challenges of modernity in Islamic studies is the tension between secularism and spirituality. In Western universities, the study of religion often adopts a secular framework, which emphasizes empirical research and critical analysis. However, Islamic studies involves a deep engagement with theological principles and spiritual concepts that do not always align with secular academic approaches. Scholars like Dupre have noted that modernity's emphasis on secularism and empirical inquiry can marginalize religious perspectives, pushing them to the periphery of academic discourse (Dupre 1993, 249). This issue is particularly relevant in the study of Islam, where the connection between religious beliefs and daily life is often integral to the understanding of texts and traditions.

Globalization has also contributed to a growing awareness of cultural imperialism, as scholars recognize the need to decolonize academic disciplines, including Islamic studies. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism remains highly relevant in contemporary scholarship, as researchers strive to create frameworks that are inclusive and respectful of the cultures they study. In response, many institutions are re-evaluating their curricula and seeking input from scholars within the Islamic world to ensure that Islamic studies programs accurately reflect the diversity and complexity of Muslim societies. This trend suggests that future Islamic studies programs in the West may adopt more culturally inclusive methodologies, integrating perspectives from both Islamic and Western intellectual traditions.

3.7 Interdisciplinary Approaches and Expanded Curricula

As Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies continue to grow, there is a pressing need for interdisciplinary approaches that transcend traditional academic boundaries. Scholars increasingly argue that the study of Islam and Arabic should not be confined to theological or linguistic analysis but should also incorporate insights from fields such as sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics. This interdisciplinary approach enables researchers to examine the multifaceted realities of Muslim societies, considering the socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts in which Islam is practiced.

For instance, the field of Islamic finance has emerged as an area of study that intersects with economics, ethics, and Islamic law. This field addresses the unique principles of finance and commerce in Islamic contexts, which are guided by religious tenets prohibiting usury and promoting equitable transactions. Islamic finance has become a focal point for interdisciplinary scholarship, attracting students and researchers interested in both economics and Islamic studies. Similarly, courses in Islamic art and architecture have become popular in art history programs, fostering cross-disciplinary dialogue that broadens students' understanding of Islamic culture.

In the field of Arabic linguistics, interdisciplinary research is also gaining traction, particularly in sociolinguistics and computational linguistics. Sociolinguists examine language variation and dialectology within Arabic-speaking communities, exploring how language use reflects social identity and regional diversity. Computational linguists, meanwhile, apply artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques to analyze Arabic syntax, semantics, and phonetics, contributing to advancements in natural language processing. These interdisciplinary approaches not only enrich the field of Arabic linguistics but also create new avenues for collaboration and innovation.

The expansion of interdisciplinary curricula reflects a recognition that Arabic and Islamic studies cannot be fully understood through a single lens. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, academic institutions can provide students with a holistic understanding of the Islamic world, equipping them with the analytical tools to address complex issues. This trend suggests that future Arabic and Islamic studies programs will continue to broaden their scope, integrating diverse methodologies to meet the needs of a globalized world.

3.8 Preparing Students for Diverse Career Paths

The growing demand for expertise in Arabic and Islamic studies has opened up new career pathways for students, both within academia and beyond. As globalization increases interactions between Western and Muslim-majority societies, employers in various sectors—including government, media, and international organizations—seek individuals with knowledge of Arabic language and Islamic culture. This demand is particularly strong in fields that require cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication, such as diplomacy, journalism, and community services.

In response to these career opportunities, many universities now offer Arabic and Islamic studies programs with “applied” tracks that combine academic training with practical skills. For instance, students may have the option to take courses in international relations, public policy, or journalism alongside their Arabic language studies, preparing them for roles in global institutions. This interdisciplinary approach enables students to build competencies in areas like policy analysis, media literacy, and intercultural communication, which are highly valued by employers.

The field of Islamic studies is also evolving within academia itself, as universities seek faculty members who can bridge classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary issues. Scholars with expertise in fields such as Islamic law, Middle Eastern politics, and Islamic philosophy are increasingly sought after, particularly in research centers focused on religious studies and international affairs. As these fields continue to grow, they offer promising career paths for graduates who wish to contribute to academic scholarship and public discourse on Islam and the Arabic language.

The rise of digital humanities has further expanded career opportunities for students in Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies, particularly in research and archival management. The ability to work with digital resources, such as online manuscripts and linguistic databases, is becoming a valuable skill in academic and cultural institutions. Graduates with expertise in digital humanities are well-positioned to work in libraries, museums, and research organizations that require specialists in digital curation and data analysis.

Conclusion

The fields of Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies in the West have evolved considerably, reflecting changes in academic paradigms, socio-political events, and technological advancements. Originally rooted in Orientalist studies with a colonial agenda, these fields have transformed to embrace more inclusive and interdisciplinary approaches. Contemporary trends underscore the increasing interest in Arabic and Islamic studies, driven by both cultural curiosity and career aspirations. The integration of digital tools and interdisciplinary methodologies has expanded the scope of these fields, enabling researchers to engage with Arabic and Islamic texts in new and innovative ways.

As the fields move forward, they face the challenge of reconciling Islamic traditions with Western academic norms. The continued influence of modernity and secularism presents both obstacles and opportunities, pushing scholars to develop frameworks that respect the religious and cultural contexts of Islamic studies. The interdisciplinary expansion of curricula, combined with the rise of digital resources, signals a promising future for these fields, as they adapt to meet the demands of a globalized world.

In conclusion, Arabic linguistics and Islamic studies in Western academia are more relevant than ever, offering critical insights into the language, culture, and beliefs of Muslim societies. These fields play a vital role in fostering cross-cultural understanding, challenging stereotypes, and contributing to informed global discourse. By continuing to evolve in response to new intellectual and societal challenges, Arabic and

Islamic studies have the potential to serve as bridges between cultures, promoting empathy and collaboration in an increasingly interconnected world.

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