

**Transnational Networks and Intellectual Authority in Islam in Europe:  
The Case of Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd,  
and Abdolkarim Soroush**

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*To my parents:  
my roots and my strength*

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the socio-political mechanisms that shaped the authority of three Muslim thinkers – Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Abdolkarim Soroush – in the European-Anglophone intellectual field between 1989 and 2010. Specifically, it investigates the role of transnational networks of individuals and institutions in the intellectual legitimization of these three thinkers. Moving beyond existing literature that focuses on their intellectual contributions, this research situates their discourses within a specific socio-political context. Relying on government papers, newsletters, interviews, bibliometric data, as well as academic and journalistic publications by and about them, the study maps and investigates the *modus operandi* of their networks. For this purpose, it engages and expands on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of social capital (resources embedded in an individuals' network) and field theory, to explore how 'power' operates among different fields of interaction to shape their 'legitimacy'.

In unpacking the process of intellectual legitimization, this study identifies three interacting elements: 1) the socio-political context concerning the domestic and global emergence of Islam, and the polarisation of attitudes towards Muslims which renewed interest on authoritative 'moderate' voices speaking for Islam; 2) their identities and ideas, which reflected this demand for specific profiles – Muslim organic voices positioned between academia and the public sphere, engaging with a synthesis of Islam and modernity, democracy, and human rights; 3) their social capital, in the form of networks of actors they engaged with: these functioned as the infrastructure through which knowledge and resources were mobilised and ultimately converted into symbolic capital, leading to their intellectual legitimacy. The nodes of these networks, this study argues, promoted their ideas and facilitated their access to resources and institutions. The conversion of this social capital into symbolic capital, and therefore legitimacy, was conditioned not only by the internal dynamics of each field they engaged but also the power relations across the fields through which they migrated (such as Middle Eastern vs European academia or academia vs the public sphere). While this thesis accounts for the socio-political dimension of these thinkers' emergence, it also addresses their agency in negotiating their position within different fields.

## Acknowledgments

PhDs are often a journey into the unknown, an investigative effort to make sense of the world we live in, by seeking knowledge. In my case, it has been a particularly long journey which has challenged not only my intellectual assumptions but, more broadly, my understanding of the lived experience. I dare to call this not solely an intellectual journey, but also a personal one which would have not been possible without the encouragement and support of a large community of scholars, friends and family.

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## **Transliteration and translation**

This thesis uses the IJMES transliteration system for Arabic words, and Iranian Studies transliteration system for Farsi words. Proper names and nouns which have standardised spellings in the English language, such as jihad, Arkoun, and Soroush, follow the common English spelling. The translation from German benefitted from the support of Dr. Tobias Pforr.

## Introduction

### 1. Rationale

The question of authority in knowledge – who has the legitimacy to define knowledge – is a recurrent *topos* of contemporary debates.<sup>1</sup> Even though ‘all individuals play a role’ in the construction and circulation of meanings, some groups or individuals have more power in this process, as Eric Louw has pointed out.<sup>2</sup> This raises the question of who holds this power, but, more interestingly, how this power is created. That is, through what social mechanisms do particular individuals gain intellectual legitimacy? While this has long been a central issue in the contemporary Western context, it is even more crucial nowadays for the ‘Western’ perception of Islam. Beyond the question of authority within the Muslim community itself is the problem of mediation and translation across communities: exactly *who* speaks for Islam to the European and anglophone intellectual audience?<sup>3</sup> Among the most prominent thinkers who have emerged as interpreters of Islam for this audience are Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Abdolkarim Soroush.<sup>4</sup> Their prominence seems to reflect what Zygmunt Bauman identified as the new post-modern role of intellectuals as translators across cultures and communities.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not they represent a grassroots base in Muslim-majority countries, individuals

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of this literature see Ann Swidler and Jorge Ardit, ‘The New Sociology of Knowledge’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 20, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Louw, *The Media and Cultural Production* (London: Sage, 2001), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Dale F. Eickelman, ‘Who Speaks for Islam? Inside the Islamic Reformation’, in *An Islamic Reformation?*, eds. Michaelle Browers and Charles Kurzman (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004); John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007); Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke, *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001), 20.

<sup>4</sup> The selection of these three thinkers is discussed in the methodology section.

<sup>5</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

such as Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush have acquired an increasing authority among the European-Anglophone audience interested in contemporary debates within Islam. This audience, the principal focus of this study, is constituted by intellectually *engagé* Europeans (both Muslim and non-Muslim) who understand English. They form a *de facto* transnational community of considerable influence for shaping the debate, and sometimes their countries' policies, about both the Muslim world and their own Muslim diasporic populations. This makes them an important audience for Muslim intellectuals who attempt to interpret Islam for the 'West'.<sup>6</sup> This study explores the mechanisms that contributed to this community's recognition and acceptance of Arkoun, Abu Zayd, and Soroush as authoritative Islamic voices. In particular, it focuses on the role of the three scholars' social capital – that is, the network of personal and institutional relationships in which they were embedded – in shaping their authority.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. Research question and argument**

This thesis looks at the formation and emergence of 'reformist' Muslim intellectuals engaging with the European-Anglophone intellectual sphere. It assesses the role of social capital in the acceptance of three scholars, Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Abdolkarim Soroush, as among the most eminent reformist Muslim thinkers for the 'West'. In this sense, it moves beyond their ideas to discuss the historical and social context that contributed to the construction of their authority. More precisely, it explores how these thinkers' social capital shaped their status as representative 'Muslim

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<sup>6</sup> Please note that, for simplicity, this group will be abbreviated to 'European-Anglophone' in this thesis hereafter.

<sup>7</sup> Social capital is here understood in Bourdieu's terms as interpersonal networks that provide people with resources and status. Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 248.

intellectuals’ and – more broadly – their legitimacy in the European-Anglophone intellectual sphere. Even more fundamentally, this study claims that the very category of ‘reformist Muslim intellectual’ in this context is socially constructed. Their place within this category, therefore, is reflected not only in some shared features of their ideas and histories (see chapter 2), but also their social capital as members of the same network of institutions and actors (chapters 4 and 5). While the socio-political context created a broadly favourable environment for Arkoun, Abu Zayd, and Soroush, their network favoured their selection from many similar actors. In unpacking their social capital, this study first investigates how Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush accessed the network of actors in the European-Anglophone intellectual sphere; second, it analyses the expansion of their network across different spatial and typological fields; third, it explores how the nodes of these networks mobilised different forms of capitals (social, economic, and cultural) across fields, ultimately converting them into symbolic capital.<sup>8</sup> This accumulation of symbolic capital gave Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush greater intellectual legitimacy. In this process, their authority was shaped not only by the power relations between individuals in the field but also by the power relations between the different fields with which they interacted.

### **3. Definitions: intellectuals, social capital, and intellectual legitimacy & authority**

#### *Intellectuals*

This work defines intellectuals as a social group. Thus, it relies on Antonio Gramsci’s distinction between intellectual activity as a mental practice (and therefore applicable to

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<sup>8</sup> Symbolic capital is here understood as ‘resources available to a social actor on the basis of prestige or recognition which function as an authoritative embodiment of cultural value.’ Craig Calhoun, ‘Symbolic capital’, in *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 474–75.

everyone) and intellectuals as a social group whose main activity comprise the production and dissemination of knowledge – ‘all men are intellectuals [...]; but not all men have in society the role of intellectuals’<sup>9</sup>. The Muslim *ulama*, a specific group of individuals who practice this activity for society as a whole, is an example of the latter. However, building on Gramsci’s second definition, this study focuses on a third category: members of the social group who are identified – and identify themselves – as heirs to the late-nineteenth-century French *intellectuels*.<sup>10</sup> Despite the long-established existence of individuals committed to intellectual activity throughout the Islamic tradition, intellectuals in this sub-category (*monawar al-fikr* in Arabic and *rowshanfekr* in Persian) first emerged in parallel with two phenomena: the modernisation process and the intensified interaction with, and resistance to, European colonialism.<sup>11</sup> Most of these thinkers attempted to understand the relation between Islam and modernity by scrutinising the interpretation of the sacred sources, often combining the hermeneutics of the Qur’an with modern sciences. The three scholars who are the object of this study – Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush – are recognised by a broad literature as part of this larger trend.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as will be elaborated in chapter 1, there is no agreement among scholars on the terminology to characterise these thinkers: they are variously described in the literature as ‘modernist’, ‘liberal’, ‘reformist’ or ‘progressive’. Despite their differing approaches and diverse backgrounds, they share a focus on exegesis of the Qur’an for addressing the relation of Islam and modernity, human rights and pluralism. While engaging with similar themes, their responses often differ. Although not part of a coherent and defined

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Tutti gli uomini sono intellettuali [...]; ma non tutti gli uomini hanno nella società la funzione di intellettuali’. Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni Dal Carcere* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), 1516 [Translation my own]. See also ———, *Gli Intellettuali e l’Organizzazione della Cultura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966).

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Gramsci, ‘Prison Notebooks: The Intellectuals’, in *An Anthology of Western Marxism*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> John Esposito L., ed. *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17–18.

<sup>12</sup> For the criteria of selection of these three thinkers, see the methodology section in chapter 1.

intellectual movement, these thinkers still belong to a network of actors shaping the contemporary understanding of Islam: for instance, they publish together in edited books, gather in roundtables and conferences, and consult for national and international institutions.

### *Social capital*

Social capital is here understood, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, social capital represents the resources accumulated in an individual's network. This study explores the network of actors (individuals and institutions), in which Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush were embedded.<sup>14</sup>

### *Intellectual legitimacy*

In line with Michèle Lamont, this study conceives intellectual legitimacy as the recognition of an individual (or theory) as 'part of a field, as something that cannot be ignored by those who define themselves, and are defined as legitimate participants in the construction of a cognitive field'.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, it is here argued, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush are individuals who cannot be ignored by scholars in the European-Anglophone field involved in the production of knowledge on contemporary Muslim thinkers. The

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<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', 248.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the concept of social capital see the theoretical framework section in chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> Michele Lamont, 'How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida', *American Journal of Sociology* 93, no. 3 (1987): 586.

terms of intellectual ‘legitimacy’ or ‘authority’ are, for purposes of exposition, used interchangeably throughout this study; a more detailed analysis of these two concepts is given in the theoretical framework section in chapter 1.

#### **4. Scope: The European-Anglophone-intellectual field, 1989–2010**

This thesis’ scope is limited to the production of knowledge on Islam in the European-Anglophone intellectual field between 1989 and 2010. It investigates the interaction between these three Muslim thinkers and the European-Anglophone public (including Muslims resident in Europe); thus, it moves its focus from the construction of authority within the Muslim community to the process of intellectual legitimation across communities.

##### *Europe*

Limiting the geographical scope of this study to Europe is dictated by two considerations. First, among the Muslim-minority regions, Europe is the continent with the highest Muslim population.<sup>16</sup> As such, it is a significant venue to explore the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. Second, Europe is the primary site where these three thinkers operated during the study’s timeframe: Arkoun in France, Abu Zayd in the Netherlands, and Soroush between North America and the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Germany. Although the network of actors with whom they interacted later expanded – especially in North America and particularly after 9/11 – this thesis’ limited compass

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<sup>16</sup> Pew estimates around 43,470,000 Muslims live in Europe, 3,480,000 in North America and 840,000 in the Latin America-Caribbean region. Drew Desilver and David Masci, ‘World’s Muslim Population More Widespread Than You Might Think’, Pew Research Center, 31 January 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/31/worlds-muslim-population-more-widespread-than-you-might-think>.

cannot extend that far, and further studies of the broader global field must wait for the future. This European focus reflects Thomas Brisson's argument: these thinkers' authority in the 'Western' literature was shaped more by the structural context in Europe, where they lived and produced, than that in their countries of origin.<sup>17</sup> For instance, Brisson saw Arkoun's visibility in France as more reflective of transformations in French academia from the 1950s onwards than anything happening in Algeria.<sup>18</sup> Abu Zayd and Soroush moved to Europe later in their lives than Arkoun, so their countries of origin had more influence on their intellectual trajectories. However, as will be elaborated in this study, their eventual prominence in the English-language literature was strongly influenced by the internal dynamics of the European intellectual context. In other words, the increased interest in these thinkers concerned not only their intellectual commitment as members of the broader Islamic community (and specifically Arab and Iranian) but also with developments within the 'Western' intellectual field.

### *The Transnational-Anglophone field*

This study focuses on the transnational dimension of knowledge production in Europe. This is dictated by two considerations. First, intellectual debates have historically had transnational breadth; as Gisèle Sapiro argued, 'the scholarly world has always been characterised by intellectual exchange. This was the case in Europe, where Latin was the common language, but also between Europeans and other cultures, particularly Arabic or Asian philosophies'.<sup>19</sup> In the Muslim world, scholars from around the caliphate communicated with, and travelled between, the empire's different cultural poles. More

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Brisson, 'Leading Arab Intellectuals in the West: The Case of Mohamed Arkoun and Edward Said', in *Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East*, ed. Mohammed Bamyeh (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 160.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>19</sup> Lucie Campos, 'Geopolitics of Translation: An Interview with Gisèle Sapiro', *Books and Ideas*, 27 March 2015, <http://www.booksandideas.net/Geopolitics-of-Translation.html>.

recently, scholars such as Pakistani-American Fazlur Rahman (b. 1919; d. 1988), who studied at Oxford and taught at Durham, worked in the US and was an important influence in the creation of Islamic liberalism in Indonesia;<sup>20</sup> the Iranian scholar Ali Shariati studied in Paris, and his ideas reached an Iranian, Pakistani and North African audience.<sup>21</sup> Cities such as Paris and London became centres of education for many of these intellectuals who would often return to their countries of origin. During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s these European capitals represented a sort of ‘transitory’ arena where many of these thinkers studied or visited. During the 1980s they became increasingly stable *loci* of discussion; at the end of that decade, Tomas Gerholm and Yngve Georg Lithman acknowledged the existence of a fervid Muslim debate in these capitals, which remains largely understudied.<sup>22</sup> While these multinational flows have always existed, recent technological developments and other globalised social phenomena have strengthened and accelerated the circulation of individuals and ideas.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, focusing on the transnational dimension allows a better grasp of the broader dynamics within what some scholars have called the ‘global intellectual field’.<sup>24</sup>

Second, the growing extent and intensity of this transnational sphere have opened space for new actors to emerge beyond, and sometimes despite, national and local power

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<sup>20</sup> Abdelwahab El-Affendi, ‘The People on the Edge: Religious Reform and the Burden of the Western Muslim Intellectuals’, *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review*, no. 8 (2009): 32–33.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahda* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017), 49. Mariam Abou Zahab, ‘The Politicization of the Shia Community in Pakistan’, in *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia*, ed. Alessandro Monsutti (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 101. See also Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Tomas Gerholm and Yngve Georg Lithman, *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe* (London: Mansell, 1988), 3. Peter Mandaville, ‘Towards a Critical Islam: European Muslims and the Changing Boundaries of Transnational Religious Discourse’, in *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe*, eds. Stefano Allievi and Jørgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 138.

<sup>23</sup> Dale F. Eickelman, ‘Clash of Cultures? Intellectuals, Their Publics, and Islam’, in *Intellectuals in the Modern Islamic World*, eds. Stephane A. Dudoignon, Komatsu Hisao, and Kosugi Yasushi (New York: Routledge, 2006), 290.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). In particular Cemil Aydin, ‘Globalizing the Intellectual History of the Idea of the “Muslim World”’, in *Global Intellectual History*, eds. Moyn and Sartori.

centres that might wish to muzzle them.<sup>25</sup> As Mehran Kamrava pointed out in the introduction to his volume on contemporary Muslim intellectuals: ‘The inclusion of Arkoun, who has spent most of his adult life in France rather than in his birthplace of Algeria, and especially the Swiss-born Tariq Ramadan, who writes almost exclusively for Western audiences, demonstrates the global reach and impact of contemporary Islam far beyond the lands traditionally associated with it’.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, an extensive literature has underlined the importance of the new ‘transnational Islam’, or ‘Islam’s transnational public space’ in challenging local and regional authorities.<sup>27</sup> Peter Mandaville has linked the creation of this space to ‘the diverse range of movements and networks dedicated to the formulation and discussion of “Progressive Islam” that have emerged in recent years’.<sup>28</sup> This study, therefore, documents the importance of ‘how the transnational elite of Islamic scholars and teachers influences thinking on Islam and its practice in all parts of the world’,<sup>29</sup> accounting for how this enlarged transnational dimension carved the space for Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush to emerge. In line with scholars such as Bourdieu, Gil Eyal and Martin V. Woessner, this project also argues that the international circulation of ideas and individuals is determined by social conditions, given the ‘power relations intrinsic to

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Mandaville, ‘Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge: Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 113.

<sup>26</sup> Mehran Kamrava, *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 2. See also David Held et al., ‘Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture’, in *Politics at the Edge: Political Studies Association Yearbook Series*, eds. Chris Pierson and Simon Tormey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Allievi called it ‘a third space’, see Stefano Allievi, ‘Islam in the Public Space: Social Networks, Media and Neo-Communities’, in *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe*, eds. Stefano Allievi and Jørgen Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 19. See also Peter Mandaville, *Reimagining the Umma: Translocal Space and the Changing Boundaries of Muslim Political Community* (Aalborg: Spirit, 1999); Dilwar Hussain, ‘The Holy Grail of Muslims in Western Europe: Representation and Their Relationship with the State’, in *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East*, eds. John Esposito L. and Francois Burgat (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 256; John R. Bowen, ‘Beyond Migration: Islam as a Transnational Public Space’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30, no. 5 (2004): 882, 91.

<sup>28</sup> Mandaville, ‘Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge’: 106.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Grillo, ‘Islam and Transnationalism’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30, no. 5 (2004): 868.

transnational actor-networks'.<sup>30</sup> The analysis of these power relations at the spatial and typological level, explored particularly in chapter 5, is one of the main contributions of this thesis. This study builds on Larissa Buchholz distinction between 'transnational' and 'global' field: the first indicating transnational aspects of power relations specific to one region – in this case Europe – the second referring to dynamics at the global scale.<sup>31</sup> Although focusing on the first, for reasons of exposition, this work will use the terms 'transnational' and 'global' interchangeably.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the focus on European-Anglophone production is dictated by the role of English as the *lingua franca* in the global intellectual field.<sup>33</sup> Looking only at the English-language literature obtains a twofold result: first, it better captures the transnational dimension in which these thinkers operate; second, it includes the reception of the three thinkers by audiences beyond the Muslim diaspora or in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, this thesis' analysis includes venues such as Germany and the Netherlands, with actors located there but producing in English.

### 1989–2010

The timeframe of 1989 to 2010 was defined by a new phase in the increasing attention on Islam in the Anglophone literature. While the 1979 Iranian revolution was crucial for

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<sup>30</sup> Martin V. Woessner, *Heidegger in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4. See also Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Social Conditions of the International Circulation of Ideas', in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Johanna Bockman and Gil Eyal, 'Eastern Europe as a Laboratory for Economic Knowledge: The Transnational Roots of Neoliberalism', *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 2 (2002): 346.

<sup>31</sup> Larissa Buchholz, 'What Is a Global Field? Theorizing Fields Beyond the Nation-State', *The Sociological Review* 64, no. 2 (2016): 53.

<sup>32</sup> This decision is consistent with Buchholz practice.

<sup>33</sup> See Barbara Seidlhofer, 'English as a Lingua Franca', *ELT Journal* 59, no. 4 (2005); David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Hans de Wit, *Internationalization of Higher Education in the United States of America and Europe* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 183–92; Stephen Wilkins and Jolanta Urbanovič, 'English as the Lingua Franca in Transnational Higher Education', *Journal of Studies in International Education* 18, no. 5 (2014); Claus Gnutzmann, ed. *Teaching and Learning English as a Global Language: Native and NonNative Perspectives* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Allievi, 'Islam in the Public Space', 16.

bringing Islam into the ‘Western’ media and academic spotlight, it was particularly after 1989 – with the end of the Cold War, the Salman Rushdie *fatwa*, and *l’affaire du foulard* – that a newly-intensified phase of attention to Islam started in Europe;<sup>35</sup> in particular, this period witnessed the re-energisation of the literature on reformist Muslim intellectuals. As Zaheer Kazmi observed: ‘It was only after the Cold War that Muslim liberal intellectuals themselves came to the fore. [...] At the same time, the notion of “Islamic reformation” also gained currency in Western academic circles, where many of them now resided’.<sup>36</sup>

As explained earlier, intellectual circles from Muslim-majority countries already existed in Europe, particularly in London and Paris. But it was the events of 1989 that elevated their transnational discourses beyond the specifically Muslim sphere to enter the broader European intellectual debate. As Renate Holub has underlined, it was these events that led European ‘mandarins’ to start discussing Islam as a major topic of concern.<sup>37</sup> This shift of attention – with actors previously uninterested in Islam reading about and engaging with internal Islamic debates – is the principal topic of this study. During the 1990s and 2000s, particularly after 9/11, this new attention attracted an increasingly polarised audience. Debates often counterposed the putative nature of Islam as intrinsically violent and anti-democratic against the specific political and historical contingencies that led some Muslims to take undemocratic or violent actions.<sup>38</sup> In this contentious atmosphere, individuals such as Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush were often

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1981). See also Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Islam, Pensee Islamique, Islamism’, *Peuples méditerranéens*, no. 50 (1990): 109.

<sup>36</sup> Zaheer Kazmi, ‘The Limits of Muslim Liberalism’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4 April 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/limits-muslim-liberalism>.

<sup>37</sup> Renate Holub, ‘Intellectuals and Euro-Islam’, in *Muslim Europe or Euro-Islam: Politics, Culture, and Citizenship in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Nezar AlSayyad and Manuel Castells (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 180.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011); Edward Said, ‘The Clash of Ignorance’, *The Nation*, 4 October 2001.

called upon to testify to the existence of internal discussions on democracy, human rights and gender equality in Islam. For scholars like Asef Bayat and Olivier Roy, these thinkers represented the intellectual face of a general disenchantment of Muslim societies with Islamist ideologies (what Bayat and Roy called ‘post-Islamism’).<sup>39</sup>

The so-called Arab Spring in 2010, and especially its aftermath, challenged many of the assumptions developed during the preceding decades.<sup>40</sup> Many authors stressed the absence of intellectuals in the Arab uprising.<sup>41</sup> In a thought-provoking article, Peter Mandaville asked if the post-Islamist thesis was still valid.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the “‘Failure” in Islamic Reform’ conference hosted at Princeton University in 2013 was indicative of a shift in perception, at least on the part of some scholars, on the topic.<sup>43</sup> Although the Arab uprisings did not directly involve Abu Zayd, Arkoun (who had died just before the events), nor Soroush (who supported the Iranian demonstrations in 2009 but was more distant from the Arab world), it seemed to signal a new phase in how Muslim thinkers were understood in the European-Anglophone literature.

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<sup>39</sup> Olivier Roy, *Global Muslim. Le Radici Occidentali Del Nuovo Islam* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2003), 14; Asef Bayat, ‘The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society’, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 5, no. 9 (1996): 47–48.

<sup>40</sup> This was confirmed also by Nina zu Fürstenberg, founder and chair of Reset – Dialogue of Civilizations Foundation. Nina zu Fürstenberg, conversation with the author, 7 May 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Robert F. Worth, ‘The Arab Intellectuals Who Didn’t Roar’, *New York Times*, 29 October 2011; Mohammad al-Sayyad, ‘The Cowering Intellectuals of the Arab Spring’, *Al-Monitor*, 8 February 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/culture/2012/04/arab-intelligentsia.html>; Nabil Echchaibi, ‘Where Are You, Arab Intellectuals?’, *Nawa*, 30 June 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/nabil-echchaibi/waiting-for-arab-intellectuals>; José Vericat, *In Light of the Intellectuals: The Role of Novelists in the Arab Uprisings* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2014), 1–3.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Mandaville, ‘Is the Post-Islamism Thesis Still Valid?’, *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 24 January 2014, <https://pomeps.org/2014/01/30/is-the-post-islamism-thesis-still-valid>.

<sup>43</sup> Princeton University, “‘Failure” in Islamic Reform’, Graduate Student Conference hosted by the Princeton Islamic Studies Colloquium at the Center for the Study of Religion (12–13 April 2013). <https://csr.princeton.edu/events/failure-in-islamic-reform> (accessed 11 February 2020).

## 5. Beyond the scope of this thesis

The limits of the present compass consign some issues (albeit important) outside the scope of this study. First, this thesis does not analyse Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's theories, nor does it undertake a comparative study of the contemporary philosophy of Islam. Instead, this dissertation focuses on the socio-political context underpinning the production of knowledge on and by these three thinkers and the sociological analysis of the process of intellectual legitimization they underwent in the European-Anglophone literature. Second, although the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a 'feminist' intellectual discourse on Islam, the three scholars studied here are all men.<sup>44</sup> This is justified by the project's deconstructive approach: assessing the most-quoted Muslim thinkers in the literature and then analysing the processes through which they gained their authority. This method necessarily reflects the still male-dominated character of the field, despite the increased prominence of women intellectuals (indeed this literature includes such figures as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas and Ziba Mir-Hosseini).<sup>45</sup> Third, this study focuses on a top-down analysis of the relationship between socio-political actors (such as governments, international organisations and academic institutions) and these three thinkers, leaving a discussion of their relationship to grassroots initiatives (such as civil society organisations) for further research. This social

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<sup>44</sup> The term 'feminism' is often contested in current debates on women in Islam. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6-7. More broadly, see Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, *Women, Leadership, and Mosques* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Juliane Hammer and Riem Spielhaus, 'Muslim Women and the Challenge of Authority: An Introduction', *The Muslim World* 103, no. 3 (2013); Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Nida Kermani, 'Treading a Dangerous Path? The Use of Islam in Women's Rights Advocacy', in *Alternative Islamic Discourses and Religious Authority*, eds. Carool Kersten and Susanne Olsson (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> The lack of space for discussions on gender and Islam in scholarly fora such as the American Academy of Religion, was raised also by Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 65-72. ———, 'Islamic Intellectual Leadership at a Crossroad', *Rewire News*, 15 September 2010, <http://religiondispatches.org/islamic-intellectual-leadership-at-a-crossroads>.

base – although often limited to a melange of university students, intellectuals, and activists – represents an essential element of these scholar's legitimacy. Finally, while this work occasionally discusses the role of the media in their public engagement, this needs further development as a project of its own.

## Chapter 1

### Theoretical framework and methodology

In the introduction to his edited volume *Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East*, Mohammed Bamyeh stated that his analysis was not ‘interested in evaluating the accuracy or reasonableness of these intellectuals’ but ‘the social ground of intellectual activity’, beyond any ‘theological’ consistency.<sup>1</sup> The attention to the practice of knowing, beyond the analysis of the content produced and transmitted, aligns this study with Bamyeh’s work.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the role of social capital in the process of intellectual legitimization of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush represents the core of this study. This chapter elaborates the theoretical framework underpinning this investigation by drawing from scholarship from both Islamic studies and the sociology of knowledge. It first reviews the existing literature and defines such key concepts as authority, legitimacy in knowledge, social capital and symbolic capital; it later elaborates on the main argument by giving an overview of the role of social capital in the formation of cultural legitimacy. This last point is the main contribution of this study and will be further expanded in chapters 4 and 5.

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<sup>1</sup> Mohammed Bamyeh, ‘Introduction: The Social Dynamism of the Organic Intellectual’, in *Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East*, ed. Mohammed Bamyeh (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 19. See also Charles Kurzman ‘defining intellectuals is less important than exploring how intellectuals define themselves and are defined by others, in particular historical situations’ in Charles Kurzman and Lynn Owens, ‘The Sociology of Intellectuals’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 80.

<sup>2</sup> Swidler and Ardit, ‘The New Sociology of Knowledge’: 306.

## 1.1 Definitions

### *Authority and legitimacy*

Discussing the emergence of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush requires defining two interlinked concepts: authority and legitimacy. Authority, the scholarship argues, is defined by two components: the power to influence ideas and behaviours by the individual holding authority and the voluntary compliance of those who follow the authority (ie legitimacy). In this sense, legitimacy is a *conditio sine qua non* for authority. Carter defined authority as ‘an individual’s ability to regulate others’ behaviour by invoking rights that are vested in a social role’.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Nicola Abbagnano saw authority as ‘any kind of power to control single or collective opinions and behaviours [...]’. Authority, therefore, is based on a free rational choice which, aware of its limits, relies on someone else’s better judgment’.<sup>4</sup> In this sense authority, defined as legitimate power that is willingly respected and followed (what Weber called ‘authoritative power’), is counterposed to the ‘capacity to impose a will in spite of [the] receiver’s resistance’<sup>5</sup> (Weber’s notion of ‘coercive power’<sup>6</sup>). Legitimacy, in the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, represents: ‘An act of acknowledgement and knowledge – the knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this his judgment takes precedence – ie it has priority over one’s own’.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have argued that what has been termed a ‘voluntary recognition’ in the definition of legitimacy, is *de*

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<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Carter, ‘Microsociologies: Social Exchange, Trust, Justice, and Legitimacy’, in *Handbook of Contemporary Sociological Theory*, ed. Seth Abrutyn (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 379.

<sup>4</sup> Nicola Abbagnano, ‘Autorità’, in *Dizionario di Filosofia*, ed. Nicola Abbagnano (Torino: UTET, 2006), 110, 12. [Translation my own.]

<sup>5</sup> Luciano Gallino, ‘Autorità’, in *Dizionario Di Sociologia* (Torino: UTET, 2006), 58. Carter, ‘Microsociologies: Social Exchange, Trust, Justice, and Legitimacy’, 379.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 212–15.

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 291.

*facto* shaped by existing power dynamics in the social structure. In elaborating his concept of ‘cultural hegemony’, Gramsci emphasised how the dominant groups actually create consent:

The ‘spontaneous’ consent [is] given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.<sup>8</sup>

Power structures, therefore, influence legitimacy in the socio-political context but also in the more specific field of knowledge and cultural production. Knowledge and power, Ann Swidler and Jorge Ardití argued, are intimately linked: indeed, through greater access to resources, and control over the means of communicative production and circulation of ideas, ‘power allows people to enact realities that make their knowledge plausible’.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, these scholars claimed, authority in knowledge is linked to authority in the broader social context, such that ‘to have authoritative knowledge is to have an institution, group, or person who can settle disputes and establish truth’.<sup>10</sup> In other words, authority in the field of knowledge – or to use Bourdieu’s terms ‘cultural legitimacy’ – reflects power dynamics within the broader society. As Bourdieu wrote:

The pursuit of the accumulation of knowledge is inseparably the quest for recognition and the desire to make a name for oneself; technical competence and scientific knowledge function simultaneously as instruments of accumulation of symbolic capital; intellectual conflicts are always also power struggles; the polemics of reason are the contests of scientific rivalry.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Swidler and Ardití, ‘The New Sociology of Knowledge’: 322.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 311. The interrelation between social authority and knowledge is stressed also by Talal Asad. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 12–13.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 110.

In this perspective, dominant ideas or thinkers exist as a result of power dynamics entangled in what Bourdieu called the ‘macro-structure’ (ie the system encompassing the totality of fields) and also the position resulting from struggles within a specific intellectual field. In discussing the prominence of the three thinkers, this thesis borrows Bourdieu and Lamont’s notion of ‘intellectual legitimacy’ as a subcategory of ‘cultural legitimacy’ – ie being ‘recognised as a part of the intellectual field –something that cannot be ignored by those who define themselves, and are defined, as legitimate participants in the construction of a cognitive field’.<sup>12</sup> Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush are the pre-eminent thinkers known by most scholars involved in the production of knowledge on contemporary Muslim thought.<sup>13</sup>

*Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush’s network in the landscape of Islamic authority*

The emergence of Abu Zayd, Arkoun, and Soroush in the anglophone literature is often assumed to be based on their religious authority within the Muslim community. Although this study does not focus on their authority in Islam, it is worth here exploring these thinkers’ positions in the landscape of religious authority in Islam before engaging with their emergence in the European intellectual field. To tackle this point, this section will first explore the historical fragmentation of religious authority in Islam; it will then provide a map of current venues of religious authority in Islam; it will finally situate these thinkers within this landscape with particular focus on their discourses and social base. It will be here argued that these thinkers did not emerge as religious authorities among the broader Muslim community but did gain intellectual authority among a global Muslim intellectual elite. Their influence in the religious sphere was hindered by three interlinked

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<sup>12</sup> Lamont, ‘How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher’: 586. Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Intellectual Field and Creative Project’, *Information* (International Social Science Council) 8, no. 2 (1969): 90.

<sup>13</sup> This is further elaborated in the methodology section, in discussing the case selection.

aspects: first, their audience was limited to intellectual circles rather than the broader community of believers; second, their acquisition of Islamic knowledge took place mainly in secular institutions; third, their intellectual project was perceived as leading towards a western secular paradigm outside the Islamic realm.

Authority, as discussed in the previous section, relies on the power to influence individuals' beliefs and practices based on the voluntary compliance of those following the authority. In the religious sphere, this influence is often linked to the power to interpret religious sources and apply them to the lives of the believers.<sup>14</sup> In defining religious authority in Islam, Zaman emphasized how it had to be based on 'recognizably "religious" grounds'<sup>15</sup> to be seen as legitimate among the believers.<sup>16</sup> Traditionally, these grounds were represented by the possession of religious knowledge (including the capacity to engage with the "foundational Islamic texts"<sup>17</sup>), a knowledge of relevant worldly affairs, and a high moral stand and personal piety.<sup>18</sup> This translated, even in pre-modern times, in a plurality of figures (imams, ulama, mufti, qadi, Sufi shaikhs) and venues (such as mosques, madrasas, Shi'a seminaries, Al-Azhar<sup>19</sup>) which rendered the 'nature, scope and locus of this authority' fluid.<sup>20</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, the encounter with modernity further challenged this already unclear definition and implementation of authority. The development of mass communications and mass education played an important role in the fragmentation of the traditional venues of authority. Alongside

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<sup>14</sup> Hilary Kalmbach, 'Introduction: Islamic Authority and the Study of Female Religious Leaders', in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques*, eds. Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach (Leiden: Brill, 2016) 3.

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Masooda Bano, 'Introduction' in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change vol. 1*, ed. Masooda Bano (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, 'Authority, Religious', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three, Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill).

<sup>19</sup> Kalmbach, 'Introduction', 12.

<sup>20</sup> Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke, 'Introduction: Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies. A Critical Overview', in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, eds. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 3.

traditional ulama, new figures emerged formed in the modern educational systems. Similarly to their predecessors, these figures based their claim to authority on their pious reputation, and knowledge of Islamic tradition, however, contrary to traditional ulama, they were trained outside or partly outside the “traditional scholarly institutions.”<sup>21</sup> The decline of the Muslim world in the face of European colonialism and modern developments led some of these figures to re-evaluate the role of traditional scholarship in addressing the modern world. Whether arguing for a literalist engagement with the sacred sources and a return to the social norms existing at the time of the prophet (as suggested by the Salafis) or for direct engagement with the Qur’an and the hadiths to adapt their reading to the modern reality (as suggested by some modernists) these positions challenged the role of the ulama as the sole gatekeepers of the Islamic interpretation. By the end of the twentieth century, globalization, the development of new communication technologies, the growth of Muslim diasporic communities, and the new visibility (and vocality) of previously ‘underrepresented’ groups (such as women) further shaped the formulation and exercise of Islamic authority.<sup>22</sup> These developments not only influenced pre-existing forms of authority introducing new modes of knowledge transmission, new audiences, and new issues of debates, but further expanded the geography of the production of Islamic knowledge. The use of digital technologies by traditional clergies to deliver online *khutbahs* or *fatwas*, for instance, allowed these actors to expand their reach beyond their local communities. The expansion of Salafi and Deobandi networks in Western countries reflected the emergence of Muslim communities in these regions. With the rise of new platforms of Islamic scholarships in Europe and

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<sup>21</sup> Kalmbach, 'Introduction', 5.

<sup>22</sup> Mandaville, 'Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge': 101–15; Volpi and Turner, 'Introduction: Making Islamic Authority Matter': 1–19; Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*; Juliane Hammer and Riem Spielhaus, 'Muslim Women and the Challenge of Authority'.

North America during the 1990s, these regions shifted from mere receivers of Islamic knowledge to producers of religious discourses.

The emergence of Abu Zayd, Arkoun, and Soroush is set within this fragmentation of Islamic authority as part of a fluid network of scholars situated between the Muslim majority and Western countries. To locate the position of their intellectual movement within this field, the coming section will provide a map of the main global platforms of Islamic authority. Building on Masooda Bano's work, this section identifies nine – occasionally overlapping – networks: six centred in Muslim majority countries (the Al-Azhar University, the Diyanet, the Hizmet movement, the Saudi Salafi network, the Deobandi madrasah network, the hawza network) and three in Western countries (the neo-traditionalist, the neo-legalist, the neo-conservatives); at the intersection of these two sets of platforms it located the network of scholars surrounding Abu Zayd, Arkoun, and Soroush. While almost all these platforms are discussed at the institutional level, the fluid nature of Abu Zayd, Arkoun, and Soroush' network account for the emphasis given to individuals rather than institutions. A separate brief discussion goes to Sufi networks and their authorities (Sufi sheikhs), which have gained particular attention in recent decades. Contrary to the actors mapped here, the Sufi tradition is based on an experiential kind knowledge: the *marifah*, the 'cognition of the divine',<sup>23</sup> is less linked to the text and more intuitive, resulting from an ecstatic experience. As such, the Sufi tradition is at the margins, if not outside, the contestation over the interpretation of religious texts which characterises the platforms discussed below.

Among the oldest and most prestigious institutions of Islamic learning is the Al-Azhar Mosque and University which was founded in the tenth century and re-defined as a university under the Egyptian government in 1961; the institution still represents an

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<sup>23</sup> Kalmbach, 'Introduction', 10.

important path to acquire religious authority. Traditionally representative of the ‘wasatya’ (moderate) Islam, its curricula emphasise an in-depth engagement with classical Islamic texts and methodological rigor. It is also among the few religious institutions teaching, in line with classical Islamic tradition, all four *madhabs*.<sup>24</sup> While it has always held an international nature, its students have come to include an even more global range of figures, including converts and second and third- generation Muslims from diasporic communities. The Diyanet, the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, is an official state institution created in 1924 with the task of managing religious matters, such as the training of imams and the administration of worship. While traditionally rooted in the Hanafi school, it emphasizes an intellectual and mystic engagement in the study of Islam.<sup>25</sup> With the rise to the power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, the Diyanet has seen an increase in its budget and influence inside and outside Turkey, representing today one of the largest bureaucracies in the Muslim world.<sup>26</sup> Internationally, it has developed a broad network of mosques in countries such as Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States. A parallel platform to the Diyanet within the contemporary Turkish tradition is the Hizmet network (or Gülen movement) created by the Muslim preacher Fethullah Gülen. Inspired by the teachings of the Muslim thinker Said Nursi the movement attempts to balance Islam and modernity and pays particular attention to interfaith dialogue. Since the 1970s it has developed a global network of schools (in Central Asia, Australia, America, Germany the Netherlands among other regions).<sup>27</sup> On the opposite side of the spectrum from Al-Azhar’s *wasatya*

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<sup>24</sup> Bano, ‘Introduction’, in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change* vol. 1, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>27</sup> The relationship between the Hizmet network and the Diyanet (and specifically the AKP) has seen fluctuating phases: the two movements allied in 2002 in a common effort to re-shape the secularist Turkish state, but then they felt apart, particularly in the aftermath of the 2016 failed military coup against the AKP, blamed to be backed by the Gülen movement.

is the Saudi Salafist network.<sup>28</sup> Born in the middle of the eighteenth century, the movement gained global influence particularly since the 1970s oil boom which allowed the Saudi government to create a global network of Salafi mosques and madrasa.<sup>29</sup> Salafis promote a literalist reading of the sacred scriptures and aspire at reproducing the social reality of Muslims during the first century of Islam.<sup>30</sup> Their views have often been held responsible for inspiring militant jihadism.<sup>31</sup> By promoting the direct engagement with the Qur'an and the *hadith*, refusing any contextualization and interpretation of the sacred sources, Salafis disregard the commentaries developed within the four *madhabs* within the Islamic tradition.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, to the Salafis, the Deobandi promote a literalist reading of the sacred sources and have been accused of inspiring militant movements such as the Taliban.<sup>33</sup> However, they differ from the Salafis in their engagement with the Islamic tradition, as they rely on the Hanafi school of law (while the Salafis discount the four *madhabs*) and their strong emphasis on personal piety.<sup>34</sup> The Deobandi movement was born in the late nineteenth century in the town of Deoband in India, and its followers are still mainly bound to South Asian Muslims (often the less wealthy pockets of society<sup>35</sup>) and the South Asian Muslim diasporic communities in regions such as Europe (particularly the United Kingdom), South Africa and East Asia.<sup>36</sup> Contrary to the three previous networks, the Deobandi madrasah network has no state affiliation, relying mainly on private community donations.<sup>37</sup> Beyond the Sunni tradition, the Shi'a theological seminaries, known as *hawza ilmiyya* (*hawza*), represent another platform in

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 19.

the training of religious authority in the Muslim world, including the formation of *marja-i taqlid* (the highest Usuli Shi'a authority). Dating back to the eleventh century, prominent seminaries such as Najaf in Iraq and Qum in Iran represent the Shi'a equivalent to Al-Azhar within Sunni Islam. The curricula span from Islamic law according to the Shi'a doctrine, to Qur'anic exegesis and theology.<sup>38</sup> Alongside the two most prominent seminaries of Najaf and Qum, a broad network of secondary seminaries has developed in the Middle East, South Asia, and more recently in Europe and North America. Although traditionally independent from the state, they have ever since the Iranian revolution in 1979 increasingly felt under the influence of the Iranian government.

Recent decades have witnessed also the emergence of a specifically western Islamic discourse. Various defined as 'Western/European/American/British/French Islam', these voices share the effort to contextualize the Islamic message within the new reality of Muslims living in the West.<sup>39</sup> Traditional figures, such as Sufi sheikhs and mosque-based imams trained in Muslim majority countries (for example the Grand Mufti of Bosnia Herzegovina Mustafa Cerić) still played an important role; however alongside these individuals, new figures – converts, imams and other figures born and raised in western countries – have emerged in the landscape of Islamic authority.<sup>40</sup> These have been broadly categorized by Bano as neo-traditionalists, neo-legalists, and neo-conservatives. Neo-traditionalists emphasise the spiritual and ethical dimension of Islam, which they pursue through a rational engagement with the Islamic legal and mystic tradition.<sup>41</sup> In seeing the Islamic tradition as inherently adaptive to different contexts they

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<sup>38</sup> Sebastian Günther, 'Education, general (up to 1500)', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Three, Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, 2017). [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_ei3\\_COM\\_26134](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_26134) (accessed 29 July 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Bano, 'Introduction', in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change* vol. 1, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Masooda Bano, 'Introduction', in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change* vol. 2, ed. Masooda Bano (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

set themselves in line with the Diyanet and Al-Azhari tradition;<sup>42</sup> in particular their attention to all four madhabs reflects the Al-Azhari approach. The network includes figures such as Tim Winter, Hamsa Yousef, and institutions such as the Cambridge Muslim College in the United Kingdom and the Zeytuna College in the United States and has attracted a significant audience among Muslim young affluent university students in the West.<sup>43</sup> The second network is represented by the neo-legalists who focus on Islamic law in an attempt to adapt it to the “contemporary realities.”<sup>44</sup> In this sense, they pay less attention to the mystic dimension of Islam and more on its legal aspects. Tariq Ramadan’s Centre for Islamic Legislation and Ethics and the Dublin-based European Council for Fatwas and Research presided by Yusuf al-Qardawi represent examples of this trend (although Tariq Ramadan has criticized the Council for its disconnect from the European social reality<sup>45</sup>). Bano includes among the neo-legalists also initiatives attempting to “Islamize knowledge” such as the United States’ based International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). Finally, the neo-conservative network gathers individuals and institutions of Salafi or Deobandi’s inspiration but attempting to contextualize their message to the modern reality, for instance promoting Muslims’ respect of secular constitutions when living in western countries.<sup>46</sup> They include figures such as Yasir Qadhi, Shams Ad Duha, and institutions in the United States such as Darul Qasim, Ebrahim College, and Darul Uloom in New York.<sup>47</sup> Similar paths have characterized also Shi’a platforms in the West. Alongside traditional venues such as the Islamic Center of Hamburg established in the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>45</sup> Nathan Spannaus, ‘Transformative Islamic Reform: Tariq Ramadan and the Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE)’, in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change* vol. 2, ed. Masooda Bano (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 125.

<sup>46</sup> Masooda Bano, ‘Introduction’, in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change* vol. 2, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Pooya Razavian and Nathan Spannaus, ‘Neo Deobandi Institutions in the West’, in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change* vol. 2, ed. Masooda Bano (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 180-210.

late 1950s, more recent institutions have attempted to combine Shi'a Islamic knowledge and its contextualization with the reality of Muslims in the West. The Al-Mahdi Institute and the Islamic College both in the United Kingdom represent examples of this trend.<sup>48</sup>

It is in this landscape of transnational platforms of authority that Abu Zayd, Arkoun, and Soroush's network is located. They are indeed part of a new generation of scholars which are rooted in the nineteenth century reformist tradition of Al-Afghani, Abduh, and Muhammad Iqbal. Set between the Muslim majority and Western countries these scholars have been often seen as the intellectual voices of what Roy and Bayat defined post-Islamist trend in Muslim societies (ie "a condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, symbols and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters"<sup>49</sup>). Scholars such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, Mohammed Talbi, Amina Wadud represent key figures in a still fluid network of individuals. Like previously discussed figures, central to their work is the attempt to contextualize the Islamic message to the current modern reality while criticising pitfalls of current modern societies.<sup>50</sup> They differ however from previous networks in the higher level of "concession they make to modernity."<sup>51</sup> Similar to the neo-traditionalists and the Diyanet they emphasize the spiritual and intellectual side of Islam as a system of belief and a faith, and aim at determining the moral and legal principles underlying the Islamic message to apply them to contemporary life.<sup>52</sup> However, more than other two platforms, they limit the role of Islam to the individual sphere; Abu Zayd and Soroush, for instance, argued that religion provides the 'general

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<sup>48</sup> Matthijs Van Den Bos, "'Western seminary': On transnational Shiite higher education in Britain", *Social Compass* 62, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>49</sup> Bayat, 'The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society', 45.

<sup>50</sup> Kamrava, *The New Voices of Islam*, 19.

<sup>51</sup> El-Affendi, 'The People on the Edge', 30.

<sup>52</sup> Masooda Bano, 'Introduction', in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change* vol. 1, 12.

ethical guidelines' leaving the solution to human and social issues, such as democracy and human rights, to the 'human reason and social will'.<sup>53</sup> This redefinition of the social role of religion does not imply a secularist agenda, since they still promote a society inspired by religious moral and ethical values (the lack of moral and ethical value in modern society represent one of the critiques they share with the other platforms). It does however set them in opposition to Islamists' view who aspired towards a central role of Islam in modern socio-political systems.<sup>54</sup> The insistence on the individual and subjective dimension in the worship and the reading of the sacred sources, which characterized this network of scholars, set them apart from the Al-Azhar, the Diyanet, and especially the neo-traditionalists with their emphasis on companionship.<sup>55</sup> This direct engagement with the Qur'an and the *hadith* is reminiscent of the Saudi Salafi's approach. While, however, the Salafis pursue a literalist reading, Abu Zayd, Arkoun, and Soroush's network emphasize the need to contextualize and interpret the message. Indeed, at the centre of their work is often the development of a hermeneutic of the sacred sources based on a synthesis of traditional Islamic scholarship and current theories from the social sciences and humanities. They, therefore, do not disregard the Islamic tradition: while critical of the monopoly of traditional Islamic scholars over Islamic knowledge, they actively engage with thinkers and conceptual tools from this tradition. Although not confined within the framework of the madhabs and legal tradition (as the case of neo-traditionalists, Al-Azhar, Deobandi) they engage with conceptual tools developed within these traditions.

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<sup>53</sup> Navid Kermani, 'From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Qur'an', in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 187.

<sup>54</sup> Kalmbach, 'Introduction', 5.

<sup>55</sup> Kermani, 'From Revelation to Interpretation', 186.

Despite the expanding interest on these thinkers, as testified by the increase in readership, translations, quotations, and debates on their work, their audience is still limited to a global Islamic (and non-Islamic) intellectual elite, rather than the broader Muslim community. As El-Affendi pointed out even in the Muslim world, they emerged as intellectuals, rather than religious authority;<sup>56</sup> in other words although emerging in intellectual circles, they are still at the edge of the religious field. Several elements contribute to this: first and foremost, their ideas do not always resonate with values existing in the broader Muslim society. This embodiment of ‘cherished values’ existing among the followers represents one of the key elements of authority.<sup>57</sup> While there has been an emerged concern on issues tackled by these thinkers (such as modernity, pluralism, democracy, human rights, gender equality) the fact that many of these thinkers (Abu Zayd, Soroush, An-Naim, Abu El Fadl) are in exile because of their ideas is indicative, if not always, often of a disconnect from their societies of origin. As Bano pointed out, it is the public, rather than the scholar, that has the power to define and shift what are ‘considered legitimate limits of reform’:<sup>58</sup> only once the public consensus shifts, the religious authority can change its discourse and performance while maintaining its legitimacy among believers.<sup>59</sup> This disconnect between these thinkers and the broader society is canalized also in the contention of the three main sources of religious authority discussed at the beginning of this section (ie religious knowledge, knowledge of the social reality, and personal piety). These scholars indeed share with the previous platforms knowledge of the worldly affairs and the Islamic scholarly tradition: in their works, they demonstrate the ability to engage with the main sources of Islam. Their training is the

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<sup>56</sup> El-Affendi, ‘The People on the Edge’, 47.

<sup>57</sup> Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 58.

<sup>58</sup> Bano, ‘Introduction’, in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change* vol. 1, 32.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

result of both academic (they often hold a PhDs on subjects related to Islamic studies) and traditional Islamic institutions (Amina Wadud studied at Al-Azhar, Ebrahim Moosa at Darul Ulum Nadwatul 'Ulama in Lucknow, Soroush received training from Ayatollah Mortaza Motahhari's disciple). This syncretic training is not specific to these scholars, as figures such as the neo-legalist al-Faruqi, and the neo-traditionalists Tariq Ramadan present similar formation. The main element of contestation, however, lies in their 'possession of considerable spiritual and moral authority acknowledged by the community'<sup>60</sup> (i.e. recognized personal piety). Even though they claim personal piety (as discussed in chapter 2) their ideas are perceived as leading towards a secular paradigm which falls outside the Islamic realm: Amina Wadud's decision to lead the prayer as a woman, Abu Zayd and Soroush's analysis of the human dimension of the revelation represent examples of this. This represents perhaps the crucial difference between these thinkers and other platforms (such as the neo-traditionalists and the neo-legalist) which, similarly to these thinkers, do not reach the broader Muslim masses. El-Affendi, highlighted how the pressure to establish recognition in the 'secular agnostics environment'<sup>61</sup> of the western academia undermines their religious authority.<sup>62</sup> Finally, the support these thinkers ideas have received by western states (in spite of these thinkers' criticism of western governments and their conscious attempt to stay away from their policies<sup>63</sup>) further undermined their legitimacy.<sup>64</sup> While state support is not specific to this network (the Diyanet is part of the Turkish state; Al-Azhar is under the influence of the Egyptian government; the Salafi of the Saudi, the *howze* network of the Iranian) the fact

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<sup>60</sup> El-Affendi, 'The People on the Edge', 43.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>63</sup> Arkoun represents an exception in this sense.

<sup>64</sup> El-Affendi, 'The People on the Edge', 45.

that these states are ‘outsiders’ of the Muslim community (and often former colonial powers) further weakens these thinkers legitimacy.

As per now, therefore, these scholars do not hold religious authority within the broader Muslim community. They are however worth attention also in the study of Islamic authority for three reasons. Firstly, although far from reaching the broader Muslim masses, their discourses have been taken by various home-grown movements: Soroush represented among the key intellectual figures of the reformist movement in Iran which led to the election of president Mohammad Khatami in 1997; Fazlur Rahman’s students became leading figures of the rising of the Indonesian Islamic Liberalism;<sup>65</sup> they are also receiving the attention of young educated Muslims in Western countries. Secondly, their readership often includes Muslims not necessarily involved with specific religious organizations and as such less visible and ‘measurable.’ In this, they have been penalized from their lack of a common institutional base. Although it is important to consider dynamics within organized communities which have gained momentum ever since the 1970s and again in the aftermath of 9/11, it is essential to take into account ‘the processes of individualization of religious education and experience’<sup>66</sup> that is characterizing many Muslim communities. This aspect although less visible in the immediate might present a stronger impact in the longer term. Thirdly, as Bano pointed out the increased literacy among Muslims is also leading, in the long term, to ‘greater awareness of and appreciation for the work of the specialist, especially among the university-educated’:<sup>67</sup> this includes both specialists within the religious sphere, but also

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<sup>65</sup> El-Affendi, ‘The People on the Edge’, 33.

<sup>66</sup> Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke, ‘Introduction: Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies. A Critical Overview’, in *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, eds. Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 15.

<sup>67</sup> Bano, ‘Introduction’, in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change* vol. 1, 10.

academics' work, and could lead to an expanded appreciation for more specialized intellectual debates among the broader Muslim society.

Despite the promises of a broader social base for these thinkers' ideas in the future, their public is still limited mainly to a global intellectual elite in the Muslim world. The gap between the position of these thinkers at the fringe of the religious field in the Muslim world and their emergence in the Anglophone intellectual (more specifically academic) world in Europe as authoritative voices in Islam is the object of this study. This research, in other words, shifts its attention from dynamics *within* the Muslim community to dynamics *across* communities. By focusing on mediating figures and gatekeepers between the 'Muslim world' and the European-Anglophone field, this study explores how authority is constructed across fields – beyond communities – as a result of social conditions.

### *Intellectual field*

While the scholarship agrees that the broader social structure shapes authority in knowledge, this influence, according to Bourdieu, is not direct but filtered by power dynamics specific to the particular context the actors occupy, in this case, the intellectual sphere.<sup>68</sup> Bourdieu saw individuals positioned in semi-autonomous social spaces that he called fields, ie 'a separate social universe having its laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy', and in which actors are positioned in power relations with each other.<sup>69</sup> Elaborating Bourdieu's theories, Fritz K. Ringer defined the intellectual field as 'configuration or a network of relationships' characterised by a diverse distribution of power, in which each agent is in conflict with each other for the 'right to

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<sup>68</sup> Bourdieu, 'Intellectual Field and Creative Project': 89–90.

<sup>69</sup> ———, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 162.

define or co-define what shall count as intellectually established and culturally legitimate'.<sup>70</sup> In this vision, the intellectual field is a hierarchical and conflictual space.<sup>71</sup> Hierarchical, in the sense that different positions in the power structure of the field 'are associated with different endowments of economic, social, cultural, and intellectual capital'.<sup>72</sup> Conflictual, because different thinkers and schools of thought compete for legitimacy within it. This view has been developed among sociologists of ideas, in particular.<sup>73</sup> Robert Wuthnow saw selection among competing ideologies as a crucial stage in the creation of new ideologies.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Randall Collins defined conflict within networks as the driving force behind intellectual history. In his perspective, social capital – in the form of alliances with other thinkers and the creation of cliques within the broader network – became a tool for scholars to reinforce their positions vis-à-vis competing schools of thought.<sup>75</sup> While engaging with conceptual tools formulated by these scholars such as the idea of an intellectual field, of different forms of capital, or the conversion of capital, this study expands the focus of analysis from dynamics within the single field to include power relations *across* fields (and sub-fields).

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<sup>70</sup> Fritz K. Ringer, *Toward a Social History of Knowledge: Collected Essays* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 4.

<sup>71</sup> As Swartz argued in elaborating Bourdieu's points 'Intellectuals are highly stratified in their struggle for symbolic legitimation. They are stratified by the type of cultural markets where they invest and by the type and amount of cultural capital they have been able to inherit or accumulate' David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 228.

<sup>72</sup> Robert J. Brym, 'Sociology of Intellectuals', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 279.

<sup>73</sup> Charles Camic and Neil Gross, 'The New Sociology of Ideas', in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology*, ed. Judith R. Blau (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 248.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>75</sup> Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 75, 876.

### *Forms of capital*

This study sees authority and legitimacy as dependent on individuals' hierarchical positions within both the field and the macro-structure. These positions, as Bourdieu argued, are defined by the overall value of (symbolic and material) resources available to each actor: what he called capital.<sup>76</sup> Building on Marx's canonical conception of capital (ie surplus value to be reinvested in production with an expectation of increased returns) Bourdieu included the societal and cultural aspects of social phenomena in his expanded understanding of 'capital'. Under this theoretical premise, he identified four different forms of capital: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. 1) Economic capital 'is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights'.<sup>77</sup> 2) Cultural capital, in Bourdieu's account, represented the 'symbols, ideas, tastes, and preferences that can be strategically used as resources in social action [...] a 'habitus', an embodied socialised tendency or disposition to act, think or deal in a particular way',<sup>78</sup> and it is manifested in three forms: as embodied (such as valued ideas, knowledge, language); institutional (such as institutional affiliations, university degrees); and objectified capital (actualised through cultural products such as books, articles).<sup>79</sup> 3) Social capital, is defined by Bourdieu as:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 30. ———, 'The Forms of Capital'.

<sup>77</sup> ———, 'The Forms of Capital', 47.

<sup>78</sup> John Scott and Gordon Marshall, 'Cultural Capital', in *A Dictionary of Sociology*, eds. John Scott and Gordon Marshall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 148.

<sup>79</sup> Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', 47–48.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

In other words, social capital is constituted of interpersonal networks able to provide resources and status. In this sense, social networks represent the foundation of social capital, as emphasised by a broad literature.<sup>81</sup> The concept was further developed around two main definitions: an individual's assets – emphasising the struggle embedded in personal relationships (Bourdieu, Burt, Portes); or a collective good – capital's 'bonding' elements within a community (James C. Coleman, Robert D. Putnam).<sup>82</sup> This study aligned itself with the first definition by considering the three scholars' social relations in the context of power struggles within and across fields. 4) Symbolic capital, which Bourdieu described as the authority accumulated 'through public recognition of their capital holdings and positions occupied in social hierarchies'.<sup>83</sup> Symbolic capital explicated the 'power to produce and to impose the legitimate vision of the world'.<sup>84</sup> Bourdieu identified this form of capital with prestige, recognition, honour, glory, reputation and fame.<sup>85</sup> Swartz defined it as legitimate recognition or 'publicly recognised authority'.<sup>86</sup> The accumulation of symbolic capital can be seen as the basis of legitimacy.

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<sup>81</sup> As Lin argued, 'Social networks are the foundation of social capital. Social networks simultaneously capture individuals and social structure, thus serving as vital conceptual link between actions and structural constraints, between micro-and macro-level analysis, and between relational and collective dynamic process'. Nan Lin, Karen S. Cook, and Ronald S. Burt, *Social Capital: Theory and Research* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2001), viii.

<sup>82</sup> Ronald S. Burt, *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 91; Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 119; Alejandro Portes, 'Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 6; James C. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 302; Robert D. Putnam, 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995): 11; Paul S. Adler and Kwon Seok-Woo, 'Social Capital: Prospects for a New Concept', *The Academy of Management Review* 27, no. 1 (2002): 19–20.

<sup>83</sup> David Swartz, *Symbolic Power, Politics, and Intellectuals: The Political Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 39.

<sup>84</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'Social Space and Symbolic Power', *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989): 20.

<sup>85</sup> ———, *Pascalian Meditations*, 166.

<sup>86</sup> Swartz, *Symbolic Power, Politics, and Intellectuals*, 84.

Chapter 5 explores the mechanisms through which the three thinkers' social capital contributed to their accumulation of symbolic capital.

## 1.2 Sources of legitimacy in knowledge

What is the source of legitimacy in knowledge (what Lamont and Bourdieu called 'cultural legitimacy')?<sup>87</sup> How is the belief in someone else's superior judgment created? While other scholars have engaged with the basis of political authority, this study is particularly interested in discussing authority and legitimacy within knowledge. The political sphere and knowledge represent two distinct, although strongly interconnected, fields of inquiry.<sup>88</sup> Addressing the literature on the formation of legitimacy within knowledge, Neil McLaughlin identified two main trends. What he called the ideational or content-based scholarship emphasised the power of ideas as the main factor in thinkers or works' popularity: the idea, in other words, that recognition of works is indicative of the inherent 'quality of ideas' they discuss.<sup>89</sup> This literature, McLaughlin argued, implicitly downplays the importance of sociological accounts of reputations. On the other hand, the literature on reputational models stressed the social construction of works' or thinkers' authority: this scholarship emphasised such aspects as the 'historical and cultural context, geography and national traditions, institutional arrangements and connections, or charisma, character flaws and discrimination' as crucial in the

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<sup>87</sup> The 'basis of legitimacy' has been discussed by Max Weber. His analysis, however, is more focused on the political sphere rather than legitimacy within knowledge, which is the object of this section. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 212.

<sup>88</sup> For discussions of political legitimacy see for example ———, 'The Three Types of Legitimate Rule', *Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions* 4, no. 1 (1958). Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); Dabashi, *Authority in Islam*.

<sup>89</sup> Neil McLaughlin, 'How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual: Intellectual Movements and the Rise and Fall of Erich Fromm', *Sociological Forum* 13, no. 2 (1998): 217.

development of thinkers and ideas.<sup>90</sup> The current study, positions itself in line with McLaughlin, recognising the importance of both approaches, but focusing on the latter: ‘Both the inherent quality of ideas, and more sociological models of the formation of reputations, must be taken into account when attempting to explain the recognition and renown won by particular producers of knowledge’.<sup>91</sup>

In their sociological accounts of the process of intellectual legitimization, Lamont and McLaughlin focused on the structural features of the intellectual field,<sup>92</sup> although both also emphasised the importance of context. Legitimation, Lamont argued, was not a consequence of the intrinsic values of the theories in themselves, but rather a result of ‘complex environment interplay’.<sup>93</sup> Her account came to include at least three aspects: 1) the features of a work meeting criteria dictated by both the climate of the times and, more specifically, the intellectual field;<sup>94</sup> 2) the role of institutions in creating cultural legitimacy;<sup>95</sup> and 3) the adaptation of the work to different cultural and institutional contexts.<sup>96</sup> McLaughlin elaborated Lamont’s point, identifying four main factors contributing to intellectuals’ cultural legitimacy. The first is represented by the climate of the times: ‘Changing historical, political and cultural factors largely determine the fate of intellectual contributions [...] their work fits the mood of the moment or can be seen as part of an emerging social, political or cultural consensus during a particular historical period’.<sup>97</sup> An idea, according to this model, becomes popular when it resonates with moods specific to the historical and geographical context. Second, he highlighted the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Lamont, ‘How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher’: 614; McLaughlin, ‘How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual’.

<sup>93</sup> Lamont, ‘How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher’: 614.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 591–96.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 596–99.

Ibid., 596–99.

<sup>97</sup> McLaughlin, ‘How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual’: 218.

importance of geographical proximity to significant sites of power in the production of knowledge: ‘geographic distance or proximity from powerful intellectual elites, prestigious cultural symbols, and hegemonic national tradition limit or facilitate the ability of thinkers to legitimate their thoughts’.<sup>98</sup> Third, he pointed to the significance of personal characteristics for favouring or limiting individuals’ reputations. For example, the role played by a thinker’s personality (such as charisma, relational skills, ability to market oneself), but also their identity (for instance, gender, ethnicity, class).<sup>99</sup> Finally, fourth, McLaughlin argued that institutions could play a crucial role in the promotion of thinkers and ideas through the prestige acquired through affiliations with prominent institutions; the resources they provided (and required); ‘the power of gatekeepers at top-rank book publishing presses or intellectual journals and reviews’; and ‘the role of mentors, allies, and school of thought’.<sup>100</sup>

This study’s analysis of the influence of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush is grounded on the structural aspects recognised by Lamont and McLaughlin. Indeed, it is here argued, the three thinkers’ growing prominence was influenced by a) the climate of the times: the social and political context drew interest for specific intellectual ideas and profiles (discussed in chapter 3); b) geographical proximity to major sites of power in the production of knowledge in English: their physical presence in Western Europe and North America, their engagement with prestigious institutions, and their production in English; c) their identity as ‘organic voices’ (ie Muslims from Muslim-majority countries), as academics and ‘public intellectuals’, and their engagement with topics valued in the specific historical context (such as Islam and modernity, democracy, human rights); and

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 219–20.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 219. This set of literature is identified also by Swidler and Ardit as ‘Focusing neither on large-scale forces like class or the capitalist economy, nor on influences such as the intellectual milieu or interests of individual actors, recent theoretical and empirical work has explored how authority, power, and practices within institutions shape knowledge’. In Swidler and Ardit, ‘The New Sociology of Knowledge’: 317.

finally d) that they are part of a network of institutions and individuals contributing to their importance (discussed in chapter 4).

However, this study takes a step further to investigate the more fluid process of cultural legitimation before it is crystallised within an institutional framework. It does this by exploring the role played by social capital in the interplay between these thinkers and powerful institutions for the process of their cultural legitimation. By doing so, it engages with Bourdieu's understanding of cultural legitimacy as the result of the network of relations within the intellectual field.<sup>101</sup> In this vision, individuals and groups of people cannot explain legitimacy *per se*; rather, it is the relationships among individuals and groups – ie their positions within the field – that defined their reputations.<sup>102</sup>

### 1.3 Social capital and cultural legitimation

As discussed in the previous section, the literature identified several elements shaping individuals' intellectual legitimacy. In particular, some scholars have explored the role of social relations in the process of cultural legitimation. Lamont pointed to the role of intellectual collaboration in giving access to institutions and more broadly to the creation of cultural legitimacy.<sup>103</sup> McLaughlin and Collins elaborated on the role of intellectual cliques and peers in this process. Collins' study of intellectual reputation focused on the social relationships among thinkers: the rise and fall of schools of thought, Collins argued,

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<sup>101</sup> Bourdieu, 'Intellectual Field and Creative Project': 105.

<sup>102</sup> 'What 'makes reputation' is not [...] this or that 'influential' person, this or that institution, review, magazine, academy, coterie, dealer or publisher; it is not even the whole set of what are sometimes called 'personalities of the world of arts and letters'; it is the field of production, understood as the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated'. ———, 'The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods', *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (1980): 265.

<sup>103</sup> Lamont, 'How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher'.

is linked to conflict and alliances among cliques of thinkers.<sup>104</sup> McLaughlin's study of Erich Fromm focused on the conflict internal to intellectual movements as crucial to the rise and fall of one thinker: Fromm not only challenged the intellectual orthodoxy of Marxist and Freudian intellectual circles, but he alienated the support of his peers within these same groups, by challenging their internal orthodoxy.<sup>105</sup> Looking at social capital in the creation of cultural legitimacy, therefore, can shed light on the interplay between informal and formal processes of legitimacy creation.<sup>106</sup>

Within the literature on Islam, recent years have witnessed increased attention to networks as a tool of analysis of Muslim communities.<sup>107</sup> In particular, a rising scholarship is engaging with the way social capital, in the form of networks of individuals, shapes knowledge formation. The idea of networks of intellectuals is not new – it was, for instance, implicitly recognised by Albert Hourani<sup>108</sup> – but it has gained currency in recent years. John O. Voll discussed a 'global network of Islamic scholar-activists',<sup>109</sup> İlker Evrim Binbaş explored intellectual networks in Timurid Iran,<sup>110</sup> Kathryn A. Miller analysed the creation and transmission of knowledge in Late Medieval Spain;<sup>111</sup> and

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<sup>104</sup> Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies*.

<sup>105</sup> McLaughlin, 'How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual'. See also Huebner's analysis of George Mead's students in his emergence Daniel R. Huebner, *Becoming Mead: The Social Process of Academic Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>106</sup> Outside the intellectual field, Seibert, Kraimer and Liden underlined the importance of social capital (through greater access to information, resources, and sponsorship) in career success. Scott E. Seibert, Maria L. Kraimer, and Robert C. Liden, 'A Social Capital Theory of Career Success', *The Academy of Management Journal* 44, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>107</sup> Among the examples of this trend see Peter Mandaville, *Muslim Networks and Movements in Western Europe* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2010); Stefano Allievi and Jørgen Nielsen, eds., *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>108</sup> 'There were not just one or two scattered writers, but groups interacting with each other and with those who came before and after them, so that it was possible to trace continuities of thought'. In Albert Habib Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), v.

<sup>109</sup> John O. Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 368.

<sup>110</sup> İlker Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf Al-Dīn 'alī Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>111</sup> Miller, *Guardians of Islam*, 59–80.

Brannon Ingram explored global networks of Islamic seminaries.<sup>112</sup> In their edited volume *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*, Miriam Cook and Bruce B. Lawrence stressed the ‘networked nature of Islam’ and how networks of travellers as a means of knowing are quintessential elements of Muslim civilisation.<sup>113</sup> More recently, such projects as euro-Islam.info or SSRC’s Inter-Asia program have explicitly engaged with the idea of networks of scholars working on Islam. Jan Felix Engelhardt explored the *modus operandi* of networks of scholars of Islam in Germany and the United States.<sup>114</sup> However, theoretical elaborations on the relation between these networks and the process of legitimisation are still in progress.<sup>115</sup> Most of this literature tends to focus either on the content of the debates arising within these networks of thinkers or provide studies of authority formation – or challenges to authority – within the Muslim community. Zareena Grewal’s ethnographic account explored how networks of American Muslims addressed the crisis of authority in Islam by looking at the global flow of individuals and ideas.<sup>116</sup> Dilyana Mincheva’s work tackled the issue of authority in Islam in relation to the Western Muslim public sphere.<sup>117</sup> Mandaville’s discussion of the network of ‘critical Muslims’ in Europe, which also included these thinkers, provided one of the bases for the current study.<sup>118</sup> Historical accounts, such as Miller’s *Guardians of Islam*, mapped the network of scholars and its role in the transmission of knowledge, paying less attention to the role of the networks in the process of intellectual legitimisation.<sup>119</sup> Hammer’s discussion of the

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<sup>112</sup> Ingram, ‘The Portable Madrasa’.

<sup>113</sup> Cooke and Lawrence, *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*, 1.

<sup>114</sup> Jan Felix Engelhardt, ‘On Insiderism and Muslim Epistemic Communities in the German and US Study of Islam’, *The Muslim World* 106, no. 4 (2016).

<sup>115</sup> See for example, recently published Masooda Bano, *The Revival of Islamic Rationalism: Logic, Metaphysics and Mysticism in Modern Muslim Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>116</sup> Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>117</sup> Dilyana Mincheva, *The Politics of Muslim Intellectual Discourse in the West: The Emergence of a Western-Islamic Public Sphere* (Chicago: Sussex Academic Press, 2016).

<sup>118</sup> Peter Mandaville, ‘Towards a Critical Islam.’

<sup>119</sup> Miller, *Guardians of Islam*.

development of a scholarly and activist network of Muslim women in her analysis of Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Nimat Barazangi did not elaborate on the formation of this network.<sup>120</sup> This study, therefore, contributes to the existing literature by offering a map of this network and elaborating, through a socio-historical lens, the role of social capital in the creation of legitimacy in the European-Anglophone sphere. Legitimacy, it is here argued, is shaped by the interaction between context and social capital. Historical and socio-political context (discussed in chapter 3) – what Bourdieu called macro-structure and field – created the demand for specific ideas and profiles. Social capital contributed to their selection from among the actors reflecting those ideas and profiles. The way social capital contributed first to selection and then to legitimacy (explored in chapters 4 and 5), represents the main contribution of this study. I first mapped and analysed the expansion of their social capital (chapter 4), and then investigated the mechanisms of mobilisation and conversion of their social capital into symbolic capital (chapter 5).

#### **1.4 Methodology and sources**

This study explores the role of social capital in the process of intellectual legitimization of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush. The idea of intellectuals as embedded in a network of relations does not *per se* represent a new reading. Collins described their intellectual activity as taking place in networks shaped by rivalries among intellectual cliques and master-pupil chains.<sup>121</sup> Eyal and Buchholz re-conceptualised intellectuals as an ‘epistemic community’, that is, ‘a network of professionals with recognised expertise and

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<sup>120</sup> Juliane Hammer, ‘Identity, Authority, and Activism: American Muslim Women Approach the Qur’an’, *The Muslim World* 98, no. 4 (2008).

<sup>121</sup> Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies*, 40, 65.

competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area'.<sup>122</sup> Robert J. Brym discussed intellectuals as 'embedded in social networks whose ties to various classes and other collectivities shifts'.<sup>123</sup> The concept of social capital, in particular, has gained prominence in the last decades and developed into a broad, mainly quantitative, literature.<sup>124</sup> This study, however, undertakes a socio-historical analysis of the phenomenon. It combines an analysis of historical materials, biographical sources and bibliometric data to map the network of actors (individuals and institutions) with whom the three scholars engaged; it contextualises these interactions within broader socio-political developments and discusses their impact on both the specialised and broader intellectual fields. To achieve this, the thesis engages with a diverse corpus of primary and secondary sources in English, Italian, French, German, Persian and Arabic. These sources include: 1) works by these thinkers, published in the forms of monographs, autobiographies, letters, articles in edited volumes, and published interviews; 2) secondary literature on the three thinkers: this scholarship represents the object of study of this thesis and is discussed later, rather than in an initial review of the literature; 3) archival research of periodicals: newspapers, magazines, journals; 4) reports by governments and international organisations; 5) newsletters and reports by institutions engaging with these thinkers; 6) interviews with Soroush, and with individuals close to Arkoun and Abu Zayd (colleagues, friends, relatives); 7) semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in the promotion of these thinkers (academics, journalists, policymakers, publishers); interviews were

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<sup>122</sup> Gil Eyal and Larissa Buchholz, 'From the Sociology of Intellectuals to the Sociology of Interventions', *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 128.

<sup>123</sup> Brym, 'Sociology of Intellectuals', 279.

<sup>124</sup> Particularly in the field of social network analysis 'Social network researchers have taken the lead in formalizing and empirically testing theories related to the concept of social capital'. In Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden, 'A Social Capital Theory of Career Success': 220. Elena Carrillo Álvarez and Jordi Riera Romaní, 'Measuring Social Capital: Further Insights', *Gaceta Sanitaria* 31, no. 1 (2017).

conducted in different modalities: face-to-face, via email, via Skype, and by telephone. Where possible, the content of the interviews has been cross-referenced with written documentation; 8) multimedia sources (including audio- and video-recordings of lectures by, and interviews with, the three thinkers as well as documentaries on them); 9) statistical data to explore the impact of knowledge produced in different national fields with which the three thinkers engaged. In the absence of comprehensive, publicly-available book sales data, and the three thinkers' limited presence on the two main citation analysis databases (Scopus and Web of Science) this study relies on alternative sources to explore their reception. These include Google N-gram Viewer, Open Syllabus Project by Columbia University and Scimago Journal and Country Rank.<sup>125</sup> Google N-gram Viewer has been used to trace the frequency of words and names (including the three thinkers' names) appeared in books over time. The tool allows charting the occurrence of given n-grams (single words or combinations of words) within the corpora of Google Books during a selected time frame.<sup>126</sup> Open Syllabus Project database has been used to explore the presence of these thinkers in anglophone universities' curricula.<sup>127</sup> Finally, charts produced through the SCImago's portal, based on the Scopus database, have been used

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<sup>125</sup> According to Harvard Library there is 'no reliable, publicly-available way to get comprehensive statistics for book sales at this time. The only database with reasonably accurate information is Nielsen BookScan, which reports point-of-sale data, but even that claims to represent only 75% of all retail sales'. The author was unable to get access to the database (neither University of Oxford nor Harvard University had a subscription to Nielsen BookScan). Harvard Library, 'Where Can I Find Detailed Book Sales Figures or Statistics?', Ask a Librarian, <https://ask.library.harvard.edu/faq/81944> (accessed 17 December 2018).

<sup>126</sup> The chart is restricted to books in English and based on the dataset generated in July 2012, and is limited to the corpus of books included in Google Books by 2008, this dataset (a total of 3,526,850 books) represents the most comprehensive corpus of books found by the author. The number is the result of the sum of books per year from 1960–2008 plus the sum of English books published in the US and the UK in 2009. Google, 'Google Books Ngram Viewer', <https://storage.googleapis.com/books/ngrams/books/datasetsv2.html> (accessed 18 December 2018). For the discussion of the use of Google N-gram in the scholarship see Frederick W. Gibbs and Daniel J. Cohen, 'A Conversation with Data: Prospecting Victorian Words and Ideas', *Victorian Studies* 54, no. 1 (2011); Roger Finke and Christopher D. Bader, eds., *Faithful Measures: New Methods in the Measurement of Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

<sup>127</sup> The project is based at Columbia University; although not exhaustive, it is among the most comprehensive databases of academic syllabi, with over a million college course syllabi from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada Australia and New Zealand. Open Syllabus Project, 'Open Syllabus Explorer', 2019, <http://explorer.opensyllabusproject.org> (accessed 10 January 2020).

to explore the impact of knowledge produced in different national fields the three thinkers engaged with (chapter 5).<sup>128</sup>

### *Selection of cases*

Abu Zayd, Arkoun, and Soroush are part of a network of scholars that emerged in the Muslim world particularly since the 1990s. As discussed previously, although raising among intellectual circles in the Muslim world, these thinkers did not gain religious authority within the broader Muslim community. This discrepancy between their emergence in the European intellectual (more specifically academic) field and the lack thereof in the broader Muslim religious field allows us to explore the specific mechanisms of legitimation in the European intellectual field. This is even more salient since their authority in the Anglophone field was often presented (explicitly or hinted at) as based on their leadership within the Muslim community: what was assumed as a neutral “translation” of authority, was *de facto* strongly shaped by power dynamics specific to the receiving field. Although providing intellectual frameworks to widespread sentiments within the Muslim community (particularly concerning modernity, pluralism, democracy, human rights, and gender issues) these scholars are still not perceived as legitimate in the religious realm in the broader Muslim community. Previously, this study has positioned the network of these thinkers in the broader landscape of Islamic authority; this section takes a step forward and motivates the selection of Abu Zayd, Arkoun, and Soroush within their network of thinkers in the Anglophone literature.

The choice of Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Abdolkarim Soroush as case studies in this work arose from two considerations. First, by the collection

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<sup>128</sup> SCImago, ‘World Report’, SJR–SCImago Journal & Country Rank, <http://www.scimagojr.com> (accessed 27 January 2018); ———, ‘Subject Bubble Chart’, SJR–SCImago Journal & Country Rank, 27 January 2007, <http://www.scimagojr.com>.

and comparison of monographs and edited volumes about contemporary intellectual debates within Islam published in English between 1989 and 2010. Their names were among the thinkers most often discussed in these publications. Second, the existence of significant literature linking them together despite the variety of their backgrounds: Arkoun as a leading scholar of Islamic Studies in France, Abu Zayd within the specialised intellectual field in Egypt, and Soroush as a key public intellectual in Iran. These thinkers emerged in the European and North American academic sphere in the second half of the 1990s and were often brought together or discussed by many leading scholars and institutions. Navid Kermani considered Abu Zayd's work as linked to Arkoun and Soroush's,<sup>129</sup> just as Mustapha Tlili, director of the Center for Dialogues at New York University placed the three thinkers: 'All of them were for me in the same category, that is [making] the critique of some ideas from the Islamic heritage, reconnecting with the heritage of Mu'tazila, re-opening of *ijtihad* in different ways, Arkoun being the more radical perhaps'.<sup>130</sup>

In his elaboration of the concept of Post-Islamism, Asef Bayat discussed Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush as the intellectual representatives of a social phenomenon becoming evident in various parts of the Muslim intellectual world: 'similar ideas [to Soroush's] can be found among Islamic modernists such as Muhammad Arkoun, Hasan Hanafi or even the secular Nasr Abu Zayd in Egypt'.<sup>131</sup> Along the same lines, Michel Hoebink believed that along 'with thinkers such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Mohammad Arkoun, Soroush belongs to a small group of radical reformers who advocate

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<sup>129</sup> Navid Kermani, 'From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Qur'an', in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 186.

<sup>130</sup> Mustapha Tlili, interview with the author, 4 November 2013.

<sup>131</sup> Bayat, 'The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society': 48.

a historical approach to the Koran'.<sup>132</sup> Forough Jahanbakhsh discussed Arkoun and Abu Zayd in her introduction to Soroush's work *The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience*,<sup>133</sup> and Mincheva also mentioned Soroush in her discussion of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and the Western-Islamic public sphere.<sup>134</sup> Ahmad Kazemi Mousavi analysed the reception of the three thinkers in South East Asia.<sup>135</sup> Beyond monographic and edited volumes, the three thinkers were also jointly studied in such research projects as 'Islamic and Jewish Hermeneutics as Cultural Criticism' within the Working Group Modernity and Islam:

Only in recent years do we observe a shift of paradigm. Against entirely different social and intellectual backgrounds, authors like the Algerian Mohammed Arkoun (who teaches in Paris), the Egyptian Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, or the Iranian Abdolkarim Soroush are beginning to define the function of religion anew (in certain ways quite traditionally so) by seeking to disentangle the public realm and its intellectual and social life from theological determination. Democracy, for example, is no longer to be refused as being against or to be justified as being compatible with Islam; rather, the entire realm of the state constitution is to be removed from the purview of religion.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush and Michel Hoebink, 'The Word of Mohammad: Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush', *Zem-Zem* (2007).

<sup>133</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), xxxi.

<sup>134</sup> Dilyana Mincheva, 'On the Emergence of a Western Islamic Public Sphere', *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 4, no. 3 (2014). See also by the same author ———, 'The Politics of Muslim Intellectual Discourse in the West: The Emergence of a Western-Islamic Public Sphere' (PhD diss., Trent University, 2014).

<sup>135</sup> Ahmad Karzemi Moussavi, 'The Reception of Modern Hermeneutics in Southeast Asia', in *Relations between Religions and Cultures in Southeast Asia*, eds. Donny Gahral Adian and Gadis Arivia (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2009). See also 'Authors like Arkoun, Soroush, and Abu Zayd [...] are interested in the openness of cultures and seek the revitalization of Islam through modernization of the faith', in Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy, *Dynamism in Islamic Activism: Reference Points for Democratization and Human Rights* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>136</sup> Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin 'Islamic and Jewish Hermeneutics as Cultural Criticism', <https://www.wiko-berlin.de/en/institute/projects-cooperations/projects/archive/working-group-modernity-and-islam/islamic-and-jewish-hermeneutics-as-cultural-criticism> (accessed 17 September 2019).

In other instances, scholars bracketed two of the three thinkers together. Carool Kersten discussed Arkoun and Abu Zayd as part of the ‘quartet of *turāth* thinking’.<sup>137</sup> Elizabeth Kassab defined them as ‘the most prominent among’ critical Islamic thinkers;<sup>138</sup> both Arkoun and Abu Zayd contributed to the volume *Humanism and Muslim Culture*.<sup>139</sup> Mincheva discussed Abu Zayd and Soroush as representative of ‘Intellectual reformers’.<sup>140</sup> They were mentioned by Hartung, in his critique of the term ‘Muslim intellectuals’:

The label is commonly assigned to a wide array of contemporary Muslim thinkers, like Egyptian Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010), Iranian Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945), or Swiss-Egyptian Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962), and even academics seem hardly to question whether this is an appropriate label.<sup>141</sup>

They participated in several conferences together, including a joint lecture at the University of Notre Dame in May 2009.<sup>142</sup> Finally, Arkoun and Soroush were discussed together by other academics, such as Victoria Harrison, as well as in newspaper articles:

Soroush and contemporaries – such as Tunisia's Rashid Ghannouchi, Egypt's Hassan Hanafi and Algeria's Mohammed Arkoun – are shaping what may turn out to be Islam's equivalent of the Christian

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<sup>137</sup> Together with Hassan Hanafi and Mohammad Abed al-Jabri. See Carool Kersten’s introduction in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 10.

<sup>138</sup> Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 174. See also Necmettin Gökkir, ‘Western Impact on Contemporary Qur’anic Studies: The Application of Literary Criticism’, *Usûl* 3, no. 1 (2005); Faeza Abdurazak and Retna Devi, ‘Scholars Argue the Need for ‘Critical Islam’ in the Contemporary Muslim World’, *National University of Singapore: Middle East Institute*, [www.mei.nus.edu.sg](http://www.mei.nus.edu.sg) (accessed 18 February 2014),

<sup>139</sup> Stefan Reichmuth, Jörn Rüsen and Aladdin Sarhan, eds., *Humanism and Muslim Culture: Historical Heritage and Contemporary Challenges* (Goettingen: V&R Unipress, 2012).

<sup>140</sup> Dilyana Mincheva, “‘Critical Islam’ Debating/Negotiating Modernity”, *Journal of Religion and Society* 14 (2012): 8–9.

<sup>141</sup> Jan-Peter Hartung, ‘What Makes a “Muslim Intellectual”? On the Pros and Cons of a Category’, *Middle East – Topics and Arguments* 1 (2013): 42.

<sup>142</sup> University of Notre Dame, ‘The Qur’an in Its Historical Context: Conference Overview’, <https://quranconference.nd.edu> (accessed 19 February 2019).

Reformation: a period of questioning traditional practices and beliefs and, ultimately, of upheaval.<sup>143</sup>

The three thinkers were linked together by a broad literature, despite the diversity of their thought, often as representative examples of what has been variously defined as the ‘modern’, ‘progressive’, ‘liberal’, or ‘reformist’ Muslim thinker.<sup>144</sup> Given their different approaches, scholars have questioned whether it is possible to talk about them as a coherent group and debated the terminology to categorise them.<sup>145</sup> Kamrava, for instances, noticed how categories such as ‘conservative’ and ‘reformist’ were fluid: ‘a Muslim intellectual may be an avid advocate of active and innovative *ijtihād* but continue to uphold certain Islamic values that are “traditional” and “conservative”.’<sup>146</sup> Similarly, Nelly Lahoud saw:

The classification of thinkers into discrete and specific categories is inevitably arbitrary to some degree. [...] Further, in assigning thinkers to one or other of these categories, I recognize that each encompasses individuals who may be in disagreement with one another on certain matters.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Robin Wright, ‘Islamist’s Theory of Relativity’, *Los Angeles Times*, 27 January 1995. Victoria S. Harrison, ‘Hermeneutics, Religious Language and the Qur’an’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21, no. 3 (2010).

<sup>144</sup> Other expressions used include ‘progressive’ ‘ijihadists’ and ‘critical Muslim thinkers’, see Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 150–54. And ———, ‘Trends in Contemporary Islam: A Preliminary Attempt at a Classification’, *The Muslim World* 97, no. 3 (2007): 401–03; Carool Kersten, ‘Introducing Critical Muslim Thinkers’, *Critical Muslims: Introducing Alternative Voices from the Muslim World*, 11 September 2008, <http://caroolkersten.blogspot.com>; Abdurazak and Devi, ‘Scholars Argue the Need for “Critical Islam” in the Contemporary Muslim World’; Mincheva, ‘“Critical Islam” Debating/Negotiating Modernity’.

<sup>145</sup> Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), IX; Omid Safi, ed. *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 7.

<sup>146</sup> Kamrava, *The New Voices of Islam*, 14–15. Similarly, Ramadan saw boundaries between these labels as ‘more subtle’. Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28.

<sup>147</sup> Nelly Lahoud, *Political Thought in Islam: A Study in Intellectual Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3. See also Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

Even Soroush recognised the heterogeneity of this group: ‘Reformism isn’t a homogeneous current either. It isn’t as if they think alike from start to finish’,<sup>148</sup> but he saw such heterogeneity as an asset and intrinsic to the nature of the intellectual work:

We don’t expect everyone to have a uniform view of religious intellectuals. The intellectual current can’t be cohesive, uniform and homogeneous anyway. By its very nature, intellectual work is varied and heterogeneous, because intellectuals don’t take orders from anyone and don’t adjust their thinking to any uniform criterion. They follow reasons and argumentation. So, they can think differently and come to different conclusions, which is not to say that all the different conclusions are necessarily right. In other words, religious intellectualism is not a party, with a leader whom everyone obeys. Religious intellectuals are not a congregation of parrots; they’re a congregation of bees, in both senses: they produce honey and they sting. And they don’t have a queen. So, you hear and see a variety of views from religious intellectuals. But this congregation of bees constitutes society’s honey peddlers and they will rein in the vinegar peddlers.<sup>149</sup>

Even the terminology used to refer to these thinkers has come under scrutiny. The ideological heritage of certain words must be evaluated within particular socio-political climates.<sup>150</sup> For example, the term ‘modernist’ – used by Amir-Moezzi and John Esposito – did not take into account that these thinkers often opposed modernist ideologies (though generally not modernity *per se*).<sup>151</sup> While using the term ‘liberal’ (following Albert Hourani and Asaf Ali Asghar Fyzee), Charles Kurzman admitted the negative connotations the word has in parts of the Islamic world for its associations with the colonial past, hostility towards Islam and unrestrained capitalism.<sup>152</sup> Omid Safi deemed

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<sup>148</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, Bizhan Mumivand and Hossein Sokhanvar, ‘A Congregation of Bees, Not a Congregation of Parrots: Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush’, *E’temad*, 16 April 2009.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Voelker warned ‘these labels must be viewed critically’. Katharina Völker, ‘Qu’ran and Reform: Rahman, Arkoun, Abu Zayd’ (PhD diss., University of Otago, 2012), 1. Kurzman’s words ‘just what to call this tradition presents a bit of a problem’. In Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*, 4.

<sup>151</sup> Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, ‘Esegesi Contemporanea’, in *Dizionario del Corano*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (Milano: Mondadori, 2007). Esposito, ed. *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, 17–22.

<sup>152</sup> Lahoud, *Political Thought in Islam*, 22; Pankaj Mishra, ‘Islamism: How Should Western Intellectuals Respond to Muslim Scholars?’, *New Yorker*, 31 May 2010.

‘reformist’ (used by Mehran Kamrava and Shireen Hunter, but also by Abu Zayd and Soroush) problematic, as it has artificially forced Islam’s trajectory into the historical and cultural path of the Christian reformation. Safi resisted an implied break from the past that these thinkers did not necessarily embrace.<sup>153</sup> Adopting ‘progressive’ instead, Safi also acknowledged its limitations, often connoting a ‘unilateral march towards post-Enlightenment, rational, male, Euro-American civilisation’.<sup>154</sup> Mandaville elaborated the concept of ‘progressive’ Islam as a ‘polysemic notion’ whose nuances differed according to diverse socio-political contexts.<sup>155</sup> To use Kurzman’s words, the scholarship’s choice of terms reflected more of ‘a heuristic devise’ than a ‘hard-and-fast category’.<sup>156</sup>

Indeed, some scholars have pointed out how specific language, when used about these individuals, often imposed categories that did not reflect their self-perceptions (as with Arkoun, see *infra* chapter 2, page 92). Katharina Völker observed how categorisation of these individuals seemed to be more ‘the concern of outward observer [...] for the sake of conversation about the general topic of contemporary Islam’, than for the thinkers themselves.<sup>157</sup> Charles Kurzman pointedly noted that the authors in his anthology on liberal Islam did ‘not necessarily self-identify as liberals’.<sup>158</sup> Such designations must be taken as conventional rather than normative when used in the process of production and

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<sup>153</sup> Safi, ed. *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, 15–16. Soroush was asked during an interview ‘You are sometimes described as Islam’s Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century Christian reformer. Are you?’ to which he replied ‘I do not think I am. My main job is to offer an alternative to the totalitarian view of Islam’. In Ehsan Masood, ‘Come the Revolution: Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush’, *New Scientist* 179, no. 2408 (2003).

<sup>154</sup> Safi, ed. *Progressive Muslims*, 15–18.

<sup>155</sup> Mandaville, ‘Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge’: 106.

<sup>156</sup> Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*, 4.

<sup>157</sup> Both the scholarship and these thinkers themselves have warned against an over-emphasis on the terminological dispute, at the expenses of the project it entails. For Soroush it ‘deflects attention from the real debate and real issues’. Völker, ‘Quran and Reform’, 1.

<sup>158</sup> Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*, 4.

communication of knowledge.<sup>159</sup> While recognising the value of terms and categories as epistemic tools, this study attends to their fluidity as fields of contestation.

## 1.5 Introducing the three thinkers

### *Mohammed Arkoun*

Mohammed Arkoun was born in 1928 in the Berber village of Taurit Mimoun, Algeria. Despite a modest background, thanks to an uncle he was sent to a French school, the Collège des Pères Blancs of Aid Larba at Ath Yenni.<sup>160</sup> This education provided him with the linguistic and cultural tools to access the francophone intellectual field in his later life. He studied Arabic language and literature on a scholarship at the University of Algiers, obtained his bachelor's degree with a thesis on 'The reformist aspect of Taha Hussein's work'.<sup>161</sup> With the outbreak of the 1954 Algerian war, Arkoun moved to Paris where he enrolled first in the *agrégation d'arabe* – graduating in 1956 – then completed a PhD in philosophy at the Sorbonne Université in 1969. His Parisian residency represented a crucial phase for Arkoun's intellectual formation. As he recalled, he ended up in the middle of a fervid intellectual debate which involved Sartre, Derrida, Bourdieu, Foucault and the scholars around the Annales school.<sup>162</sup> He also entered the orientalist circles gravitating around the important journals *Arabica* and *Studia Islamica* along with Louis Massignon, Jacques Brunschwig and Claude Cahen.<sup>163</sup> After teaching at several

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<sup>159</sup> Kurzman, echoed Fyze in claiming the necessity to move beyond nomenclature. Asaf Fyze, 'The Reinterpretation of Islam', in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, eds. John Donohue and John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*, 4. See also Soroush, Mumivand and Sokhanvar, 'A Congregation of Bees'.

<sup>160</sup> The double sense of marginalization rooted in his being a Berber in an Arab majority country, and an Arab in France had an important role in shaping his thought and intellectual trajectory.

<sup>161</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *La Construction Humaine De L' Islam* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2012).

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

universities, in 1972 he finally obtained a professorship at Université Paris 8 (Vincennes-Saint-Denis) and Université Paris 3 (Sorbonne Nouvelle), where he taught until 1992.<sup>164</sup> The affiliation with Sorbonne Nouvelle, where he became director of the Department of the History of Islamic Thought, and his position as editor of *Arabica*, provided the institutional legitimacy and prestige that bolstered his intellectual authority.<sup>165</sup> The 1970s marked Arkoun's emergence as a leading Islamologist.<sup>166</sup> In the 1990s his work attracted attention at the international level, but particularly in the francophone public sphere.<sup>167</sup> His public engagement in France culminated in 1998 when President Jacques Chirac nominated him to the Commission Stasi (to study the application of the principle of *laïcité* in France).<sup>168</sup> On the global scene, he worked with high-profile international organisations: he developed a regular collaboration with UNESCO, participated in the European Commission's 2002 Symposium on Intercultural Dialogue, and presented at the sixty-first United Nations General Assembly in 2006. His visiting professorships at universities around the world, including University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), the University of Amsterdam, New York University, Princeton University and Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, expanded his intellectual authority far beyond the francophone world. In particular, his collaboration with the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London – following his 1992 retirement from Sorbonne Nouvelle – provided an institutional base for his visibility in the European-Anglophone world.<sup>169</sup> Arkoun's accomplishments were recognised by awards both within academia, such as the Giorgio

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<sup>164</sup> Brisson, 'Leading Arab Intellectuals in the West', 65.

<sup>165</sup> Abdou Filali-Ansary and Aziz Esmail, eds., *The Construction of Belief: Reflections on the Thought of Mohammed Arkoun* (London: Saqi, 2012), 7.

<sup>166</sup> Brisson, 'Leading Arab Intellectuals in the West', 165–66.

<sup>167</sup> Ursula Günther, 'Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought', in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 136.

<sup>168</sup> Jean-Louis Debré, *Rapport Fait au Nom de la Mission d'Information Sur la Question du Port des Signes Religieux à l'École* (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, 2003).

<sup>169</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, 'Lettre De Mohammed Arkoun À Maurice Borromans, 30 Avril 1991', in *Les Vies de Mohammed Arkoun*, ed. Sylvie Arkoun (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014), 258.

Levi Della Vida Award in 2002, the Ibn Rushd Prize in 2003, and the Gifford Lecture in 2001; and outside of it, such as Officer of the French Légion d'Honneur in 1996 and the 2011 round table on the 'Relevance of Mohammed Arkoun's Thought' organised by UNESCO.<sup>170</sup>

His extensive production, and the variety of subjects he addressed, make any overview of Arkoun's work deficient by definition.<sup>171</sup> Central to his project was an effort to create a form of Islamic studies capable of addressing contemporary issues:<sup>172</sup> 'My intention is to combine a critical review of modern studies devoted to early and contemporary periods of what is generally called "Islam", with the systematic deconstruction of the original texts used in these studies as sources of genuine information'.<sup>173</sup> Both the classical understanding of *ijtihad* and the orientalist's historico-philological tradition, according to Arkoun, had failed to address contemporary issues, leaving space for the rise of militant Islamists and the dominance of political scientists in the study of Islam.<sup>174</sup> In an attempt to introduce modern critical analysis into an Islamic framework, he rethought both the objectives and the methodology of the study of Islam. First, he suggested re-examining those parts of Islamic thought that have been presented as unquestionable dogma by Islamic orthodoxy, such as the nature of the Qu'ran, individualism, and the rule of law.<sup>175</sup> Second, he developed a multidisciplinary approach

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<sup>170</sup> UNESCO, 'Relevance of Mohammed Arkoun's Thought', UNESCO World Philosophy Day, 17 November 2011, [http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/SHS/pdf/Programme\\_Mohammed-Arkoun\\_PhilDay\\_2011.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/SHS/pdf/Programme_Mohammed-Arkoun_PhilDay_2011.pdf).

<sup>171</sup> This was recognised by several scholars working on his thought. See Günther, 'Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought', 126; Rachid Benzine, *I Nuovi Pensatori dell' Islam* (Corsico: Pisani, 2004), 97; Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 178.

<sup>172</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, 'Rethinking Islam Today', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588, no. 1 (2003); Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 85.

<sup>173</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi, 2002), 9.

<sup>174</sup> Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 84.

<sup>175</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 12–13, 398–34.

to the study of Muslim cultures and societies through the introduction of history, anthropology, linguistics, hermeneutics, semiotics and discourse analysis, *inter alia*, to investigate the mechanisms of meaning production in different Abrahamic societies.<sup>176</sup> Ursula Gunther saw Arkoun's 'modern critical analysis of the structure of Islamic reason', as the starting point of his thought: ie a form of reason that 'accepts to function within religious postulates' taking them as an 'unchallenged given'.<sup>177</sup> Moving beyond the practice of classical *ijtihād* as practised by Muslims, and classical Islamology of the European orientalist tradition, Arkoun engaged with historical semiotics and socio-linguistics to expose different interpretations of the Qu'ran. His exegesis showed how the selection and canonisation of orthodox interpretation had taken place.<sup>178</sup> Islamic orthodoxy, Arkoun argued, has been the result of the selection and canonisation of specific interpretations over others.<sup>179</sup> In his deconstruction of orthodoxy, he distinguished between 'Qur'anic fact' and 'Islamic fact', seeing the emergence of Islamic reason as linked to the transition from the first to the second: the 'Qur'anic fact' corresponded to God's appeal to human consciousness during the lifetime of Muhammad and 'addressed the existential conditions of a belief in the one God'.<sup>180</sup> It was historically bounded, meaning that it reflected the language, socio-economic and political realities of the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula, and ended with the death of Mohammad; as such, it is no longer accessible.<sup>181</sup> The process of collection and canonisation of the 'official closed corpus' (the *Muṣaḥḥaf*) followed the death of the prophet in 632 CE and signalled the

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 156–63. Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 85.

<sup>177</sup> Günther, 'Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought', 132.

<sup>178</sup> Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 86.

<sup>179</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 155, 249.

<sup>180</sup> Ursula Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker Der Islamischen Vernunft* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2004), 269. [Translation my own]

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

beginning of Islamic fact.<sup>182</sup> In other words, a ‘shift from the oral discourse’ (speech) to the official closed corpus (text).<sup>183</sup>

This ‘dogmatic enclosure’, with the closing of the *bāb al-ijtihād* around the tenth century, was meant to guarantee consistency and coherence within Islamic discourse. It was also intended to allow ‘group members to share the same framework of perception and expression’,<sup>184</sup> but it marked the beginning of orthodoxy in Islam as an ‘official religion’.<sup>185</sup> Orthodoxy evolved through a process of selection and the elimination of discontinuities within Islam (ie names, authors, ideas, schools of thought). This historical and ideological selection process created a *de facto* ‘system of values’ meant to secure and preserve power.<sup>186</sup> The creation of orthodoxy was, in Arkoun’s account, strictly linked to the formation of what he called the ‘thinkable’ and ‘unthinkable’ in Islamic thought: subjects such as revelation, the nature of the Qu’ran, secularism, and civil society were eliminated and became part of the ‘unthought’ and ‘unthinkable’:<sup>187</sup>

The unthought is made up of the accumulated issues declared unthinkable in a given logosphere. A logosphere is the linguistic mental space shared by all those who use the same language with which to articulate their thoughts, their representations, their collective memory and their knowledge according to the fundamental principles and values claimed as unifying *weltanschauung*.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 57, 61–62. Günther, ‘Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought’, 148.

<sup>183</sup> Yusuf Rahman, ‘The Hermeneutical Theory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Analytical Study of His Method of Interpreting the Qur’an’ (PhD diss., McGill University, 2001), 177.

<sup>184</sup> Günther, ‘Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought’, 133.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 132, 48.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>187</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 13, 15–23. Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 84.

<sup>188</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 12.

In this context, Arkoun's critique of Islamic reason entailed the deconstruction of the official religion, along with the reconstruction (through what he called 'applied Islamology') of an 'exhaustive tradition' that included both orthodoxy and heterodoxy.<sup>189</sup>

Applied Islamology insists on the need to practice a progressive-regressive method, combining the long-term historical perspective with the short-term perspective, because all of the contemporary discourse emerging in Islamic context, inevitably refers to the emerging period of Islam, and the 'Golden Age of' its civilization used as mythological references to reactivate 'values' – ethical and legal paradigms – which need to be reassessed according to what I call a 'critique of Islamic reason'.<sup>190</sup>

Arkoun's response to the traditional philological and historical biases of Islamic Studies was meant to create a 'disciplinary space between [the] political and historical sciences'.<sup>191</sup> His work on Islam represented part of a broader project to situate the study of revelation within the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, Arkoun criticised anthropology and sociology for addressing religion's rituals, and its conceptions of the sacred, but neglecting the study of revelation – thus leaving it to the monopoly of theology, which had transformed historical, societal and cultural events into transcendental truth.<sup>192</sup> Islam, in this account, represented a specific expression of a broader religious phenomenon.<sup>193</sup> He claimed that the Societies of the Book (Islam, Christianity and Judaism), used different modalities to tackle similar issues, such as the 'relation between the sacred text and its earthly manifestations through the religious imaginary', or the 'search for salvation through obedience of God's will'.<sup>194</sup> Engaging

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<sup>189</sup> Günther, 'Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought', 130.

<sup>190</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 10–11.

<sup>191</sup> ———, 'The Answers of Applied Islamology', *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 25.

<sup>192</sup> Benzine, *I Nuovi Pensatori Dell' Islam*, 117–18.

<sup>193</sup> Günther, 'Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought', 143.

<sup>194</sup> Benzine, *I Nuovi Pensatori Dell' Islam*, 118. [Translation my own]

with religious phenomena in this broader sense enabled Arkoun's ground-breaking comparative approach to the three monotheistic religions.<sup>195</sup>

*Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd*

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was born in Qahafa, a village near Cairo, in 1943. As he recounted in his autobiography, his modest background – and the responsibilities he faced as the eldest son after his father's death – shaped his understanding of Islam. Through a process of 'caring and providing for his family', he became sensitive towards human suffering and social justice, a reality that also informed his approach to the study of Islam.<sup>196</sup> He studied Arabic and history at Cairo University and graduated with honours in 1972. After obtaining his master's degree, he was able to spend a year at the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania thanks to a fellowship from the Ford Foundation.<sup>197</sup> In this formative year, he expanded his knowledge of hermeneutics, anthropology and sociology.<sup>198</sup> Once back at Cairo University, he obtained a PhD in Islamic philosophy and started his academic career at the university's Department of Arabic Language and Literature, beginning as an assistant professor in 1982 and then as an associate professor in 1987. In 1992, during the review for his promotion to a full professorship, a member of the academic committee accused him of apostasy. The case, brought from academia to *shari'a* court, drew international attention. The court's guilty verdict on his apostasy – and its concomitant annulment of his marriage – effectively forced him into exile. He moved to the Netherlands in 1995, where he occupied various academic positions, first as a visiting professor and then as Cleveringa Honorary Chair in Law, Responsibility,

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<sup>195</sup> Günther, 'Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought', 147.

<sup>196</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Esther Ruth Nelson, *Voice of an Exile: Reflections on Islam* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 26.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 95, 101.

Freedom of Religion and Conscience (2000–2001) at University of Leiden, and finally as Ibn Rushd (Averroës) Chair of Islam and Humanism at the Universiteit voor Humanistiek in Utrecht from 2004 until his death in 2010.<sup>199</sup>

Abu Zayd introduced modern linguistics and hermeneutics into his analysis of the sacred sources.<sup>200</sup> Like Arkoun, he approached the study of Islam through a synthesis of traditional Islamic theology and modern theories from the humanities and social sciences. In pursuing what he saw as the traditional role of the jurists – ie disclosing the meaning of the Qu’ran and re-encoding it according to the specific historical context – he engaged with traditional exegetical tools that distinguish between ambiguous (*mutashābih*) and clear (*muḥkam*) verses, and historical or universal verses in the Qu’ran.<sup>201</sup> The divergences among theologians, Abu Zayd claimed, lay not on the theoretical distinction between these categories but in the actual implementation of these distinctions: how verses were assigned to a specific category. The novelty of his approach to this debate consisted of the methodology he used to make such distinctions. Viewing the Qu’ran *qua* text, he suggested a textual analysis of the sacred source: ie the ‘[c]ontextualization of the Quranic stipulation [through historical criticism] and examination of its linguistic and stylistic structure – as discourse [through hermeneutics]’.<sup>202</sup> As a cultural production, the Qu’ran re-articulated pre-Islamic culture and concepts ‘via the specific language structure’, becoming ‘the producer of a new culture’.<sup>203</sup> To understand the Qu’ran he saw it as imperative to take into account the historical, social, cultural and human dimensions

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<sup>199</sup> Katharina Völker, ‘Nasr Abu Zayd’s Philosophy on Islam and Education’, in *International Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Paul Smeyers (New York: Springer, 2018), 18.

<sup>200</sup> Kermani, ‘From Revelation to Interpretation’, 187.

<sup>201</sup> Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 93–94. ———, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, 118. Kermani, ‘From Revelation to Interpretation’, 172.

<sup>202</sup> Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 95–96.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

preceding and surrounding the text.<sup>204</sup> The human dimension, in particular, ‘is present in the process of canonization’: ‘namely, the early rearrangements and later application of signs of vocalization to the consonantal script’.<sup>205</sup>

Abu Zayd saw the Qu’ran as ‘a space of Divine and Human communication’ characterised by a vertical dimension (*wahy* in Arabic) between God and Muhammad, and a horizontal dimension ‘embedded in the structure of the Quran and which was manifest during the actual process of communication’. The latter’s realisation becomes ‘feasible’ only through the shift of our conceptual framework from Qu’ran as ‘text’ to ‘discourse’.<sup>206</sup> His *Reformation of Islamic Thought* also addressed the relationship between the Qu’ran and politics.<sup>207</sup> He challenged the idea that Islam is intrinsically hostile to democracy, progress or modernity: the political principles in the Qu’ran – such as the concept of consultation, or *shūrā* – are, in his view, descriptive rather than normative.<sup>208</sup> He claimed the *shari‘a* was a man-made production of jurists’ statements based mainly on *sunna*, *ijmā‘* and *ijtihād* and only partly on the Qu’ran.<sup>209</sup> By Abu Zayd’s lights, therefore, the contemporary social and political stagnation of Muslim societies was not due to the immutable nature of the Qu’ran, but rather to the modes of thinking in contemporary Muslim societies.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> ———, ‘The Qur’an: God and Man in Communication’, Inaugural lecture for the Cleveringa Chair at Leiden University, Leiden, 27 November 2000, 1–6, [http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/forum/01\\_1/onderzoek/lecture.pdf](http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/forum/01_1/onderzoek/lecture.pdf) (accessed 12 February 2020).

<sup>205</sup> ———, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 98.

<sup>206</sup> ———, ‘The Qur’an: God and Man in Communication’, 1; ———, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 97.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 96–97.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>209</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 89–90; Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 99.

<sup>210</sup> ———, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 96.

### *Abdolkarim Soroush*

Abdolkarim Soroush was born Hosein Haj Farajollah Dabbagh in Tehran, Iran to a lower-middle-class family in 1945. He attended the newly established Alavi High School, which combined Islamic Studies with scientific disciplines.<sup>211</sup> The school had an important role in shaping his mindset as well as his decision to study in the United Kingdom in 1973 (after earning his bachelor's degree in pharmacology from Tehran University).<sup>212</sup> He obtained a master's in Analytical Chemistry at the University of London, followed by a specialisation in History and Philosophy of Science at Chelsea College, London.<sup>213</sup> During this period (which preceded the Iranian Revolution) he became particularly active with the Iranian student movement, giving speeches later disseminated as pamphlets and publications.<sup>214</sup> In the aftermath of the revolution, he returned to Iran, lecturing as director of the Islamic Culture Group at Tehran's Teacher Training College.<sup>215</sup> In 1980 he was nominated by Khomeini to the Cultural Revolution Committee established to align university curricula with Islamic doctrine. Although this was 'the only official appointment he has ever held within the ruling system in Iran'<sup>216</sup> and despite his resignation due to internal disagreements, this remains the role for which he is most often criticised. During the 1980s but particularly in the 1990s, Soroush became increasingly critical of the regime, a position that emerged in his articles for *Kian*, the periodical he co-founded.<sup>217</sup> The publication became the forum of the nascent *rowshanfekran-e dini*

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<sup>211</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Intellectual Autobiography: An Interview', in *Reason Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, eds. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.; Mehran Kamiyab, 'Abdolkarim Soroush: Ma' refat va modara', BBC Persian, 28 May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmdatUq188>. (accessed 18 March 2019).

<sup>213</sup> Soroush, 'Intellectual Autobiography: An Interview', 8–9.

<sup>214</sup> Among them ———, *Tazad-e dialektiki* (Tehran: Hekmat, 1979). ———, *Nahad-e na aram-e jahan* (Tehran: Serat, 1999).

<sup>215</sup> Soroush, 'Intellectual Autobiography: An Interview', 11. Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran, 1953–2000: From Bazargan to Soroush* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 144.

<sup>216</sup> ———, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism*, 145.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 180–81.

(Religious intellectuals) movement in Iran, an intellectual and social phenomenon that led to the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, with Soroush among its leading figures.<sup>218</sup> While Soroush enjoyed broader public outreach in his country than Arkoun and Abu Zayd did in theirs, internal political pressure – including attacks on his lectures by the paramilitary group Ansar-e Hezbollah – forced him to leave the country several times, and permanently in 2009.<sup>219</sup> Unlike Arkoun and Abu Zayd, outside of Iran Soroush held mainly visiting professorships at universities in Europe and North America. These included prestigious institutions such as Harvard University (2000–01), Princeton University (2002–03) and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (2003–2005). While a visiting fellow at the International Institute for the Study of Islam (ISIM) in Leiden (2006–07), he developed a friendship and intellectual collaboration with Abu Zayd.<sup>220</sup> His intellectual authority was recognised by his inclusion in *Time* magazine’s 2005 roster of the world’s 100 most influential people and among *Foreign Policy*’s top 100 global thinkers in 2005, 2008, 2009 and 2010.<sup>221</sup>

Soroush developed an epistemological perspective on the study of Islam, introducing the distinction between religion (*din*) as immutable and divine – and religious knowledge (*ma’refat-e dini*), a ‘human endeavour’, that was ‘constantly changing’.<sup>222</sup> He distanced himself from previous revivalists’ attempts to reform Islam *per se*, including thinkers such as Mohammad Iqbal, Mohammad Abdoh, Rashid Reza, Ali Shariati and Ruhallah Khomeni; contrary to these predecessors, he saw not Islam, itself, as needing

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Kathy Evans, ‘A Questioning Approach to Islam Puts Maverick Professor in Limelight’, *Guardian*, 6 June 1996.

<sup>220</sup> Soroush, Mumivand and Sokhanvar, ‘A Congregation of Bees’.

<sup>221</sup> Scott Macleod, ‘Abdolkarim Soroush’, *Time*, 18 April 2005; Foreign Policy, ‘Introducing Foreign Policy’s 100 Top Global Thinkers’, *Foreign Policy*, no. 176 (2009); Foreign Policy, ‘The World’s Top 20 Public Intellectuals’, *Foreign Policy*, no. 167 (2008).

<sup>222</sup> Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism*, 148.

reformation, but humans' understanding of Islam.<sup>223</sup> His theory of the 'contraction and expansion of religious knowledge' was an attempt to overcome previous thinkers' neglect of epistemology.<sup>224</sup> This theory elaborated three main points: first, an intertwined and mutual influence between the understanding of religions and other fields of human knowledge; second, that any contraction or expansion within other areas of human knowledge is also reflected in our understanding of religion; and, finally, that human knowledge is undergoing a constant evolution and these shifts are reflected in humans' understanding of religion throughout history.<sup>225</sup> Soroush thus challenged the monopoly of any group, including the clergy, over the interpretation of religion.

This pluralistic vision also informed his definition of 'religious government', which he rooted in an understanding of religion based on faith (*imān*) rather than jurisprudence (*fiqh*). A religious government, he argued, 'can be an appropriate reflection of a religious society':<sup>226</sup> a society where individuals freely embrace faith. A religious state, however, should reflect both the religious and non-religious values of its community: it 'provides [a] just, free, and materially prosperous livelihood' for its citizens while creating 'the environment' and tools 'for the faithful to practise faith freely' and be respected.<sup>227</sup> According to Soroush, though the values of the state – ie its final aims – incorporate the religious dimension of society, the tools to achieve these goals are positioned outside the religious realm. The debate over the nature of the state and methods of government belongs, in his understanding, not to the theological or jurisprudential

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<sup>223</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Islamic Revival and Reform: Theological Approaches', in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, eds. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Hossein Kamali, 'The Theory of Expansion and Contraction of Religion a Research Program for Islamic Revivalism (an Iranian Perspective)', Abdolkarim Soroush Website, February 1995, [https://www.dr.soroush.com/English/On\\_DrSoroush/E-CMO-19950200-1.html](https://www.dr.soroush.com/English/On_DrSoroush/E-CMO-19950200-1.html).

<sup>226</sup> Soroush, 'The Idea of Democratic Religious Government', 126.

<sup>227</sup> Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism*, 161; Soroush, 'Tolerance and Governance', 146.

domains, but the rational and scientific fields of political philosophy, economy and sociology.<sup>228</sup> A religious democratic government should rely on the collective reason of the majority, rather than on the dictates of an elite group (including the clergy); it should give primacy to justice, freedom, human rights and rationality.<sup>229</sup> All these elements, he argued, derive from outside religion: ‘It is reason that defines truth, justice, public interest, and humanity; that attributes these properties to a particular religion’.<sup>230</sup> This same vision is reflected in Soroush’s understanding of the relation between Islam and democracy. Rather than relying on Qu’ranic verses and *hadiths*, he claims that ‘the discourse on religious government should commence with a discussion of human rights, justice and restriction of power (all extra-religious issues). Only then should one try to harmonise one’s religious understanding with them’.<sup>231</sup>

## 1.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the theoretical and methodological framework for the present study. It positioned the current work within the existing literature and introduced the three thinkers while explaining the modalities of their selection. As this chapter details, this study owes a three-fold debt to Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical work. First, an affinity with themes he investigated: processes of cultural legitimation, the circulation of ideas, and power struggles within intellectual fields and academia. Second, concepts such as cultural and social capital have dialogical merit: stimulating debate between materialistic and idealistic analyses of socio-historical phenomena. Material and

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<sup>228</sup> Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism*, 156; Soroush, ‘Tolerance and Governance’, 131.

<sup>229</sup> Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism*, 150, 55, 56, 61.

<sup>230</sup> Soroush, ‘The Idea of Democratic Religious Government’, 127.

<sup>231</sup> ———, ‘Tolerance and Governance’, 132.

symbolic resources assume the value assigned to them in specific settings (fields). For instance, an in-depth knowledge of theological debates within Islamic seminaries, although valuable for an *‘ālim* in Qum or Al-Azhar (constituting cultural capital in those settings) does not necessarily constitute cultural capital within European-Anglophone academia and vice versa. This is a particularly valuable perspective, given this study’s focus on transition and translation of legitimacy across contexts. Third, by exploring the germinal phase of Islamic intellectual debates in ‘Europe’ or ‘the West’, this study investigates an historical period in which authority and legitimacy had not yet been crystallised in institutional frameworks. Thus, Bourdieu’s theoretical tools provide a framework to analyse still-fluid power dynamics. While engaging with Bourdieu’s work, however, the study does not subscribe to a specifically Bourdieusian analysis but engages with a broad literature from both the sociology of knowledge and Islamic studies, as will be evident throughout. Ensuing chapters elaborate on the central question of the role Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush’s social capital played in their emergence in the European-Anglophone literature. Chapter 2 explores how they fulfilled the demand for specific profiles and ideas, unpacking two categories used to define the three thinkers: ‘Muslim’ and ‘intellectual’, chapter 3 provides the historical and political context in which these thinkers’ network was positioned, and chapter 4 explores the geographical and typological expansion of their network and the modalities through which it framed the selection and transmission of knowledge. Finally, chapter 5 analyses how the conversion of their social capital into symbolic capital ultimately shaped their legitimacy.

## Chapter 2

### Content and profiles: Islamic and intellectual dimensions

As in the previous chapter, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush gradually took on a collective identity in the literature on contemporary Muslim thought in the European-Anglophone world. While this study explores the social mechanisms leading to their emergence, with particular focus on their social networks, this chapter will engage with their thought as well as their perceived, and self-perceived, identity. Moreover, arguing for the importance of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's social capital for the formation of their legitimacy does not imply questioning the significance of their intellectual work. As theorised by Lamont and McLaughlin, their ideas and profiles also attracted interest because they resonated with the historical and political mood of the time.<sup>1</sup> The content of their work represented valued cultural capital in the context of increasing interest in Islam. This can be seen, for instance, in their engagement with specific themes: Islam's interaction with issues of modernity, democracy and the 'West'; as well as their approach to those themes through a synthesis of traditional Islamic theology and theories from the social sciences and humanities. At the same time, their identity as Muslims of Middle Eastern or North African origins living in the West seemed to legitimise their role as organic voices from the Muslim world. Finally, their position as thinkers set between academia and the public sphere provided them with both the prestige of university affiliation and the legitimacy of grassroots public intellectuals. Before analysing the socio-political structures and social mechanisms underpinning the rise of these three figures, this chapter will explore how the content of their work and their profiles satisfied recent discourses within the

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<sup>1</sup> Lamont, 'How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher'; McLaughlin, 'How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual'.

anglophone literature. This will underline the tension between their self-perception, on one side, and the essentialising categorisations projected upon them, on the other.

## **2.1 In-betweenness and the hybrid dimension**

An overview of the three thinkers' works, and positions in the social landscape, reveals them as individuals located in a hybrid dimension between different fields. In the last decades, an increasing number of studies have shown interest in the role of mediating figures set across different social structures.<sup>2</sup> This trend was echoed by Bauman's understanding of intellectuals in post-modern societies. While modern intellectuals, he argued, had the role of 'legislators' expected to assess opinions existing in society and chose the 'best social order', their actual legitimacy in post-modern society came from their role as 'interpreters' across communities.<sup>3</sup> Although Bauman's definition of intellectuals appeared prescriptive rather than descriptive in nature, it reflected a broader interest for thinkers set in between different communities. The rise in frequency of the term 'Muslim intellectuals' – at the same time use of the word 'intellectuals' declined – is indicative of a crisis of intellectual authority within the European-Anglophone community and a renewed interest in intellectuals as interpreters across groups (see diagrams 1 and 2):

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<sup>2</sup> Within sociology see for instance Mark S. Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78 no. 6 (1973). Also Burt, *Structural Holes*.

<sup>3</sup> Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*. See also Thomas Osborne, 'On Mediators: Intellectuals and the Ideas Trade in the Knowledge Society', *Economy and Society* 33, no. 4 (2004).



**FIGURE 1. Frequency of the phrase ‘Muslim intellectuals’ in the English literature between 1970 and 2008.** The chart was created using Google Books Ngram Viewer based on the Google English Books database. Axis y shows the percentage occurrence of the phrase, compared to the n-grams (ie a single word or combination of words) over the selected time frame represented by the x-axis.<sup>4</sup>

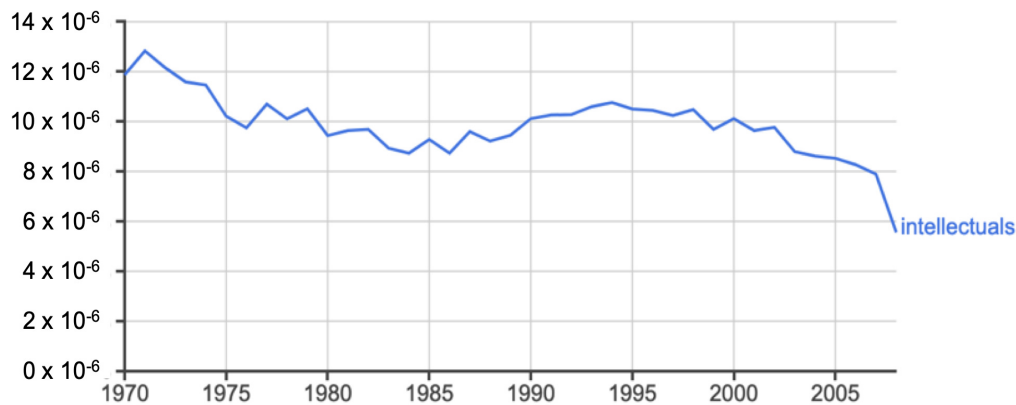


**FIGURE 2. Frequency of the phrase ‘intellectuals’ in the English literature between 1970 and 2008.**<sup>5</sup> Although at two different scales, the comparison of these two diagrams evidences the simultaneous increase in interest in ‘Muslim intellectuals’ and declining usage of ‘intellectuals’.

Both the content of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush’s work and their collective identity reflected this increased attention to mediating figures across different cultural spheres. While these thinkers’ authority within their community was frequently challenged, in the European-Anglophone context, they were accepted as both interpreters of, and

<sup>4</sup> Google Books Ngram Viewer is a tool that allows charting the occurrence of given n-grams (ie single word or combination of words) in a selected time frame within the corpora of Google Books. For a broader discussion see the methodology section in chapter 1. Google, ‘Google Books Ngram Viewer’, <https://storage.googleapis.com/books/ngrams/books/datasetv2.html> (accessed 18 December 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Google, ‘Google Books Ngram Viewer’, <https://storage.googleapis.com/books/ngrams/books/datasetv2.html> (accessed 18 December 2018).

representatives for, the Muslim world. This attention to their in-betweenness as actors interpreting and contextualising across different spheres was pointed out by several scholars engaged with their work. Kersten examined these thinkers as working ‘in the interstices between and betwixt cultures and academic traditions, or what Homi Bhabha called the “third space”.’<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Jon Armajani pointed to the ‘dual identity’ of Arkoun and similar thinkers operating ‘within a transnational ethos’ between two different societies: their Muslim-majority countries of origin and the countries where they pursued their academic careers.<sup>7</sup> This was particularly true for Arkoun who, having lived and worked most of his life between two worlds, embraced the role of a mediator earlier than the other two thinkers. Kersten and Günther defined him as a ‘border crosser’ positioned both ‘inside and outside the Islamic cultural zone. Because of this simultaneous engagement and distancing, Arkoun can build bridges and explore new ways’.<sup>8</sup> This was echoed by Ali Hassan Zaidi who also saw Arkoun’s strength in his position at the margins of both traditions.<sup>9</sup> This role as intermediates was not merely imposed on the three thinkers but embraced by them. According to Soroush, their work was meant to create a climate that ‘assists dialogue between civilisations’<sup>10</sup> through a critical approach towards both Islam and modernity and by exposing the complexity of the Islamic tradition to other communities:

Here is where the modern Muslim intellectual has a role to play for the world community as a whole. As I said earlier, neither Islam nor modernity is monolithic, and both are open to question. The process of

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<sup>6</sup> Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Mehrdad Armajani, ‘Islamic Thought in the West: Sacred Texts, Islamic History, and Visions of Islam in a Transnational Age’ (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 1999), 468, 69.

<sup>8</sup> Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker Der Islamischen Vernunft*, 13. As quoted by Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 177.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Over the course of a long career, Arkoun has claimed for himself a position on the margins of both the Islamic and Western Scholarly traditions. This, too, in the name of dialogue, for it is from the margins of both traditions that Arkoun hopes to make Islam intelligible to the West and the West intelligible to the Muslim world’. In Ali Hassan Zaidi, *Islam, Modernity, and the Human Sciences* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 44.

<sup>10</sup> Soroush, Mumivand and Sokhanvar, ‘A Congregation of Bees’.

questioning has already begun in the case of the latter [...] The modern Muslim intellectual stands to serve the needs of other communities as well when he or she begins to question and rethink the premises of both Islamic discourse and modern discourse simultaneously. He or she can also show to the non-Muslim world how complex Islam truly is, once he or she brings to the surface the internal dynamics of Islamic discourse that have been silenced or suppressed for so long. As a result, our collective understanding of Islam will be broadened and enriched.<sup>11</sup>

He saw dialogue, including the ‘dialogue of civilisations’ formulated in 2006 by Mohammad Khatami, the former president of Iran, as one of the priorities of human activity.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, he worried about the popularity of Huntington’s ideas, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11: ‘It seems that the West has not taken the theory of the dialogue of civilisations as seriously as the clash of civilisations and the question of a clash is still more important to them, especially after the events of 9/11, when the subject became more serious and attracted more attention. It even found its way into the minds of the general public in the West’.<sup>13</sup>

Abu Zayd stressed how one of the roles of Muslim intellectuals was to advance an understanding of Islam through its historical, geographical and cultural contextualisation; this had become particularly relevant, he argued, in the aftermath of 9/11, given the ‘flood of ill-informed, simplistic debate in which stereotypes and slogans often triumph in both sides’.<sup>14</sup> He warned against the emergence of hostile dichotomic attitudes (‘with us or against us’) in both the Western and Muslim worlds, and the

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<sup>11</sup> Farish Noor, ‘The Responsibilities of the Muslim Intellectual in the Twenty-First Century: Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush’, in *New Voices of Islam*, ed. Farish Noor (Leiden: ISIM, 2002), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Johann Neuman ‘In U.S. Visit, Iran’s Khatami Urges Dialogue’, *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 2006. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-sep-08-fg-khatami8-story.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Hamideh Safamanesh, ‘Dialogue of Cultures Instead of Dialogue of Civilizations: An Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush’, Abdolkarim Soroush Website, 5 May 2000, <http://drsoroush.com/en/dialogue-of-cultures-instead-of-dialogue-of-civilizations>. He claimed ‘I believe that perhaps the most important thing that’s left for humanity to do is to engage in dialogue. There can be nothing higher and more fruitful than this’. In *ibid*. See also Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23–25.

<sup>14</sup> Alystair Lyon, ‘Dogma Cloys Debate in Arab World: Islamic Scholar’, *Reuters News*, 1 May 2008, See also Mahmoud Tawfik, ‘Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: The Power of Dialogue’, *Qantara*, 20 July 2007, <https://en.qantara.de/content/nasr-hamid-abu-zaid-the-power-of-dialogue>.

necessity to fight such claims ‘and their consequences by all possible democratic means’.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Arkoun underlined the importance of academics for explaining the new reality of Muslim migration to Europe: ‘And these tools [of thinking] can only be provided if the academic people play a role in taking into consideration the presence of new populations coming from outside’.<sup>16</sup> It was not just explaining Islam, *per se*, but creating mutual understanding by mediating inter-religious dialogue, a role Arkoun had been committed to for the most of his career:

I have been involved in interreligious dialogue, especially Muslim-Christian dialogue, for more than twenty years. During this time, I have attended many meetings, conferences, and seminars; given several lectures and courses; and written books and articles dealing more or less with the cultural and scientific conditions of a modern, critical view of the religious legacies of these three monotheistic communities.<sup>17</sup>

For them, this new role represented an organic extension of what they perceived as their responsibility as public intellectuals in the traditional sense.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, they became committed to addressing both their community (which remained the primary concern, particularly in the cases of Abu Zayd and Soroush), and a global audience beyond notional national and religious boundaries. The English language was an essential tool to reach this extended audience, despite some difficulties mastering the language (especially for Abu Zayd and Arkoun).<sup>19</sup> Arkoun, in particular, actively promoted the translation of

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<sup>15</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, ‘Rethinking the Qur’an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics’, in *Humanism and Muslim Culture: Historical Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, eds. Stefan Reichmuth, Jörn Rüsen, and Aladdin Sarhan (Goettingen: V&R Unipress, 2012), 60.

<sup>16</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Islam – Reformation or Subversions?’ Paper presented at the International Conference Islam – Religion and Democracy, Heidelberg, 13 November 2004.

<sup>17</sup> ———, ‘Explorations and Responses: New Perspectives for a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26, no. 3 (1989): 523. See also ———, ‘Is Islam Threatened by Christianity?’, *CrossCurrents* 45, no. 4 (1995). ———, ‘Pensiero Religioso E Pensiero Scientifico Nel Contesto Islamico’, in *La Passione Del Conoscere*, ed. Lorena Preta (Bari: Laterza, 1993), 83. This was recognised also by Armajani, ‘Islamic Thought in the West’, 397.

<sup>18</sup> Discussed later on.

<sup>19</sup> As Armajani pointed out ‘They are among the first Muslim intellectuals in modern times to write in and make their works initially available in western languages’. In Armajani, ‘Islamic Thought in the West’, 469. Similarly Taji-Farouki and El Affendi underlined how these thinkers addressed increasingly an audience beyond the believers. Taji-Farouki, ed. *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an*, 17,19; El-

his works into English. He contacted Robert Lee suggesting the re-publication of his *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* in that form to reach an anglophone readership. He also asked Rizwan Mawani, a former student, to translate a chapter of his *Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* into ‘readable English’.<sup>20</sup> While Arkoun was aware of the risks of addressing such a diverse public – ‘the communication with two audiences [Western and Muslim] with such contradictory perceptions and demands is so difficult to succeed that one ends up losing both audiences’<sup>21</sup> – he did not refrain from such engagement.

The following sections will further elaborate on the mediating position of the three scholars by exploring its embodiment in their work and identity in relation to other social actors. In particular, it will unpack two categories, Muslim and intellectual, often used to describe these thinkers. Although analysed here separately for reasons of exposition, both the content of their work and their identity – including its Muslim and intellectual components – reflected mutually-constitutive elements of their personal and professional trajectories. This intertwining of their perceived *in-betweenness* (discussed here), and structural *in-betweenness* (discussed in the following chapters), shaped their intellectual legitimacy in the European-Anglophone literature.

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Affendi, ‘The People on the Edge: 40–41. See also Gilles Kepel, *Allah in the West: Islamic Movements in America and Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Lee, email exchange with the author, 27 June 2013; Rizwan Mawani, Arkoun’s former student, telephone conversation with the author, 4 May 2014.

<sup>21</sup> ‘La communication avec deux publics aux perceptions et aux exigences si contradictoires, est si difficile à réussir qu’on en vient à perdre ses deux publics’. In Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Le Cheminement d’une Critique. Entretien’, *Revue interisignes*, no. 10 (1995): 221–22, 24. As quoted by Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker*, 36. [Translation my own]

## 2.2 Content of their work

Despite the diversity of their approaches, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's thought presented some common features. These commonalities are examined here according to their Islamic and intellectual dimensions. In their reflections on Islam, all three scholars critiqued any ideological readings of religion, and instead promoted a hermeneutical approach to the sacred sources. Intellectually, their work reflected a critical approach towards knowledge and a sense of public commitment; the latter translated into a double-edged criticism towards power, together with an effort to provide their readership with tools for critical thinking. These aspects of their thought represented an important part of their cultural capital, which contributed to their legitimacy in the intellectual sphere.

### 2.2.1 Islamic dimension: a critique of the ideology and hermeneutics of the sacred sources

The centrality of Islam in Abu Zayd, Arkoun, and Soroush's work, combined with their attention to issues on the frontline of intellectual debate among their European-Anglophone readership (such as modernity, democracy, human rights, gender issues, minorities) helped spark interest in their work. As Kersten pointed out: 'Most of the existing writing about these intellectuals deal primarily with their views on Islam in public life, leaving the methodological, epistemological and broader philosophical underpinnings of their ideas and thought as largely unexplored'.<sup>22</sup> Titles such as *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond* or *New Voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity* for books about their thought emphasised attention to those aspects of

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<sup>22</sup> Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 3.

their research.<sup>23</sup> Particularly outside academia, their ideas were increasingly presented as evidence of the existence of a) an intellectual debate within the Muslim world, and b) ‘moderate’ voices within Islam. Newspaper articles with headlines like ‘Reformers Crusade to Modernise Islam’,<sup>24</sup> or ‘Islam Without Militance’,<sup>25</sup> likewise testify to this kind of interest. Within this framing, it was not only the themes they debated that contributed to their greater visibility, but also the answers they provided – such as the compatibility of Islam with modernity and democracy – as well as the modalities they used to tackle those issues. While the theme of Islam and modernity was not new in the Muslim intellectual debates, these thinkers distanced themselves from their predecessors in their emphasis on a hermeneutic of the sacred sources and a critique of any ideological reading of Islam. Previous generations of reformist thinkers had underlined the socio-political component of Islam as an ideology: in their discourses, Islam became a means to achieve social justice, as well as liberation from colonialism and other forms of oppression.<sup>26</sup>

Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush disputed this approach, warning against the risks of an ideologization of religion, instead emphasising an understanding of Islam as a worldview, faith and system of beliefs.<sup>27</sup> Their criticism of ideological readings of Islam targeted both Islamists as well as the traditional holders of authority in Islam – the *ulama*. While Abu Zayd and Arkoun’s criticism, however, presented a historical breath, exploring the ideological evolution of Islamic orthodoxy, Soroush focused his criticism on the role of the Shi’a clergy in contemporary Iran. Having experienced the

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<sup>23</sup> Ronald Nettler, Mohamed Mahmoud, and John Cooper, *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998); Kamrava, *The New Voices of Islam*.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Waldman, ‘Reformers Crusade to Modernize Islam’, *Globe and Mail*, 16 March 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Ira M Lapidus, ‘Islam without Militance’, *New York Times*, 21 August 1994.

<sup>26</sup> William E. Shepard, ‘Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 3 (1987); Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 87.

<sup>27</sup> Kamrava, *The New Voices of Islam*, 17.

revolutionary outcomes his country, Soroush – who initially took part in the revolution embracing an ideological reading of Islam – argued that religion is ‘more comprehensive than ideology’ (*Farbehtar az id'iolozhi*).<sup>28</sup> Ideology’s primary function, he elaborated, was mass mobilisation and for this reason, it needed to be straightforward and therefore simplistic; though suitable to specific contingencies, its role was fulfilled once the desired social change had occurred. By contrast, religion, albeit through different interpretations and understandings, endured over time and space.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, for Soroush, the oversimplification of ideology represented an obstacle to the pursuit of religious knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Arkoun saw ideology as a barrier to critical thinking: ‘we have left the path of enlightenment and indulged ourselves in ideological wars in which free thought was not welcomed anymore’.<sup>31</sup> He cautioned against the excessive ideological focus which characterised some contemporary Muslim scholars as ‘many of them do not even rely on precise philological criticism because they are too much influenced by ideological commitments’.<sup>32</sup> He, therefore, framed his intellectual project as a tool to reject the ideologization of religion to achieve a free and critical Islamic thought, with a detached vision of religions as ‘systems of beliefs, convictions, and knowledge which are still dominating and regulating the existence of many societies’.<sup>33</sup> Throughout its history, Arkoun argued, Islam has been used for political and ideological purposes to legitimise power.<sup>34</sup> Islamic orthodoxy, that is, the official religion, was the result of an ideological

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<sup>28</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, *Farbehtar az id'iolozhi* (Tehran: Serat, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. See also Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran, 1953–2000*, 151–52.

<sup>30</sup> Soroush, *Farbehtar az id'iolozhi*, 4. Valla Vakili, *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996), 6.

<sup>31</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Kalimāt al-ustād Muhammed Arkun,’ paper presented at the Ibn Rushd Preis für freies Denken, Berlin, 6 December 2003.

<sup>32</sup> ———, ‘The Study of Islam in French Scholarship’, in *Mapping Islamic Studies: Genealogy, Continuity and Change*, ed. Azim Nanji (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), 44. See also ———, ‘Rethinking Islam Today’.

<sup>33</sup> ———, ‘The Notion of Revelation: From Ahl Al-Kitab to the Societies of the Book’, *Die Welt des Islams* 28, no. 1/4 (1988): 62.

<sup>34</sup> Günther, ‘Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought’, 143.

process of selection and canonization of some interpretations over others;<sup>35</sup> this implied the exclusion of ideas, thinkers, schools, works, and groups defined as heterodox and pushed in the realm of the ‘unthinkable’.<sup>36</sup> Through the deconstruction of ‘Islamic reason’ (ie ‘a form of reason that accepts to function within religious postulates’ agreeing not to discuss them but rather to ‘take them as starting points for all constructions’<sup>37</sup>) Arkoun attempted to reconstruct the phases of the creation of this orthodoxy. He identified three stages: a first phase (612-623 AD) coinciding with the revelation, what he called the ‘Qur’anic discourse’: ie the oral Prophetic speech; a second phase between 632 and 936 which marked the beginning of the Islamic discourse: this period saw the collection and canonization of the oral discourse into the official closed corpus of the written text (the *mushaf*);<sup>38</sup> classical exegesis played a key role in this period in forming the realm of what was ‘thinkable’ in the ‘Islamic discourse’;<sup>39</sup> the third phase, what Arkoun called the period of orthodoxy, started in 936 and was when a new *imaginary* was formed within the Muslim community ‘shaping of the thinkable/unthinkable and the Islamic reason’.<sup>40</sup> The dogmatic enclosure of Islamic reason, with the closing of the *bab-al-ijtihad* around 900-1000, signed in Arkoun’s account a watershed in the intellectual history of Islam, marking the end of an ‘innovative period of philosophical thought’;<sup>41</sup> while indeed it guaranteed coherence and consistency within the same framework of expression, it eliminated discontinuities within Islamic thought relegating them in the sphere of the ‘unthought’ and the ‘unthinkable’.<sup>42</sup> This orthodoxy was therefore created by Muslim

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>36</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 15-23.

<sup>37</sup> Günther, ‘Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought’, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 133.

religious scholars who projected themselves as custodians of tradition creating a close realm of the ‘unthinkable.’

Influenced by Arkoun’s work, Abu Zayd explored the ideological instrumentalization of religion in both classical and contemporary iterations of Islamic thought in his *Critique of Religious Discourse*.<sup>43</sup> He situated the first ‘ideological ploy in the name of scripture’ in the episode of the battle of Siffin in 657 when the Umayyads asked for ‘arbitration by God’s book’ holding pages of the Qur’an on the tips of their swords; this represented for Abu Zayd, the first attempt to confine the role of reason in favour of the scripture.<sup>44</sup> In line with Arkoun and Soroush, he warned against ideological readings of the sacred sources: ‘Religious texts profoundly influence social and cultural life: if we place them at the mercy of the ideology of the interpreter without defining the extent to which the text lends itself to exegesis and the limits of the meaning it offers, then we are in deep trouble’.<sup>45</sup> To define these limits, to obtain a scientific comprehension of the text freed from ideological readings, he proposed a literary analysis of the Qur’an: ‘literary studies, revolving around the notion of the text, are the guarantor for realizing a “scholarly approach” with which we can overcome the “ideological orientation” that dominates our culture and our thinking.’<sup>46</sup> He used the term *ta’wil*, rather than the more common *tafsir* (commentary, explanation) to describe his endeavour to emphasize the human dimension present in the act of interpretation:<sup>47</sup> while *tafsir* is limited to commentaries and explanations, interpretation for Abu Zayd involved also the historical and literary contextualization of the text. He pointed out how the term *ta’wil* was the one

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<sup>43</sup> Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>45</sup> Mona Anis, ‘Thus Spoke Nasr Abu Zayd: Interview with Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd’, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 8 July 2010. He also wrote ‘How is that the meaning of Islam could be manipulated so easily? Islam’s meaning kept changing and transforming, depending on what ideology one brought to the religion. Just what is the relationship between ideology and interpretation of the text? That became a burning question for me’. In Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 79.

<sup>46</sup> Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, 276.

<sup>47</sup> Kermani, ‘From Revelation to Interpretation’, 172.

used during the first period of the Islamic intellectual history with reference to the exegesis of the Qur'an, and that its meaning was then restricted in the Muslim theology.<sup>48</sup> In this sense, he highlighted how the historical contextualization of the sacred sources had a central role in the first phase of Islam and how this approach was then marginalized. Philosophical reasoning and schools such as the Mu'tazila, were gradually marginalized in the Arab Muslim culture until the *coup de grace* given to reason by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali.<sup>49</sup> Al-Ghazali's era was a period of political unrest which led to the fall of Baghdad: these socio-political struggles were translated from the real world into the realm of the religious text, and the role of reasons was reduced to mere ideological exploitation of the religious texts for events in the real world.<sup>50</sup> A century after al-Ghazali experts in Islamic law attacked anyone studying philosophy.<sup>51</sup> Similarly to Arkoun, Abu Zayd identified the emergence of a reactionary religious discourse as the result of a selection and marginalization of heterodox voices: the canonization of some interpretations over others, reflected, he argued, political and ideological power struggles.<sup>52</sup> Muslims gradually lost their free relationship with the Qur'an which surged at an inscrutable and untouchable entity.<sup>53</sup> This instrumental engagement with the sacred sources, he warned, characterised also more contemporary Islamist movements in Egypt such as al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>54</sup>

Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush's criticism of the ideological use of Islam – whether used to support orthodoxy or to seek social justice – combined with an assertion of a faith-based dimension of religion, responded to the increased attention to political

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>49</sup> Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, 83.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>52</sup> Kermani, 'From Revelation to Interpretation', 175.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, 148-162.

Islam, on one side, and the growing discussion over the role of religion in the public sphere, on the other. Having questioned whether there could be any single interpretation of religion, the three thinkers shifted their attention from an ontological to an epistemological analysis of Islam. Arkoun viewed with suspicion any discourse claiming a monopoly over truth, questioning the idea of neutral knowledge of phenomena and arguing a need ‘to study Islam as an epistemological project’.<sup>55</sup> Soroush agreed that ‘the meaning of religion is fluid’,<sup>56</sup> and distinguished between ‘religious knowledge’ – ie contextual interpretations – and ‘religion’ itself, not reachable by human cognition.<sup>57</sup> They, therefore, addressed their efforts towards a hermeneutical exploration of the sacred sources. While the practice of contextualising the Qur’anic verses within the specific setting of sixth-century Arabia was well established in debates within Islam, what distinguished these scholars was their attention to the actual processes of the production of Islamic discourse. In their analyses, they developed hermeneutical tools which synthesised Islamic tradition with contemporary theories from the humanities and social science, engaging with authors such as Gadamer, Foucault, Habermas, and Derrida. Abu Zayd’s examination of Qur’anic linguistic and stylistic structure, for instance, was based on the theological divide between ambiguous (*mutashābih*) and clear (*muḥkam*) verses and influenced by the postmodernists’ emphasis on texts and discourse analysis.<sup>58</sup> He later recalled the influence of his years in Philadelphia, at the University of Pennsylvania, introducing him to philosophy, hermeneutics in literature, anthropology and psychology as an experience that ‘opened up a brand-new world for me’.<sup>59</sup> Soroush brought the

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<sup>55</sup> Arkoun, ‘Rethinking Islam Today’: 18. See also Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, ‘Linguaggio Religioso E Ricerca Di Una Nuova Linguistica: Una Lettura Del Pensiero Di Mohammed Arkoun’, in *Islam E Storia*, ed. Nasr Abu Zayd (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002), 184.

<sup>56</sup> Iranian Labour News Agency, ‘Some of Our Religious Intellectuals Are Still Afraid of Being Called Liberal or Secular’, Abdolkarim Soroush Website, 27 October 2006, [http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/News\\_Archive/E-NWS-20061027.html](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/News_Archive/E-NWS-20061027.html).

<sup>57</sup> Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 67, 114.

<sup>58</sup> Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 93.

<sup>59</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 95.

philosophy of science – and authors such as Popper, Kuhn, Habermas and Foucault – to the debate on Islam, not only in his work but also in the classes he taught: ‘In this period, I started to teach [the] philosophy of natural and social sciences. I included the philosophies of Winch, Habermas, and Hayek as well as those of Motahhari, Ibn Khaldun and others. I also taught Hegel, Herder and Marx in the context of the philosophy of history’.<sup>60</sup> Arkoun, in particular, stressed the need for an interdisciplinary approach (using linguistics, cultural anthropology, semiotics and other modern fields) in the study of the Qur’an:

I directed my attention to the epistemic and epistemological innovations introduced by Annales School in multidisciplinary history, the works of Claude Lévi Strauss in anthropology, of Michel Foucault on the history of the clinic, and to the systems of thought of Roland Barthes on literary criticism, of Algirdas Julien Greimas on semiotics, of Jacques Lacan on analytic psychology, and of the competing schools of linguists.<sup>61</sup>

The literature often emphasised this synthesis between Islamic and Western traditions as a distinctive characteristic of these scholars, Arkoun in particular; as Ursula Günther pointed out: ‘Arkoun impresses through his diversity and his extensive knowledge of both the Arab-Muslim and the Occidental-Christian culture and history of thought including recent discourses in social sciences and humanities, all coupled with a sharp awareness of overlapping and comprehensive correlations’.<sup>62</sup> The hybrid nature of their approach to the study of Islam – in both the topics they tackled and their development of epistemological tools familiar to the European-Anglophone readership – was

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<sup>60</sup> Soroush, ‘Intellectual Autobiography’, 12. See also *ibid.*, 9, 13. ———, ‘Life and Virtue: The Relationship between Socioeconomic Development and Ethics’, in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 49.

<sup>61</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, ‘The Vicissitudes of Ethics in Islamic Thought’, in *Humanism and Muslim Culture: Historical Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Jörn Rüsen Stefan Reichmuth, Aladdin Sarhan (Gottingen: V&R Unipress, 2012), 63. See for instance ———, ‘The Answers of Applied Islamology’, *Theory, culture & society* 24, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>62</sup> Günther, ‘Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought’, 135.

instrumental in capturing ‘Western’ attention to their work. Framing their analysis and critique of Islam within what was perceived as ‘Western’ modalities of intellectual discourse produced cultural capital valued in the European-Anglophone intellectual field.<sup>63</sup>

### **2.2.2 Intellectual dimension: a critical approach towards knowledge and public engagement**

#### *A critical approach to knowledge*

The criticism of any ideological readings of religion, as well as the attention to the hermeneutics of the sacred sources – discussed in the previous section – reflected Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush’s broader critical approach towards pre-existing knowledge. This position was informed by both their dispositions and self-perception as intellectuals *a la* Gramsci. In this, they echoed an extensive literature emphasising critical reasoning – ie what Edward Said called a ‘critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés’<sup>64</sup> – as a *sine qua non* of intellectual activity.<sup>65</sup> Arkoun saw the intellectuals’ duty as the scrutiny of all existing spheres knowledge: ‘The task of the scholar-thinker is to include in his or her field of investigation and analysis all that has been said, experienced and constructed and which emerges within the confines of dogmatism’.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> For further elaboration on the hermeneutics of the Qur’an by Abu Zayd and Arkoun see Mincheva, ‘On the Emergence of a Western Islamic Public Sphere’. Also Harrison, ‘Hermeneutics, Religious Language and the Qur’an’.

<sup>64</sup> Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 17.

<sup>65</sup> In discussing other two thinkers, Akbar Ahmed, and Ziauddin Sardar, Tomas Gerholm defined them as dealing ‘with fundamental values and philosophical issues in a “free” way, constantly ready to turn his and her critical eye on the foundations of what has just been said’. Tomas Gerholm, ‘Two Muslim Intellectuals in the Postmodern West: Akbar Ahmed and Ziauddin Sardar’, in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, eds. Akbar S. Ahmed and Hasting Donnan (London: Routledge, 1994), 211.

<sup>66</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 51–52.

Soroush stressed the importance of reason in a religious intellectual's activity: 'Religious intellectuals are intellectuals because they believe in a reason that is independent of revelation and is nourished by it. And, lamp of reason in hand, they strive to shed light on truth and to sear injustice'.<sup>67</sup> 'Ratiocination', in his view, meant a commitment to reasoning and its modern outcomes (including science and modern theology); an important task the intellectual should pursue, while aware of the ambiguity of its meaning.<sup>68</sup> Abu Zayd's words reiterate this attitude: 'the Qur'an insists on emphasising human rational thinking and argues for reflection instead of blindly following tradition and copying the past'.<sup>69</sup> While the literature supporting these scholars cited their analytical thinking as a testament to their intellectual identity, some questioned the scholarliness of their approach. Abdou Filali-Ansary distinguished between the methods used by both Arkoun and Abu Zayd, whom he thought applied the 'tools of modern scholarship to the study of Islam and the Muslim world', from the work of Soroush, whom he recognised as an 'innovative theologian but not a scholar'.<sup>70</sup> Other authors deemed the three thinkers' faith as 'an epistemological obstacle' to their research'.<sup>71</sup> Jan-Peter Hartung, for instance, saw an incompatibility between intellectualism – meaning the refusal of any dogma – and religion, since all faiths ultimately assert an unquestionable truth: the existence of God.<sup>72</sup> This attitude was echoed by Arkoun, who criticised reformers for maintaining that the Qur'an must be obeyed as

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<sup>67</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, 'What Religious Intellectualism Isn't', paper presented at a conference on Religion and Modernity, Tehran, 6 September 2007, [https://www.dr.soroush.com/English/By\\_DrSoroush/Religious%20Intellectualism%20.html](https://www.dr.soroush.com/English/By_DrSoroush/Religious%20Intellectualism%20.html).

<sup>68</sup> Iranian Labour News Agency, 'Some of Our Religious Intellectuals Are Still Afraid of Being Called Liberal or Secular'.

<sup>69</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, 'Islam, Muslims and Democracy', in *Religion Und Politik*, ed. Josef Homeyer (Sankt Augustin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 1998), 107.

<sup>70</sup> Abdou Filali-Ansary, Skype interview with the author, 6 June 2014.

<sup>71</sup> 'Glaube gilt als epistemologisches Hindernis in der Forschung' Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker*, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Hartung, 'What Makes a "Muslim Intellectual"?', 38. In Hitchens's words 'intellectual [...] attitude towards authority should probably be sceptical, as should the attitude towards utopia, let alone to heaven or hell'. Christopher Hitchens, 'How to Be a Public Intellectual', *Prospect Magazine*, 24 May 2008.

it is: 'In the practice of the Reformers, there is more than one postulate, a true axiom: God spoke to men, and God must be obeyed, punctually, totally, without adding anything and taking anything away from what the Qur'an – which brings the revelation of God to men – said'.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, contrary to Arkoun, neither Abu Zayd nor Soroush finally questioned the Qur'an as God's revelation. However, they both pointed to the human dimension of the Qur'an: Abu Zayd arguing for the Qur'an as a human expression of God's divine revelation and Soroush postulating the creation of the Qur'an as a product of the prophet's mind and personality under God's inspiration.<sup>74</sup> This shifted their attention from an ontological to an epistemological exploration of religion, *de facto* opening the space for a human investigation into the broader aspects of Islam. As Taji-Farouki pointed out, they pushed the boundaries of human investigation to include the sacred sources as an object of analysis. By contrast, at the beginning of the twentieth century, 'the reformists were careful to avoid the potential excesses of a rational-historical interrogation of the Qur'an and "would not touch the sanctity of the text"'.<sup>75</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s, scholars such as Fazlur Rahman and Ali Shariati had started re-examining the status of the *hadith* without directly questioning the Qur'an; now the Qur'an itself came under scrutiny in a renewed exegesis of the sacred text.<sup>76</sup> Although not applying their critical analysis to every aspect of religion (such as the existence of God, as Hartung pointed out), they extended the scope of religious knowledge that could be investigated.

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<sup>73</sup> 'Dans la pratique des réformistes, il existe plus qu'un postulat, un véritable axiome: Dieu a parlé aux hommes, et Dieu doit être obéi, ponctuellement, totalement, sans qu'il faille rien ajouter et sans rien retrancher à ce que dit le Coran qui porte la révélation de Dieu aux hommes'. Arkoun, *La Construction Humaine De l'Islam*, 1566. [Translation my own]

<sup>74</sup> Abu Zayd, 'The Qur'an: God and Man in Communication'; Soroush and Hoebink, 'The Word of Mohammad'.

<sup>75</sup> Taji-Farouki, ed. *Modern Muslim Intellectuals*, 18.

<sup>76</sup> El-Affendi, 'The People on the Edge': 32.

*Public commitment: providing society with tools for critical thinking*

This self-limitation partly reflected their faith, but also the broader tension that existed for intellectuals who wished to maintain their critical attitude towards knowledge and yet continue their public engagement – which required the careful expression of radical positions to maintain relevance with the broader public. Indeed, all three thinkers conceived their role as public intellectuals as comprising not only their analytical *modus operandi* but also their larger relationship with society. In this second ‘outward’ dimension as intellectuals, they aimed to pursue social justice by providing tools for critical thinking as well as voicing criticism against powerful actors.<sup>77</sup> Arkoun and Soroush, in particular, saw themselves invested with the responsibility to provide society with tools for thinking. Arkoun’s project aimed to develop a form of critical Islamic thought that promoted the exercise of the critical faculty to free religion from ideological instrumentalisation.<sup>78</sup> This responded to what he saw as ‘a need to encourage and initiate audacious, free productive thinking on Islam today’.<sup>79</sup> According to Soroush, the role of the religious intellectual in society consisted in ‘theorising the transition from tradition to modernity’<sup>80</sup> by ‘combating superstition and harmonising religiosity with modern life’<sup>81</sup> His goal, therefore, was to liberate spirituality from organised religion – and for ‘the masses’ still in need of the latter, to promote a more tolerant understanding of it.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Tony Bennett, *Critical Trajectories: Culture, Society, Intellectuals* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 141–43. Mehran Kamrava, *Iran’s Intellectual Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 7, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Abu Zayd, ‘Linguaggio Religioso E Ricerca Di Una Nuova Linguistica’, 182, 87.

<sup>79</sup> In Arkoun, ‘Rethinking Islam Today’: 18.

<sup>80</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, ‘Jameah Interview with Dr. Soroush’, Abdolkarim Soroush Website, 16 June 1998, [http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19980600-Jameah\\_Interview\\_with\\_Dr\\_Soroush.htm](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19980600-Jameah_Interview_with_Dr_Soroush.htm).

<sup>81</sup> Soroush, Mumivand and Sokhanvar, ‘A Congregation of Bees’.

<sup>82</sup> ‘In my humble endeavours, therefore, I try to emancipate the spirituality from the cage of the officially organised religions. As for masses who seek the spirituality within organised religion, I offer a more tolerant interpretation thereof’. Soroush Abdolkarim, ‘Acceptance Speech’, Praemium Erasmianum Foundation, <http://www.erasmusprijs.org/Prijswinnaars?lang=en&itemid=0EC868F9-A2F0-5A07-4901472F2CDF2262&mode=detail>. (accessed 1 September 2018).

Abu Zayd appeared more self-conscious than the other two thinkers about taking such a leading role, instead emphasising humility or modesty frequently in his lectures: ‘I am not here claiming any missionary task to formulate a specific Islam, but rather situating my hermeneutical position’.<sup>83</sup> Although he ultimately acknowledged the importance of having a dialogue with the larger society, he admitted that he would not have chosen it for himself: ‘I have been for some time, like everyone, very satisfied with my academic environment and these discussions until against my own will I became a public figure. It took me some time to accept the fact that I am not only an intellectual, but I have to be involved with this public debate about religion’.<sup>84</sup> However, this need to maintain engagement with the broader public, beyond the ivory tower, also pushed Abu Zayd and Soroush to be more cautious in their questioning. Abu Zayd, in particular, following his accusation of apostasy in Egypt, showed constant awareness that he must carefully calibrate any radical critiques to continue his public engagement:

In a way I was afraid, to be honest: how to say these provocative things to the religious people, how to be honest to your academic intelligence, and to reveal it to the public in a way that will not cause any kind of insult. This was my real concern. Because during my experience in Egypt I have realized that it is very easy, as it happened in history, to get certain ideas and to reduce them with a small phrase to say this is what someone is saying, that the Qur’an is a cultural product, what does it mean?<sup>85</sup>

These concerns influenced the scope of his inquiry, allowing him to question Islamic discourse but not the Qur’an itself: ‘If you go to a critical study of Islamic history, critical study of Islamic tradition, so far it is not widely accepted, but it has a certain room. But

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<sup>83</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur’an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Amsterdam: Humanistics University Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>84</sup> ———, ‘On Islam in Europe’, paper presented at the Lecture series Postsecularism, Utrecht, 19 February 2008.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. As Dick Dowes, editor of the *ISIM Newsletter*, pointed out ‘Abu Zayd was careful not to be too provocative’. Dick Douwes, ‘Editorial’, *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 7 (2001).

when it comes to the Qur'an, there are problems. We have to go wisely. The other option is committing suicide'.<sup>86</sup>

The necessity to balance a critical approach towards knowledge with maintaining relevance with the Muslim public was also evident during the conference 'Muslim Intellectuals and Modern Challenges', in April of 2000, which gathered several important Muslim thinkers including Abu Zayd and Soroush.<sup>87</sup> The seriousness of these concerns also surfaced in 2007 when Soroush gave an interview where he described his formulation of the divine origin of the Qur'an as a 'prophetic experience': ie the conception of the prophet Mohammad as the 'receiver and the producer' of the Qur'an under God's inspiration.<sup>88</sup> The strong reaction to these statements – Soroush was accused of heresy – and the alienation of some of his supporters seemed to confirm their concerns.<sup>89</sup> A more radical position was taken by Arkoun, who claimed an unwillingness to compromise his investigations and placed himself among those intellectuals in the service of critical thought, in opposition to those at the service of power.<sup>90</sup> He criticised 'reformist' thinkers for being too cautious, leaving untouched issues that needed critical scrutiny: 'They continue to avoid taboo issues either tactically, or out of avowed fear, or ignorance of the history of Islam and society. The result is an immense unthought in the current Islamic thought: the task of the intellectual is to attack it with determination, whatever the obstacles which keep multiplying'.<sup>91</sup> And he rejected the accusation made by 'reformists'

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<sup>86</sup> Abu Zayd, 'On Islam in Europe'.

<sup>87</sup> Michel Hoebink, 'ISIM Workshop Report: Muslim Intellectuals and Modern Challenges', 26–28 April 2000. [http://www.isim.nl/files/muslim\\_intellectuals\\_report.doc](http://www.isim.nl/files/muslim_intellectuals_report.doc) (accessed 18 March 2019).

<sup>88</sup> Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, 'Who Wrote the Qur'an?', *New York Times*, 7 December 2008. See also Hoebink, 'The Word of Mohammad'.

<sup>89</sup> The scholar however persisted in his argumentation which he developed and published in Abdolkarim Soroush, *Kalam-e Mohammad roya-ye Mohammad* (Soghrat, 2019). See also ———, 'Guftogu Ba Abdolkarim Soroush az Kalame Khoda va Kalame Mohammad', interview by Dariush Rajabian, BBC Persian, 29 May 2019, <http://www.bbc.com/persian/tv-and-radio-48442419>.

<sup>90</sup> Arkoun Mohammed, 'Quelques Tâches de l'Intellectuel Musulman Aujourd'hui', *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 37, no. 1 (1988): 25.

<sup>91</sup> 'Ils continuent à éviter les questions tabou soit par tactique, soit par crainte avouée, soit par méconnaissance de l'histoire de l'islam et de la société. Il en résulte un immense impensé dans la pensée

that he was confined to an ivory tower: ‘They seek to discredit their most credible competitors: those who remain at the service of a thought free of all ambitions of power and at the same time critical, in the philosophical sense: constantly questioning the theoretical conditions of validity of any cognitively oriented proposition stated by reason’.<sup>92</sup>

The tension between these two positions became evident during a conference in Berlin in which all the three thinkers participated, as recounted by Abu Zayd. During his presentation, Arkoun criticised both Abu Zayd and Soroush for engaging with ‘outdated issues’.<sup>93</sup> Abu Zayd, who had always acknowledged his debt to Arkoun’s scholarship, responded that issues which were deemed outdated in European countries, and in the ivory tower where Arkoun lived, remained causes for which people were still dying in Muslim countries.<sup>94</sup> Arkoun seemed to partly accept this criticism and incorporated it into his subsequent assessments of these thinkers’ contributions. While leaving unchallenged the axiom that ‘God must be obeyed’, they corrected it ‘by and with pragmatism’ – which he recognised as a necessary strategy, given the constraints they faced in the Muslim world.<sup>95</sup> In other words, while the three intellectuals shared a commitment to critical

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islamique actuelle: la tâche de l’intellectuel est de s’y attaquer avec détermination, quels que soient les obstacles qui se multiplient toujours davantage’, *ibid.*, 20. [Translation my own]

<sup>92</sup> ‘Ils veillent à discréditer leurs concurrents les plus crédibles: ceux qui restent au service d’une pensée libre de toute ambition de pouvoir et en même temps critique, au sens philosophique: s’interroger avec constance sur les conditions théoriques de validité de toute proposition à visée cognitive énoncée par la raison’. In *ibid.*, 25. [Translation my own]

<sup>93</sup> ‘Not too long ago, I met up with Muhammad Arkoun, a Muslim scholar at a conference in Berlin. [...] He commented on my work, as well as the work of Mr. Soroush, an Iranian scholar, who was also present at the conference. He criticised both of us for discussing out-dated issues in our writing and specifically referred to what constitutes a large chunk of my work, the doctrine of the created Qur’an’. Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 194.

<sup>94</sup> ‘I agree with you, I do focus on out-dated discussion – out-dates in European countries like France, places like the Sorbonne in particular, where you live and produce your discourse. But people die in our countries for lack of what you call out-dated discussion. We can learn from you and the work you produce in your ivory tower, but that does not give you the right to undermine our work’. *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*; Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Contemporary Critical Practices of the Qur’an’, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 426.

thinking, the different contexts in which they worked necessarily shaped their understanding of what this process entailed.

*Public commitment: the (double-edged) critique of power*

Beyond providing critical-thinking tools to the broader society, these three scholars thought their role as public intellectuals also included voicing criticism towards injustice and powerful actors. In Soroush's words: 'If we take away the element of criticism, the intellectual becomes like any other scientist who only discovers truths'.<sup>96</sup> He likened his role as a Muslim intellectual to shedding 'light on truth and sear injustice'.<sup>97</sup> Abu Zayd overtly identified with the poor and the oppressed: 'I belong to the poor. I defend the rights of the poor. This is where I stand'.<sup>98</sup> This emphasis on social justice fulfilled not only their intellectual commitment but also their belief that this issue is central to the Islamic message. Arkoun even saw a correspondence between socialism and Islam in the sacred sources:

No one should be surprised by the consonances between Islam and socialism [...] the Qur'an introduces all the ingredients and themes of a recurrent 'revolutionary' ideology, including the redistribution of wealth to protect the rights of the poor, the orphaned, the widowed, the weak and uproots, unconditional fraternity between believer-militants; absolute equity of the leader of the City-*Umma* in protecting the rights of all by enforcing respect for God's rights; incessant struggle against all figures of oppression, untruth or error.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Iranian Labour News Agency, 'Some of Our Religious Intellectuals Are Still Afraid of Being Called Liberal or Secular'.

<sup>97</sup> Soroush, 'What Religious Intellectualism Isn't'. See also Noor, 'The Responsibilities of the Muslim Intellectual in the Twenty-First Century: Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush'. In other instances he claimed 'Justice is a subject that's very close to my heart and I think that the debates we've had about political freedoms and human rights all pass through justice'. Matin Ghaffarian, 'Amsterdam Debate: An Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush', *Ham Mihan*, 14 June 2007.

<sup>98</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 79.

<sup>99</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 110.

Similarly, Abu Zayd, recognised that his worldview was shaped by the Qur’anic emphasis on social justice: ‘For years, I believed that Islam could be interpreted only as a religion of social justice. [...] How can I hold to certain beliefs (justice, compassion, freedom), beliefs taken from the Qur’an, and not have those beliefs spill over into my thinking in the political arena?’<sup>100</sup>

In particular, their novel position between cultural and geographical settings turned their criticism into what Omid Safi called a ‘multiple critique’.<sup>101</sup> This double-edged criticism addressed both actors within the Muslim community – particularly orthodox thinkers and political actors – as well as those outside the Muslim world. Abu Zayd’s criticism of the official religious establishment in Egypt; Soroush’s opposition to the Iranian regime, particularly during the 2009 demonstration; and Arkoun’s denunciation of government’s instrumental use of religion in Muslim-majority countries epitomised their inward critique.<sup>102</sup> Outside the Muslim world, their criticism of ‘Western’ attitudes towards Islam – as embodied in Western government’s policies towards Muslim communities in Europe, North America and the Middle East – was equally intense. All three scholars criticised the Gulf War, for instance, and later on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>103</sup> Particularly after 9/11, they took a stand against ideas such as ‘the clash of civilisations’ and ‘the war on terror’, as well as the Western media’s demonisation of Muslims and Islam.<sup>104</sup> They saw the objects of both their critiques –

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<sup>100</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 79.

<sup>101</sup> Safi, ed. *Progressive Muslims*, 2–5.

<sup>102</sup> Examples of this include Ayman Bakr, Elliott Colla, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, ‘Silencing Is at the Heart of My Case’, *Middle East Report*, no. 185 (1993): 29; Abdolkarim Soroush, ‘You Have Turned Iran into a Grim Land: A Letter from Soroush to Khamenei’, Abdolkarim Soroush Website, 22 December 2011, <http://drsoroush.com/en/you-have-turned-iran-into-a-grim-land/>.

<sup>103</sup> Arkoun, ‘The Answers of Applied Islamology’: 24–25; Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, ‘Brutality and Civilization: Violence and Terrorism’, in *War, Repression, Terrorism: Political Violence and Civilisation in Western and Muslim Societies*, ed. Jochen Hippler (Stuttgart: Institute für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2006).

<sup>104</sup> Critiques of the idea of clash of civilisation emerged, for instance, in Mohammed Arkoun, ‘In Praise of Subversive Reason: Beyond Dialogue and the Quest for Identity’ (paper presented at the European Culture: Identity and Diversity. Colloquy of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 8–9 September 2005); Soroush, ‘Intellectual Autobiography: An Interview’, 24–25; Soroush Abdolkarim, ‘Seraj’s Interview with Dr.

conservative and reactionary discourse in the Muslim world, and Western interference in the region – as intertwined. Abu Zayd accused the United States of backing reactionary regimes: ‘The oil is under the control of states whose regimes are reactionary, in all senses religiously backward, xenophobic and tribal. And it’s in America’s interests that no genuinely democratic states are set up’.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, Arkoun blamed European and American political and military intervention in the Middle East for facilitating reactionary movements in the region: ‘Europe and the West have to realise the damages they have caused in the Middle East, especially starting from the Fifties. Indeed, the movements that have emerged in those societies after the Fifties are all linked to European political initiatives, if not its direct military intervention, supported in some cases by the United States’.<sup>106</sup>

Soroush asserted the necessity for reciprocal respect and moderation on both sides: Europeans could not expect moderation from Muslims at the same time they did not respect (and often provoked) the Muslim population.<sup>107</sup> This double-criticism, nearly always present in Arkoun’s intellectual trajectory, became particularly evident in the work of Abu Zayd and Soroush once they moved to Europe and North America.<sup>108</sup>

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Soroush’, Abdolkarim Soroush Website, April 1997, [www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19970400-Seraj\\_Interview\\_with\\_Dr.\\_Soroush.htm](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19970400-Seraj_Interview_with_Dr._Soroush.htm). Critique of the media’s representation of Islam and the Muslim world: Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 193. Similarly, Soroush warns: ‘European media should show adequate respect for Islamic values’ in Ghaffarian, ‘Amsterdam Debate’.

<sup>105</sup> Bakr, Colla, and Zayd, ‘Silencing Is at the Heart of My Case’: 29. See also Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, ‘Modernity, Democracy Are Only for the Privileged’, *Qantara*, 15 September 2009, <https://en.qantara.de/content/nasr-hamid-abu-zayd-modernity-democracy-are-only-for-the-privileged>.

<sup>106</sup> ‘L’Europa e l’occidente devono rendersi conto dei danni causati al Vicino Oriente, soprattutto a partire dagli anni Cinquanta. Infatti, i movimenti che si sono affermati in quelle società dopo gli anni Cinquanta sono tutti legati a iniziative politiche, se non a diretti interventi militari europei, appoggiati o meno dagli Stati Uniti’. In Arkoun, ‘Pensiero Religioso e Pensiero Scientifico Nel Contesto Islamico’, 85–86. [Translation my own]. See also Rachid Benzine, Christian Delorme, and Oussama Deway, ‘Mohammed Arkoun, Tisseur De Passerelles’, *Afrique contemporaine* 235, no. 3 (2010): 16, 18.

<sup>107</sup> ‘It isn’t enough to expect moderation from Muslims; Europeans, too, must behave moderately towards Muslims. You can’t provoke Muslims and expect them not to be provoked. European media should show adequate respect for Islamic values’. Ghaffarian, ‘Amsterdam Debate’.

<sup>108</sup> As pointed out by Günther ‘As a border crosser, he finds himself in a tense relationship with both the home and exile culture. Thus, he can formulate a double critique of the two societies to which he belongs’. In Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker*, 13. [Translation my own]. See also Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 178. This emerged, for instance, in Arkoun’s critique of both the existing

Indeed, it was after that move that their interlocutors came to include a significant number of 'Western' and non-Muslim actors. In this new context, as Abu Zayd explained, their commitment to the oppressed included a critique beyond the Muslim world:

Today, I still identify with the oppressed. Although my vision has expanded to include not just the weak or the poor in the Muslim world, but the oppressed through the entire world. And this is where I find myself – defending the rights of the poor no matter who they are where they might be. I don't restrict my efforts on behalf of the poor and oppressed to the religious realm.<sup>109</sup>

### *The case of human rights*

This double-edged condemnation is evident, for instance, in their treatment of human rights. For all the three thinkers, human rights, although formulated in the West over the last few centuries, reflected the universal values that existed in all traditions. Soroush saw human rights as an 'international language' desired by all cultures and civilisations and, as such, part of the religious intellectuals' project.<sup>110</sup> Abu Zayd agreed with him, revindicating the universal nature of human rights: in his account, they pre-dated Western civilisation and were part of the global struggle for peace and justice<sup>111</sup>:

Universal human values, which are considered to be purely Western, are in fact part of the human battle for peace and justice. These values are essential for all civilizations, regardless of their religious, cultural or socio-political backgrounds. The fight for human rights started long before Spartacus' revolt against the Romans and has not seen its end with recent figures and movements, such as Mandela and anti-apartheid organizations.<sup>112</sup>

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religious and the orientalist academic discourse. Abu Zayd, 'Linguaggio Religioso e Ricerca di una Nuova Linguistica', 182. For Arkoun's discussion of Orientalism see Arkoun, 'Rethinking Islam Today'.

<sup>109</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 79.

<sup>110</sup> In his own words 'Religious intellectuals' project also included human rights'. Soroush, Mumivand and Sokhanvar, 'A Congregation of Bees'. On another occasion he elaborated, 'Human rights have been fleshed out by philosophers over several centuries and, today, they have achieved this universal supremacy, to the point where they've turned into an international language and we all speak to each other via this language. It is something that all cultures and civilizations want'. Safamanesh, 'Dialogue of Cultures Instead of Dialogue of Civilizations: An Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush'.

<sup>111</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, 'The Concept of Human Rights, the Process of Modernization and the Politics of Western Domination', *Politik und Gesellschaft: International Politics and Society*, no. 4 (1998).

<sup>112</sup> ———, 'Modernity, Democracy Are Only for the Privileged'.

Arkoun reiterated this position.<sup>113</sup> They criticised, therefore, the trampling on human rights in Muslim-majority countries, while admonishing against their instrumental use by Western actors. The universality of human rights did not imply support for hegemonic politico-economic interests advanced in the name of these values. As Soroush argued, ‘if we speak of the universality of human rights today, we have to remember that human rights, at any rate, were not made by the Bush and Reagan Administrations’.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Abu Zayd expressed concern about the abuse of human rights by Western powers as a tool of control: ‘Though the Human Rights declaration is basically intended to be universally implemented, it has been politically manipulated by the powers of the North as a means of exercising domination over the Third World countries’.<sup>115</sup> On one side, they considered human rights as compatible with Islam and addressed them as a natural part of their perceived role as intellectuals; on the other, they carefully calibrated their criticism towards both Muslim and non-Muslim actors. As will be further discussed, this double-edged criticism was used for different purposes by opposing actors: for some grassroots Muslim organisations, it served as a means to criticise orthodox interpretations of religion and voice discontent for European and North American governments’ policies towards Muslims both domestically and internationally. For others, such as some European and North American governments, it provided an organic ‘moderate voice’ to counterpose against either ‘radical’ groups within Islam or right-wing xenophobic voices in the English-speaking world (or both).<sup>116</sup> Given this tendency, these thinkers grew increasingly wary of the risks of being instrumentalised. Abu Zayd recalled how,

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<sup>113</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Islam, the West, and Human Rights’, *Index on Censorship* 18, no. 5 (1989).

<sup>114</sup> Safamanesh, ‘Dialogue of Cultures Instead of Dialogue of Civilizations’.

<sup>115</sup> Abu Zayd, ‘Modernity, Democracy Are Only for the Privileged’.

<sup>116</sup> See for instance Andrea Jacobs, ‘Reformist Islam: Protagonists, Methods, and Themes of Progressive Thinking in Contemporary Islam’, working paper, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2006.

particularly after 9/11, the dichotomic rhetoric in the Western media pressured him and other scholars towards a univocal critique of Islam and the suppression of any criticism of the Western discourse. His refusal to accept this imposition of anti-Muslim attitudes, and his increased condemnation of Western political agenda, resulted in his exclusion from the media debate:

[11 September] Didn't affect my basic approach really, it changed my discourse. I have been more critical of political Europe, political West in general. And because the western media after 11 September was 'either you have to be anti-Islam', [or anti-West] – they could tolerate your criticism about Islamic culture but could not tolerate any criticism toward the western discourse, not only from me but also from Dutch professors. You had to be one way. And because as a scholar I refuse to be one way, so for some time I was not invited to interviews.<sup>117</sup>

In sum, their dual commitment to a critical attitude towards knowledge and the imperative for public engagement shaped Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's self-perception as public intellectuals. This meant not only providing society with critical tools to read religion and any existing discourse but also voicing double criticism. It was not merely engagement with Islam-specific issues (as discussed earlier), but also how they framed themselves within approaches recognised by the European-Anglophone literature. Their participation in that intellectual dominion provided the cultural capital necessary to enter the European-Anglophone intellectual debate. In particular, the increased Western need to find 'moderate' discourses within Islam – as a counter-narrative to its monolithic and radical understandings – reinforced their position within European-Anglophone production.

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<sup>117</sup> James D. Le Sueur, 'Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: Qur'anic Interpretation, Egypt, and Exile', Video interview, 2009, <https://vimeo.com/32303841>.

## 2.3 Identities

Beyond the specific content of their work, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's perceived collective identity represented another influential aspect of their importance. Their identification (or lack thereof) as 'Muslims' and 'intellectuals' became instrumental for those who either supported or rejected their legitimacy as organic and authoritative voices. These identities, defined as belonging to specific social groups (or not), resulted from a negotiation between their self-perception and the categories projected on them by other social actors engaging with them and their work. While acknowledging the extensive literature on the issue of identity, this section focuses on how their identification was reflected in demands that they conform to specific profiles.<sup>118</sup>

### 2.3.1 Muslim dimension: belonging to the Islamic faith and the 'reformist' intellectual tradition

This emphasis on Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's Islamic identity frequently appeared in accounts of the scholars and journalists who wrote about them.<sup>119</sup> Yet this common classification as 'Muslims' often seemed to overlook the nuances in how these thinkers perceived their Islamic identity. All three scholars positioned their work as ultimately reflecting a viewpoint from within Islam. As Arkoun argued, 'I pose myself from an internal perspective to Islam: I want to restore our understanding of the religious phenomenon as a universal phenomenon'.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, Abu Zayd saw tradition as an

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<sup>118</sup> For an overview of the literature on the subject see 'Identity', in *A Dictionary of Sociology*, ed. John Scott and Gordon Marshall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>119</sup> Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker*, 37. Citing Mohammed Arkoun, *Penser l'Islam Aujourd'hui* (Alger: Laphomic ENAL, 1993), 2 f.

<sup>120</sup> 'Io mi pongo da una prospettiva interna all'Islam: mi preoccupo di restaurare la nostra comprensione del fenomeno religioso come un fenomeno universale'. As quoted by Benzine, *I Nuovi Pensatori dell'Islam*, 99. [Translation my own]

important resource that permitted challenges to the religion from the inside, although strengthened by external knowledge; any external criticism, he argued, risked being perceived as a condemnation of Islam as a whole, and as such was ineffective:

Tradition is a very important resource. I think to fight all traditions is very essential not to fight from outside. And here the outside and the inside are very important. It is very easy to criticize those people, to condemn them. But by condemning them from outside you condemn Islam, because they claim to represent Islam. So, you have to fight from inside. Of course, armed with knowledge from outside. Tradition is not enough.<sup>121</sup>

However, they differed in how they defined this internal perspective and perceived themselves *vis-à-vis* the reformist intellectual tradition within Islam. For Abu Zayd, and particularly for Soroush, personal faith represented a fundamental component of their commitment as ‘Muslim thinkers’; for Arkoun the cultural project played the primary role: ‘I give the possibility to access religion through culture and not necessarily through catechism’ he argued.<sup>122</sup> Abu Zayd, however, perhaps as a reaction to the accusation of apostasy, was often vocal about his faith: ‘I’m sure that I’m a Muslim. [...] My worst fear is that people in Europe may consider and treat me as a critic of Islam. I’m not. I’m not a new Salman Rushdie and don’t want to be welcomed and treated as such. I’m a researcher’.<sup>123</sup> In another instance, he wrote: ‘I identify myself as a Muslim. I was born a Muslim, I was raised a Muslim and I live as a Muslim’.<sup>124</sup> Soroush saw the possession of personal faith as a *sine qua non* for religious intellectualism. ‘Religious intellectuals are really religious; that is to say, religion is not just a research topic for them, it is a matter

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<sup>121</sup> Abu Zayd, ‘On Islam in Europe’.

<sup>122</sup> ‘Do la possibilità di accedere alla religione tramite la cultura e non necessariamente tramite il catechismo’. Quoted by Benzine, *I Nuovi Pensatori dell’Islam*, 99. [Translation my own]

<sup>123</sup> Reuters, ‘Nasr Abu Zayd, Who Stirred Debate on Koran, Dies at 66’, *New York Times*, 6 July 2010.

<sup>124</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 11. He affirmed this elsewhere: for instance, during an interview with the BBC World Service, when asked whether he would consider himself a good Muslim, he answered ‘Absolutely! Yes, no question about that’. BBC World Service, ‘Liberal Theologian Accused of Heresy’, Focus on Fate, 25 January 1996, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03njt4z>.

of faith'.<sup>125</sup> He explicitly pointed to Arkoun as lacking this quality: 'For example, Mr. Mohammed Arkoun is only close to Islam as a matter of identity and he can study it and teach it; but no element or trace of religion is left in him. He does not have any attachment to religion as a matter of faith; he's only attached to it as a subject of study'.<sup>126</sup> Soroush's position towards Arkoun was also voiced by other contemporary thinkers such as Mohamed Talbi, who attacked him for not identifying undisputedly as a devout Muslim.<sup>127</sup> Even Ursula Günther, among the foremost scholars of Arkoun's work, deliberately avoided defining Arkoun as Muslim.<sup>128</sup> More precisely, Arkoun's faith reflected his childhood experiences, as explained by one of his former students:

He had a very strong attachment to what he called 'the faith of his mother'. He talked about his mother in Cabilia in Algeria going to a local tree and asking for intercession. He had a very enduring sense and memory of what religion meant to his mother, and that sharply contrasted to the political and sociological structures he was critiquing. These were very separate in his mind.<sup>129</sup>

His emphasis on Islamic identity, therefore, reflected more of an intellectual project than a declaration of personal belief.<sup>130</sup> This did not necessarily imply a lack of personal faith, rather the confinement of such beliefs to the private sphere, combined with a public emphasis on his role as intellectual theorising from within Islam.<sup>131</sup> As he put it, 'I speak as a social scientist who observes what exists in society, what currents appear and have

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<sup>125</sup> Iranian Labour News Agency, 'Some of Our Religious Intellectuals Are Still Afraid of Being Called Liberal or Secular'. This is reiterated also in Noor, 'The Responsibilities of the Muslim Intellectual in the Twenty-First Century: Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush'.

<sup>126</sup> Iranian Labour News Agency, 'Some of Our Religious Intellectuals Are Still Afraid of Being Called Liberal or Secular'.

<sup>127</sup> Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, xiv.

<sup>128</sup> Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker*, 18.

<sup>129</sup> Rizwan Mawani, Arkoun's former student, telephone interview with the author, 4 May 2014.

<sup>130</sup> This also came up in conversation with Soroush. Abdolkarim Soroush, telephone interview with the author, 26 January 2013.

<sup>131</sup> In Ira Lapidus' words 'he is a devout believer in the message of the Qur'an'. In Lapidus, 'Islam without Militance'. This was affirmed in conversations with various former colleagues at the Ismaili Institute in London.

not been there before'.<sup>132</sup> Günther pointed out how during the 1970s and 1980s Arkoun often named himself and his contemporary Arab peers as 'Muslim intellectuals', suggesting a sense of communion with them. This attitude shifted when, starting in the 1990s, the increased attention to 'Muslim intellectuals' came with an increasing pressure to subscribe to that category. From that period, according to Günther, Arkoun refused to apply the term 'Muslim' to his work and used the expression 'Muslim intellectuals' only in quotation marks or italics to emphasise the constructed dimension of this category.<sup>133</sup> In the West, he argued that 'one is classified against his will in the "Muslim" identity category as it has been forged by the media in the last 30 years'.<sup>134</sup> He distanced himself from both the traditional Islamic discourse and the 'reformist' one.<sup>135</sup> In contrast to this, Abu Zayd and Soroush saw themselves as operating within the tradition of nineteenth-century 'Islamic reformation', although recognising the limitations of their predecessors. Despite any such reservations, Abu Zayd explicitly situated his work within the Islamic reformist trend.<sup>136</sup> Soroush saw himself, and was considered to be, a leading member of the Iranian movement *rowshanfekran-e dini* (religious intellectuals) claiming influence from thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh and Abu Hamid Al Ghazali.<sup>137</sup> Arkoun, on the contrary, saw the Islamic tradition as not 'based on any scientific and intellectual

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<sup>132</sup> In Arkoun, 'Kalimāt al-ustād Muhammad 'Arkūn'. [Translation my own]

<sup>133</sup> Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker*, 36.

<sup>134</sup> More broadly he argued: 'J'aimerais aussi attirer l'attention sur la double pression qui s'exerce sur cette catégorie d'acteurs fort nombreux, dispersés, isolés qu'on nomme les intellectuels musulmans. En Occident on est rangé malgré soi dans la catégorie identitaire "musulmane" telle qu'elle a été forgée par les médias au cours des dernières 30 années; du côté musulman, les intellectuels se doivent précisément d'insister sur cette appartenance sans trop réfléchir de façon critique sur les implications idéologiques de toute revendication identitaire. La communication avec deux publics aux perceptions et aux exigences si contradictoires, est si difficile à réussir qu'on en vient à perdre ses deux publics'. ['I would also like to draw attention to the double pressure that is exerted on this category of very numerous, scattered, isolated actors who are called *Muslim* intellectuals. In the West, one is classified against his will in the "Muslim" identity category as it has been forged by the media in the last 30 years; on the Muslim side intellectuals must insist on their belonging to this category without thinking too much about the ideological implications of any identity claim']. In Arkoun, 'Le Cheminement d'une Critique. Entretien': 221–22, 24. As quoted by Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker*, 36. [Translation my own]

<sup>135</sup> Abu Zayd, 'Linguaggio Religioso e Ricerca di una Nuova Linguistica', 181.

<sup>136</sup> Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 93–99.

<sup>137</sup> Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, 23.

foundation. It sacrifices the possibility of a constructive critique into a form of pure ideological consumerism'.<sup>138</sup> The Islamic reformation, in his view, failed to tackle the 'unthought in Islamic thought', which represented the main object of analysis in his project.<sup>139</sup> This attitude might explain, to a certain extent, the distance Arkoun felt from reformist thinkers, including Abu Zayd and Soroush. In his own words:

It was dismaying to find [...] scholars such as Leonard Binder or (to a lesser degree) Robert Lee or Olivier Carrè and others who have commented on my work, evidently failing to grasp the radicalism of my intent, took my work as a species of modern, reformist (*islahi*) Islam; whereas, in my whole approach, Islamic 'reform' of the familiar type, represents precisely the kind of mythologizing and ideologizing that I am concerned to lay bare and to help overcome.<sup>140</sup>

This frustration was also due to the sense of marginalisation Arkoun felt within Western academia despite a whole career spent in Europe. While the 'Muslim intellectual' label represented a door of access into the European-Anglophone literature for thinkers such as Abu Zayd and Soroush, Arkoun perceived it as a label marginalising his contribution to the broader public and academic debate in the West, including issues not concerning Islam. Günther pointed out the difficulties Arkoun faced to free himself from the imposed confinement to religion-specific debates as a Muslim-born thinker in a still hierarchical 'Western hegemonic culture'.<sup>141</sup> The emergence of a 'clash of civilisations' discourse during the 1990s (and its counter-narrative the 'dialogue of civilisations') reinforced, on one side, the literature's essentialisation of the three thinkers into one homogenous group; and on the other, the attention to their Islamic identity. Despite their uneasiness, they partly endorsed the mediating role imposed on them as it provided an opportunity to shape

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<sup>138</sup> Abu Zayd, 'Linguaggio Religioso e Ricerca di una Nuova Linguistica', 182. [Translation my own]

<sup>139</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 15-23.

<sup>140</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?* (London: Saqi, 2006), 10.

<sup>141</sup> Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein Moderner Kritiker*, 37. This emerged also in Tariq Ramadan's article Tariq Ramadan, 'The Problems of Being Called a "Muslim Intellectual",' *Guardian*, 14 September 2010.

the discussion. All the three thinkers, after all, saw dialogue as the answer to the ‘clash of civilisations’ narrative. Yet while they conceived this dialogue as one based on cultural grounds, they were still primarily perceived and promoted within a religious framework. Both Arkoun and Soroush, for instance, defined religion as one dimension of ‘culture’ and tried to shape the debate over the ‘dialogue of civilisations’ in cultural rather than religious terms. Benzine noted how Arkoun did not feel a ‘religious responsibility’ and was more concerned with promoting critical thinking than the encounter between Christians and Muslims.<sup>142</sup> In fact, he identified the ‘clash of civilisations’ as a clash of ignorance:

The thing which clashes together is not a clash of civilization – I prefer not to name the man who claimed this and has become to many something like a prophet – no, rather it is the clash of institutionalised ignorance. There is no society, no system of thought that does not produce its own ignorance. Ignorance happens unnoticed, we don’t feel that we are ignorant. It is present in all societies, as in all Arab societies.<sup>143</sup>

Similarly, Soroush saw the popularity of Huntington’s ideas as a response to what he called the ‘Islam of identity’ (that he contraposed against a faith-based ‘Islam of truth’<sup>144</sup>), an identity that, although expressed in the language of religion, was more cultural: ‘I fear that Muslims, in their confrontation with Western civilisation, wish to turn to Islam as an identity. And this is encouraged by certain Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers alike’.<sup>145</sup> In contrast, Soroush emphasised that religion is part of the culture, and like culture, it is a dynamic phenomenon. Civilisation, in his account, was a static stage of culture, as was

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<sup>142</sup> ‘Mohammed Arkoun n’essayait pas de favoriser la rencontre entre chrétiens et musulmans. Il voulait donner à penser, à réfléchir, il n’avait pas de responsabilité religieuse’. Benzine, Delorme, and Deway, ‘Mohammed Arkoun, Tisseur De Passerelles’: 9–10. [Translation my own]

<sup>143</sup> Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought, *A Report: Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought Presented the Ibn Rushd Prize 2003 to Prof. Mohammed Arkoun*, 25 August 2003, <http://www.ibn-rushd.org/English/PM-E2-6.1.04.htm>.

<sup>144</sup> Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, 23–24.

<sup>145</sup> ———, ‘Intellectual Autobiography: An Interview’, 23.

religion conceived in the same immutable way. As such, they were unable to engage in useful conversation. Any real dialogue, therefore, had to be a cultural, rather than merely religious, project:

I was wondering to myself why we should speak about a dialogue of civilizations and not about a dialogue of cultures? [...] Civilizations are basically the static stages of cultures. A culture is called a culture when it is in progress [...] then, we could speak about the dialogue of religions too, because religions are a part of cultures and they enjoy cultural dynamism. They can constantly change and develop.<sup>146</sup>

He recognised not only religious authorities, but more broadly individuals involved with culture (such as philosophers, historians, artists and, yes, clerics), as important actors in this dialogue.<sup>147</sup> In Soroush's view, Muslim intellectuals entered this dialogue as cultural figures rather than as religious authorities.<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, these thinkers often were perceived entirely within the religious framework, and despite their uneasiness at being uniquely categorised that way, they saw that it gave them both responsibilities and opportunities. Their endorsement of this framework partly reflected what Spivack has called 'strategic essentialism', ie the temporary acceptance of essentialising identity categorisations 'as a strategy for collective representation' in pursuit of socio-political goals.<sup>149</sup> Thus, while voicing their differences, they provisionally accepted their classification as organic Muslim intellectuals in interreligious dialogue, for the chance to shape the discussion over the 'clash of civilisations'. This can be seen, for instance, in their willingness to participate in conferences and lectures with other such thinkers. In

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<sup>146</sup> Safamanesh, 'Dialogue of Cultures Instead of Dialogue of Civilizations'.

<sup>147</sup> 'Cultures can sit down together and engage in dialogue. And the people who hold this dialogue between cultures are the people who are involved in culture; people who have a hand in culture and are its bearers. This can include philosophers, historians, artists, clerics and so on, and the dialogue between clerics is effectively a dialogue between religions'. *ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Kristina B. Wolff, 'Strategic Essentialism', in *International Encyclopedia of Geography*, eds. George Ritzer and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011).

2009, during a talk at Notre Dame University, Soroush remembered both Abu Zayd and Arkoun, who had recently passed away:

I should express my sorrow and grief over the untimely death of one of our greatest friends and scholars in Qur'anic Studies, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who died in 2010. 2010 was really a tragic year for the Islamic World: we lost three great scholars: Nasr Abu Zayd was one of them, then we lost Mohammad Arkoun from Algiers and France [...] All of these Islamic scholars were working on the Qur'an very diligently and Nasr Hamid perhaps was in the forefront of Qur'anic studies'.<sup>150</sup>

Soroush engaged with the legacies of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri during a special panel on them at Middle Eastern Studies Association annual conference in 2011.<sup>151</sup> Evaluating Abu Zayd's participation in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Arkoun said their work was not 'revolutionary' since it just 'popularises knowledge long since widely accepted'<sup>152</sup> but recognised Abu Zayd's value as: 'The first Muslim scholar to face the Arabic world directly by writing in Arabic while teaching at Cairo University tried to break the many taboos which prohibit the application of the most relevant achievements of contemporary linguistics to the Qur'an'.<sup>153</sup> Such words reflected both a recognition of the value of each other's work, but also an increasing sense of a shared common cause.

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<sup>150</sup> Soroush Abdolkarim, 'The Quran, Philosophy, and Law', paper presented at the The Qur'an Seminar, Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, 11 April 2013.

<sup>151</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Reflections on Contemporary Islamic Thought: Abdolkarim Soroush on the Legacies of Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd and Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri,' in *Middle East Studies Association of North America Annual Meeting Program* (Washington: MESA, 2011).

<sup>152</sup> Arkoun, 'Contemporary Critical Practices and the Qur'an'.

<sup>153</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 194.

### 2.3.2 Intellectual dimension: academics, public intellectuals and their audience

While Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's Muslim identity gave them legitimacy as organic voices, their position straddling academia and public sphere reinforced their intellectual legitimacy within the English language literature. Indeed, the putative detachment and symbolic capital of their academic affiliations also reinforced their authority among other contending Muslim voices in the public sphere; at the same time, their status outside academia secured their organic authenticity vis-à-vis the ivory-tower scholars. While their academic identity, and the related prestige, were defined by their institutional affiliations, their intellectual status was a more contested issue.<sup>154</sup> Their self-perception as intellectuals met diverse responses in the literature: support for their intellectual status on one side, and defiance rejection, on the other. Ahmad and Mahmoud Sadri, for instance, emphasised Soroush's career as 'super-intellectual' marked by 'selflessness and unbending commitment to the socially relevant truth'.<sup>155</sup> Rachid Benzine pointed to Arkoun's sense of responsibility as a 'scholar-thinker-teacher' and as an intellectual who 'researches, then thinks the object of his research, and finally teaches it in the public space'.<sup>156</sup> Similarly, Stefan Wild located Arkoun in the 'tradition of intellectuals who feel responsible' shown by his consideration of the relationship between political and religious spheres, on democracy, on the dialogue between the East and the West, and on 'Arab-Islamic humanism'.<sup>157</sup> Critiques of these thinkers challenged their definition as

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<sup>154</sup> Arkoun as professor at Sorbonne University, Abu Zayd as professor at Cairo University first and then Utrecht University in the Netherlands, Soroush as professor at Teheran University in Iran and then affiliated to several universities in Europe and North America.

<sup>155</sup> Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, xi.

<sup>156</sup> 'Pour lui, il y avait une lourde responsabilité du 'chercheur-penseur-enseignant' (une de ses autres triades fétiches). L'intellectuel doit chercher, puis penser l'objet de sa recherche, et enfin l'enseigner dans l'espace public'. Benzine, Delorme and Deway, 'Mohammed Arkoun, Tisseur De Passerelles': 23. [Translation my own]

<sup>157</sup> Stefan Wild, 'Mohammed Arkoun, Ibn Rushd Preis Für Freies Denken.' Laudatory speech presented at the Ibn Rushd Preis Für Freies Denken. Berlin, December 6, 2003. <http://www.ibn-rushd.org/Deutsch/Laudatio-D-03.htm>. (accessed 17 March 2019).

intellectuals on the basis not only of their epistemological approach (discussed above) but also of their perceived lack of grassroots base in society (discussed at the end of this section).

This contested definition of ‘intellectual’ – and the inclusion or exclusion from this category<sup>158</sup> – was part of a broader debate in the literature ever since the inception of the term, but had acquired particular significance for Islam and legitimate Muslim voices given the attention they drew during these years. As previously discussed (see chapter ‘Introduction’), definitions of intellectual as a social group often relied on the function they play in society.<sup>159</sup> As a social category with a specific history, the origin of ‘intellectuals’ has been traditionally traced back to the eighteenth-century *philosophes* and later to the Dreyfus affair in 1894.<sup>160</sup> It was on the latter occasion that the term was used for the first time as a noun – rather than an adjective – to designate those, among the French intelligentsia, who stood with Emile Zola in support of the falsely-accused Captain Dreyfus and against the military authorities. The word came, therefore, to indicate a somewhat collective identity, characterised by a critical voice and challenging attitude towards power. In this initial connotation, it tended to exclude academics and other thinkers who were either quietist or pro-establishment.<sup>161</sup> From the late-nineteenth century, but particularly in the late-twentieth century, the use of ‘intellectual’ to define a collective identity had come under increasing scrutiny as the proliferation of mass education, mass media and the internet multiplied the number of actors involved in the production and distribution of ideas. While some scholars believed this phenomenon

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<sup>158</sup> As Ali Gheissari pointed out ‘one methodological question in the study of intellectuals is how narrowly we should define their typological domain’. Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century*, 10.

<sup>159</sup> See also Max Weber, *Il Lavoro Intellettuale Come Professione: Due Saggi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977); Holub, ‘Intellectuals and Euro-Islam’, 187.

<sup>160</sup> Homa Katouzian, ‘Khalil Maleki: The Odd Intellectual Out’, in *Intellectual Trends in the Twentieth Century Iran*, ed. Negin Nabavi (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 24.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

empowered intellectuals' role in society, others saw it undermining their authority.<sup>162</sup> The emergence of contending voices challenged the mandarins' monopoly over the production and distribution – as well as the selection and legitimisation – of knowledge and values. Bourdieu deemed any *a priori* definition of intellectuals as problematic: all such classifications, in his view, were strictly linked to the question of *who* had the authority to define the category.<sup>163</sup>

In the Muslim world, intellectual activity – as a rational approach towards knowledge, based on dialogue and debate – had been a prominent feature since Islam's early days. The *ulama*, the traditional holders of knowledge within the Islamic world, maintained for centuries their monopoly based on a systematic study of *fiqh* and theology in addition to debates within seminaries.<sup>164</sup> Historically, they functioned as intellectuals in Gramsci's sense of producers and distributors of knowledge in society; however, the notion of intellectuals as a distinctive social group – which identified with the French intellectual tradition – appeared in the Muslim world only after the encounter with modernity, the introduction of mass education, and greatly increased interaction with Europeans. As a result, the end of the nineteenth century witnessed the development of a new educated elite and the decline of the *ulama*'s supremacy in the production of knowledge. Muslim intellectuals in this period represented a synthesis between modern secular thought and the *ulama*'s traditions.<sup>165</sup> Even in the Islamic context, however, the

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<sup>162</sup> 'It was with the emergence of the global information economy in the late twentieth century that saw communication professionals become not only still more numerous, but also more socially powerful than ever before. As a consequence, intellectuals have become ever more central to the very functioning of the (globalizing) economy because of the flows of data, information and ideas have become key commodities within the new economy'. In Louw, *The Media and Cultural Production*, 13.

<sup>163</sup> Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 221.

<sup>164</sup> John A. Simpson and Edmund S.C. Weiner, 'Ulema', in *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

<sup>165</sup> A broad literature has engaged with the issue, see for instance: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, 'Living and Working at the Wissenschaftskolleg', in *Jahrbuch 2002/2003*, ed. Angelika Leuchter (Berlin: Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 2004), 15; Taji-Farouki, ed. *Modern Muslim Intellectuals*, 10. See also Eickelman, 'Who Speaks for Islam?'; Esposito, ed. *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, 11–12.

definition of who considered themselves within the category of intellectuals was disputed. While some scholars saw intellectuals as a mainly modern phenomenon, others emphasised the importance of not reducing the intellectual experience in the Muslim world to merely a response to modernity and European influence.<sup>166</sup> Arkoun, for instance, defined members of the *ulama* as intellectuals *par excellence*, since like intellectuals they are ‘concerned with the question of meaning’.<sup>167</sup>

Despite the diversity of opinions over the definition of intellectuals, the literature seemed to gravitate around three main dimensions of intellectual activity: first, the action of production and transmission of ideas, knowledge, and values; second, the content produced and transmitted; and third, the audience they addressed. Most of the literature defining Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush as intellectuals recognised all three dimensions within their work: they were involved in the production and distribution of ideas; they produced a critical analysis of pre-existing knowledge; and had a sense of public commitment which translated into an effort to move beyond the academic ivory tower and their peers to address a broader public. In this sense, their public responsibility did not reflect merely the content of their work but also their social interactions. Indeed, all three thinkers saw engagement beyond their peers as an essential element of their work. Abu Zayd stated that he did not believe ‘in secluding myself in an ivory tower’,<sup>168</sup> given that ‘we have a problem in the Arab world of intellectuals only talking to intellectuals’.<sup>169</sup> In the same way, as Wild pointed out, the ivory tower was not the place for Arkoun.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Bamyeh, ‘Introduction’; Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*; Esposito, ed. *Makers of Contemporary Islam*; Kamrava, *The New Voices of Islam*, 11.

<sup>167</sup> Mohammed, ‘Quelques Tâches De L’intellectuel Musulman Aujourd’hui’: 2.

<sup>168</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 147.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>170</sup> ‘The ivory tower is not the place for Mohammed Arkoun’ [‘Der elfenbeinerne Turm ist nicht der Ort Mohammed Arkouns’. [Translation my own]. He added ‘On a background of *Islamology engagée*, a politically and socially engaged Islamic studies, he particularly cared about young Muslim immigrants in Central Europe. Mohammed Arkoun has also called this science ‘Applied Islamic Studies’ [‘Auf dem Hintergrund einer islamologie engagée, einer politisch und sozial engagierten Islamwissenschaft, hat er sich besonders um junge, muslimische Immigranten in Mitteleuropa gekümmert. Diese Wissenschaft hat

For all of them, public commitment also required engagement with the media to reach a broader audience. Abu Zayd emphasised the importance of engaging with the media to reach a more general audience rather than ‘writing books that no one reads’,<sup>171</sup> and again: ‘Writing books or articles or papers, it is not enough. It is also important to be engaged and to give back when it comes to the public debate in the public room [...] besides being an authority in academia’.<sup>172</sup>

This came in parallel with an effort to create a language accessible to the broader public, as Abu Zayd said: ‘I am testing my ability to express complex ideas in a simple and accessible way. That too is a challenge’.<sup>173</sup> He, in particular, emphasised the need to develop a ‘middle language’ set between the language of the elites and the one used in everyday conversations:

We have two languages here, the language of the elite and the language that is used in everyday communication for people in the Muslim world. How to find a middle language that will not scarify the depth of ideas to popularization. But there is a lot of popularization: people who, for example, preach. In intellectual talks, there is a lot of preaching in similarly intellectual language. And I think this is the real challenge.<sup>174</sup>

Arkoun’s *Rethinking Islam*, published in 1994, was structured as a series of questions and answers in a declared attempt to reach beyond the specialised audience through a more accessible format.<sup>175</sup> Soroush’s role as a co-founder of the magazine *Kian*, epitomised his engagement with the Iranian public sphere (although not translated for an anglophone readership). While all three shared this sense of public commitment, they differed in its

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Mohammed Arkoun auch angewandte Islamwissenschaft’ genannt’. Translation my own] Wild, ‘Mohammed Arkoun, Ibn Rushd Preis Für Freies Denken’.

<sup>171</sup> Atassi, Mohamed Ali (director), ‘Waiting for Abu Zayd’, (Egypt/Syria, 2010). ‘I realised that it was with the media [...] that I can reach more audience’ In Abu Zayd, ‘On Islam in Europe’.

<sup>172</sup> ———, ‘On Islam in Europe’.

<sup>173</sup> Atassi, ‘Waiting for Abu Zayd’.

<sup>174</sup> Abu Zayd, ‘On Islam in Europe’.

<sup>175</sup> As Arkoun wrote: ‘this book was conceived, written and published for a broad audience’. Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 1; Robert Lee, interview with the author, 26 June 2013.

implementation, both in terms of the actors with whom they engaged and the extent they succeeded in reaching a wider audience. In Arkoun's case, public engagement also translated into collaboration with political actors: he worked with the French government on several occasions (he was consulted by the French High Council for Integration and president Jacques Chirac appointed him a member of the Stasi Commission, which examined the application of the principle of *laïcité* in France<sup>176</sup>), as well as with the European Commission (he took part to initiatives organised by the then president of the European Commission Romano Prodi<sup>177</sup>). This was not the case for Abu Zayd, who collaborated with several think tanks in the Netherlands and Germany but never directly with governments;<sup>178</sup> nor for Soroush, who after his experience in the Iranian revolution, was reluctant to collaborate with Western political actors, and said: 'Let me reiterate in this connection that we must keep politicians out of this arena otherwise this convoy will remain lame until Judgement Day'.<sup>179</sup> Furthermore, despite their commitment to move beyond academic circles, they did not always reach a broader public. Except for Soroush, who obtained popularity as a leading intellectual figure in the reformist movement in Iran, these thinkers lacked a grassroots base within the broader Muslim community. Both Arkoun and Abu Zayd were understood to have limited contact with Muslim communities in Europe.<sup>180</sup> Armajani noticed a contradiction between Arkoun's putative commitment

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<sup>176</sup> Haut Conseil à l'Intégration, *Liens Culturels Et Intégration: Rapport Au Premier Ministre, Juin 1995* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1995).

<sup>177</sup> Assia Bensalah-Alaoui and Jean Daniel, *Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area: Report by the High-Level Advisory Group Established at the Initiative of the President of the European Commission* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2004).

<sup>178</sup> He engaged with them either writing report for them or participating to conferences organised by them. Christian W. Troll, *Progressive Thinking in Contemporary Islam: Conference Report* (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2005); Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*.

<sup>179</sup> Safamanesh, 'Dialogue of Cultures Instead of Dialogue of Civilizations'.

<sup>180</sup> In Arkoun's words: 'En France, mon audience est restreinte, tandis qu'au Caire ou à Alger, on me coupe la parole purement et simplement'. ['In France, my audience is restricted, while in Cairo or Algiers, I am cut off altogether'. Translation my own]. In Arkoun, *La Construction Humaine De l'Islam*, 2231.

to an accessible language and the complexity of most of his publications.<sup>181</sup> Arkoun himself recognised this difficulty, but he deemed it necessary in the pursue of critical knowledge: ‘The Arab reader, who might ask [...] “This Professor Arkoun expresses everything so complicated. We cannot understand him, and that’s why we do not read his books”. One critic said, “It’s a sea of concepts”. Yes, a sea of concepts, we need this sea of concepts’.<sup>182</sup>

Beyond the language barrier, Arkoun identified a second obstacle between what he called ‘émigré intellectuals’ and their readership in their countries of origin: the ‘ideological mistrust towards a thought, a literature, [and] forms of artistic expression considered too “foreign” to “national genius”.’<sup>183</sup> In other words, despite their efforts at public outreach they did not attain, with the exception of Soroush in Iran, mainstream popularity. As Stefano Allievi has pointed out, however, this failure did not necessarily contradict their public dimension as intellectuals, which, he argued, is by definition, non-mainstream<sup>184</sup>. In this sense, their outreach to community leaders, activists, and heads of civil society organisations (briefly discussed in chapter 4) still indicated their intellectual significance within the Muslim community. Despite the contentious nature of their label as intellectuals and their contested authority within the Muslim community as such, they were nevertheless increasingly defined as organic intellectuals by a broad literature in the European-Anglophone world.

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<sup>181</sup> Armajani, ‘Islamic Thought in the West’, 398, 99.

<sup>182</sup> Arkoun, ‘Kalimāt al-ustād Muhammad ’Arkūn’.

<sup>183</sup> Arkoun, ‘Quelques Tâches de l’Intellectuel Musulman Aujourd’hui’: 30.

<sup>184</sup> Stefano Allievi, conversation with the author, 12 September 2018.

## 2.4 Conclusion

As this chapter has discussed, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's thought and identity were important elements in their acceptance in the European-Anglophone literature. During a period of increased attention towards the Muslim world, their interpretations of Islam and their engagement in debates and languages familiar to the Western readership contributed to their cultural capital within the European-Anglophone literature. At the same time, their perceived identity as intellectuals and Muslims reinforced their legitimacy as authoritative organic voices, at least in the West. Both the content of their work and their position between academia and the public sphere reflected a quest for mediating figures able to interpret across different geographical-cultural contexts and genres, as well as translate across academic and public debates. At the same time, their origins in Muslim-majority countries combined with their actual locations in Europe or North America put them in the crosshairs between different cultural-geographical traditions. It was in this interplay between their projected categorisation by the European-Anglophone world as 'Muslims intellectuals', and their self-perception as 'public intellectuals', that the three thinkers emerged into the literature. Yet despite their shared self-perception as public intellectuals, they presented different conceptions of what this position entailed. They differed in their understanding of how personal faith fits within their intellectual project. And, finally, they differed in their sense of belonging (or not) to the Islamic reformist tradition. Despite these significant differences, their new socio-political context crystallised their classification within specific categories, bleaching out the nuances discussed in this chapter. In a conscious or unconscious echo of Spivak's 'strategic essentialism', these thinkers ultimately embraced the role assigned to them, to attempt to reframe the European-Anglophone discussion over Islam and the 'West'. The

next chapter will take a step back and explore the socio-historical context that brought interest in these categories in the first place.

## Chapter 3

### Socio-political context

The previous chapter explored the characteristics shared by Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush as Muslim intellectuals positioned between the Middle East and the ‘West’, and between academia and the public sphere, as they interrogated the relationship of Islam to modernity and democracy within an innovative hermeneutical framework. Their shared situation helped them satisfy the growing desire for knowledge about Islam, and the search for voices to challenge its assumed incompatibility with ‘Western’ values. The chapter claimed that the contemporary context created the demand for such explorations. This chapter shows how the socio-political developments between 1989 and 2010 at the national and transnational levels, shaped the production of knowledge by these three thinkers. It proceeds in three stages.

First, it briefly traces the emergence of Islam as a socio-political force (inside and outside Europe) during the second half of the twentieth century, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. Although slightly beyond the temporal scope of this study, this allows us to further contextualise the renewed attention to Muslims and Islam in the European-Anglophone literature. The second stage explores the emergence of Islam in the European public sphere following the end of the Cold War, which led to an increasingly polarised debate, and the consequent expansion and institutionalisation of the venues of knowledge production on Muslims and Islam during the 1990s. In this period, new actors became interested in Islam, often seeking ‘organic’ Muslim voices to support the religion’s compatibility with modernity and democracy.<sup>1</sup> Academia’s increased collaboration with

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<sup>1</sup> This is also observed by Günther, ‘Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought’, 158–59, note 38.

such outside actors favoured Muslim figures situated between the public and scholarly spheres. These trends underwent rapid expansion in the aftermath of 9/11, which led to the third part of this analysis: how these developments expanded Islam's participation in intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Such ecumenical initiatives enlarged the platform for these thinkers typologically and geographically. On one hand, the multiplication of such transnational opportunities meant that Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush were promoted in the global field by a more heterogeneous variety of actors. On the other, while this seemingly reinforced their intellectual authority, it also potentially undermined their legitimacy on a broader scale. The security framework underpinning several of these initiatives, the rise of Islamophobic and right-wing narratives, and questions about the authenticity of their grassroots base within the Muslim community all threatened to erode their reputations. While not discussing Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush specifically, this chapter explores the foundations on which this network was built, leaving the mapping of their specific networks to the next chapter.

### **3.1 The 1970s and 1980s: the de-secularisation and re-emergence of Islam**

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a global re-emergence of religion as a powerful socio-political force.<sup>2</sup> The rise of liberation theology in Latin America, Poland's Solidarity movement, American politicians' embrace of Christian fundamentalism, and the Iranian Islamic revolution challenged the dominant narrative of a gradual secularisation of societies around the world.<sup>3</sup> Europe's renewed attention to

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<sup>2</sup> Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 375–7.

<sup>3</sup> See Eickelman, 'Clash of Cultures?', 292; James Piscatori, 'The Rushdie Affair and the Politics of Ambiguity', *International Affairs* 66, no. 4 (1990): 779; Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1.

Islam – and the corresponding development of contemporary literature on Islam and Muslims – was influenced by the rising importance of religion at the global level and also by shifts in the Muslim presence in Europe.

### *The Muslim world outside Europe*

In the second half of the 1970s, Islam re-emerged as a social – and increasingly political – force throughout the Muslim world.<sup>4</sup> At the social level, the crisis of modernity, and negative reactions to modernising or pro-Western governments, fostered a growing interest in religion.<sup>5</sup> While exposing religious individuals to secular ideas and Western ways of life, mass education paradoxically provided them with tools to promote their religious views in the public arena.<sup>6</sup> In the Middle East the defeat of the Six-Day War, and the subsequent economic stagnation, contributed to the crisis of ruling Arab nationalist governments (such as Egypt's Nasserist regime and the Ba'ath regime in Syria).<sup>7</sup> The many failures of the national-welfare state in these countries created a vacuum that was often filled by religious organisations, significantly contributing to their rise as a social force.<sup>8</sup> Along with the broader decline of political ideologies (including Arab Nationalism and Communism), this drove members of these societies (including many in the intellectual elite) to seek alternative answers in Islam.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the

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<sup>4</sup> Joel Beinin and Joe Stork, *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 5. A broad literature has engaged with the rise of Islamism in these years. For overviews see for instance, Nikki R. Keddie, 'Iran: Change in Islam; Islam and Change', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11, no. 4 (1980): 529–30; Salman Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 18–22.

<sup>5</sup> Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), xi.; Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change*, 5, 290.

<sup>6</sup> Keddie, 'Iran: Change in Islam; Islam and Change': 529.

<sup>7</sup> See also Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 522; Richard Gott, 'Reason Blinks in the Light of Faith', *Guardian*, 20 April 1996.

Egyptian intellectual Hassan Hanafi, although not enthusiastic about Islamism, now perceived ‘it to be the only way’.<sup>10</sup> The 1970s oil boom caused sudden economic growth (and a corresponding boost to geopolitical importance) in some of the Gulf States, which became powerful actors shaping the international Islamic discourse.<sup>11</sup> Alongside these processes, such catalytic events as the Iranian Revolution (1979), Anwar Sadat’s assassination by a radical Islamist (1981), and the Hama’s uprising in Syria (1982) also brought political Islam to the global arena.<sup>12</sup> While Islam-inspired discourses and movements already existed, only during the 1980s did these acquire genuine political power. The creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the rise of Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan, and the Islamisation of Malaysia under Mahathir Muhammad are all indicated the ‘Islamic political revival’.<sup>13</sup> This reassertion of Islam as a global socio-political force, conjoined with what John Esposito called the ‘re-Islamisation’ of migrant communities in Europe (discussed in the following section), had important implications for the rise of Islam within the European public discourse.<sup>14</sup>

### *Muslim communities inside Europe*

Significant waves of migration from Muslim-majority countries to Europe started in the early twentieth century, particularly from formerly subaltern colonies to their colonisers’ home countries. This trend intensified during the economic boom of reconstruction after

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John L. Esposito, ‘Political Islam and Gulf Security’, in *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?*, ed. John L. Esposito (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 53, 59; Gerholm and Lithman, *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics*, 1; Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 33.

<sup>13</sup> Mona Kanwal Sheikh, ‘Jamaat-E-Islami’, in *Encyclopedia of Global Religion*, eds. Mark Juergensmeyer and Wade Clark Roof (London: Sage, 2012); Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7–8.

<sup>14</sup> John L. Esposito and Francois Burgat, ‘Introduction: Modernizing Islam and Re-Islamization in Global Perspective’, in *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East*, eds. John L. Esposito and Francois Burgat (2003), 11–14.

the Second World War; the 1950s and 1960s witnessed a substantial wave of labour migration towards Europe.<sup>15</sup> Initially, this phenomenon was perceived as temporary by both the hosts and the immigrants, but the situation changed during the 1970s: the 1973 oil crises and the 1972–74 recession altered this paradigm. A fall in demand pushed European governments to drastically limit labour migration, although they continued to allow family reunification.<sup>16</sup> With the arrival of more students and political refugees during the 1980s, this changed the character of the migrant presence in Europe.<sup>17</sup> For the first time, these communities showed themselves ‘concerned with opportunities for socio-religious expression within the context of the host society’,<sup>18</sup> and they became increasingly politically engaged. The 1970s had already seen a progressive organisation and institutionalisation of immigrant communities to address their specific demands. Immigration became a prominent political issue in several European countries, with the general public and governments.<sup>19</sup> In this phase, however, migrants were defined – and defined themselves – according to their ethnic, rather than religious, identity.<sup>20</sup> For instance, during these years most press articles identified them as Arabs, Pakistanis or Turks, rather than Muslims.<sup>21</sup> The 1980s saw the ‘re-Islamisation’ of Muslim

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<sup>15</sup> Gerd Nonneman, ‘Muslim Communities in the New Europe: Themes and Puzzles’, in *Muslim Communities in the New Europe*, eds. Gerd Nonneman, Tim Niblock and Bogdan Szajkowski (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996), 4–5. See also Gerholm and Lithman, *The New Islamic Presence*, 1, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Jørgen S. Nielsen, ‘Muslims, Christians and Loyalties in the Nation-State’, in *Religion and Citizenship in Europe and the Arab World*, ed. Jørgen S. Nielsen (London: Grey Seal, 1992), 2; Gerholm and Lithman, *The New Islamic Presence*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> ———, *The New Islamic Presence*, 1; Richard T. Antoun, ‘Sojourners Abroad: Migration for Higher Education in a Post-Peasant Muslim Society’, in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, eds. Ahbar S. Ahmed and Hasting Donnan (London: Routledge, 1994), 160.

<sup>18</sup> Gerd Nonneman, Tim Niblock and Bogda Szajkowski, eds., *Muslim Communities in the New Europe* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Holub, ‘Intellectuals and Euro-Islam’, 177. See also Hussain, ‘The Holy Grail of Muslims in Western Europe’.

<sup>20</sup> Nonneman, ‘Muslim Communities in the New Europe’, 4–5.

<sup>21</sup> At the transnational level, initiatives such as the ‘Euro-Arab Dialogue’, launched in 1973, and the Euro-Arab dialogue symposium in 1983, testify to the prioritisation of the ethnic, rather than religious, dimension. Times, ‘A Dialogue between Cousins’, *Times*, April 13 (1983); Derek Hopwood, ‘Euro-Arab Dialogue Symposium’, *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies. Bulletin* 10, no. 1 (1983): 69.

communities in Europe, as religious identity subsumed ethnicity as the framing category for immigrant groups.<sup>22</sup> Specific features of the Islamic presence in Europe prompted the shift. First, the growth of Muslim communities through continuing migration and high fertility reshaped the demography of the Islamic presence in Europe.<sup>23</sup> The newer generations, in particular, had the linguistic and cultural tools to participate in their national public spheres. Second, these communities' business activities became increasingly visible, which led to debates over their new economic status.<sup>24</sup> From the second half of the 1970s, religiously-inspired grassroots initiatives started to enjoy the financial support of the Gulf States. Newly enriched by the oil boom, they invested some of their petrodollars into religious infrastructures around the world.<sup>25</sup> These institutions promoted communities based more on their religious identity than on ethnic and national categories.<sup>26</sup> Third, the mobilisation of these groups increasingly took on a religious framework: the creation of more mosques and schools, the development of large Muslim organisations during the 1980s and 1990s, the rise of an Islamic religious leadership that replaced the 1970s–1980s secular leftist elites as the representative voice of the immigrant communities, and the rise of technologies that gave them access to the public sphere all contributed to a shift in the discourse over immigration.<sup>27</sup> This 'gradual mobilisation,' as Oussama Cherribi described it, entered national debates as a result of 'sudden mobilisations':<sup>28</sup> ie specific events such as the halal meat provision case (1984), the Honeyford affair (1988), the Rushdie *fatwa* (1989) – all in the United Kingdom – as well

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<sup>22</sup> Oussama Cherribi, 'The Growing Islamization of Europe', in *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East*, eds. John L. Esposito and Francois Burgat (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 193. See also Faisal Devji and Zaheer Kazmi, *Islam after Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Cherribi, 'The Growing Islamization of Europe', 194–96.

<sup>24</sup> Nonneman, 'Muslim Communities in the New Europe', 5.

<sup>25</sup> Grillo, 'Islam and Transnationalism': 863.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 195; Cherribi, 'The Growing Islamization of Europe'.

<sup>27</sup> ———, 'The Growing Islamization of Europe', 193, 99.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 200–01.

as *l'affaire du foulard* in France (1989).<sup>29</sup> Before engaging with this new phase, the next section will explore the impact of these transformations on the scholarship of Muslim thinkers and the production of Islamic knowledge in Europe.

### *Production of knowledge on Islam and Muslims*

Nikkie Keddie and John Voll noticed how political events and the 'Islamic revival' took Western scholars by surprise, who had been focussed on 'modernist' Muslim intellectual discourses.<sup>30</sup> Keddie saw these scholars' interest in Muslim intellectuals during the 1960s and 1970s as conditioned by the general assumption of a gradual secularisation and modernisation – often understood as Westernisation – of societies worldwide.<sup>31</sup> Muslim intellectuals had been seen as emerging actors challenging the power and influence of traditional religious establishments.<sup>32</sup> As Keddie underlined, studies on Islam and Islamic intellectual history focused on Western-influenced intellectuals, while overlooking 'primarily traditional thinkers' such as members of the *ulama* and the heads of Sufi orders.<sup>33</sup> This reality contributed to a shift in the academic literature, with new attention to the influence of religion and its social causes and implications.<sup>34</sup> In this view, the renewed attention to Muslim intellectuals in the 1990s took on a very different

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<sup>29</sup> Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 22. For a discussion of the British case see David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 157–96.

<sup>30</sup> Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change*, 3; Keddie, 'Iran: Change in Islam; Islam and Change': 528. For a comparative overview of the academic study of Islam see Clinton Bennett, *The Bloomsbury Companion to Islamic Studies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, 'Intellectuals in the Modern Middle East: A Brief Historical Consideration', *Daedalus* 101, no. 3 (1972).

<sup>32</sup> ———, 'Iran: Change in Islam; Islam and Change': 527; Piscatori, 'The Rushdie Affair and the Politics of Ambiguity': 774–75.

<sup>33</sup> This despite the historical primary role of 'traditionalists' in leading mass movements. See Keddie, 'Iran: Change in Islam; Islam and Change': 527.

<sup>34</sup> Ståle Knudsen, 'A Comparative Overview of Academic Discourse on Indigenous Knowledge in the Middle East and Africa', in *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Sustainable Development: Relevance for Africa* (Delhi: Kamla-Rah Enterprises, 2007), 16–17; Keddie, 'Iran: Change in Islam; Islam and Change': 528–29. See also Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, 'The Revivalist Literature and the Literature on Revival: An Introduction', in *The Contemporary Islamic Revival: A Critical Survey and Bibliography*, eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, John O. Voll and John L. Esposito (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

perspective than it had during the 1960s and 1970s: ie a reassessment and redefinition of the growing importance of religion in the public sphere (rather than its diminishment).

The 1970s witnessed renewed attention in the West towards the study of Islam and Muslim societies. At this stage, however, the scholarship was still focused on Muslim-majority countries, and more specifically, those of the Middle East.<sup>35</sup> Studies on immigration and the Muslim presence in Europe were relatively rare at annual conferences of sociological associations in Britain and France during these years.<sup>36</sup> In the public sphere, media coverage of Islam – albeit greatly increased since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 – still revolved around the Middle East, as an outsider phenomenon marginal to the public discussion.<sup>37</sup> But media coverage shifted by the second half of the 1980s: the publication of *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe* in 1988 testified to this transfer of academic attention from the ethnic to the religious dimension of Muslim immigration in Europe.<sup>38</sup> However, as Nielsen pointed out, in Western Europe, this attention continued to be more concerned with its social implications and paid little attention to the new European-Islamic discourse.<sup>39</sup> As Gerholm and Lithman commented in 1988: ‘We have no analysis of contemporary Muslim intellectuals in Europe and their work. We have no survey of the impressive Muslim publishing efforts centred largely in London. We have no study of the image of Islam propagated in the media’.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the increase of ethnic-cultural production during the 1970s and 1980s specific to these communities, European intellectuals remained more concerned with

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<sup>35</sup> Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 34. See also Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*.

<sup>36</sup> Holub, ‘Intellectuals and Euro-Islam’, 180.

<sup>37</sup> Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change*, 375. See also Holub, ‘Intellectuals and Euro-Islam’; Gerholm and Lithman, *The New Islamic Presence*.

<sup>38</sup> ———, *The New Islamic Presence*.

<sup>39</sup> Jorgen S. Nielsen, ‘New Centres and Peripheries in European Islam?’, in *Shaping the Current Islamic Reformation*, ed. Barbara A. Roberson, *History and Society in the Islamic World* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 65.

<sup>40</sup> Gerholm and Lithman, *The New Islamic Presence*, 3.

‘their own others’, namely, the working class.<sup>41</sup> As Binder observed: ‘Western intellectuals read very little of what Muslim intellectuals write. Still, insofar as these [Muslim] thinkers explore Western ideas and confront them with the hegemonic forms of Muslim thought, they carry out the dialogue in their works’.<sup>42</sup> Thus, until the end of the 1980s, the Muslim presence in Europe was not a primary intellectual concern in Western countries. Then, as previously mentioned, certain catalytic events such as the Rushdie *fatwa* (1989) and *l’affaire du foulard* in France (1989) occurred at roughly the same time as the geopolitical scene was being radically transformed after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and helped shift attention towards Islam. In other words, despite attracting the interest of specialised circles during the early 1980s, Islam properly entered the European public debate only at the very end of the decade.

### **3.2 The 1990s: the emergence of Islam in the European public sphere and rise in the production of knowledge on Islam and Muslims**

As discussed, the early 1980s witnessed increased attention to Islam as a social and political force in the specialised fields, and the notable expansion of the literature on political Islam and Islamic immigration to Europe testifies to this new tendency.<sup>43</sup> However, until 1989 such analyses were mainly confined to this specialised literature. This shifted in the 1990s, because of the combination of broader geopolitical developments and highly-publicised domestic events. Many scholars agree that the end of the Cold War in 1989 was the crucial moment for the emergence of Islam in the

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<sup>41</sup> Holub, ‘Intellectuals and Euro-Islam’, 179–80.

<sup>42</sup> Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Arkoun, ‘The Study of Islam in French Scholarship’, 40; Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics*, 1; Gerholm and Lithman, *The New Islamic Presence*.

Western European public sphere. In 1995, Willy Claes, NATO's former secretary-general, defined radical Islam as the biggest threat to the West, replacing the danger from communism.<sup>44</sup> Some authors have pushed this argument further, hypothesising that a deliberate search for a new enemy to replace the communist threat contributed to the identification of Islam as the primary opponent of the West.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, at the geopolitical level, the vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union favoured the rise of Islamist movements in many regions of the world. Al-Azmeh noticed how during the Cold War some of these Islamist movements enjoyed the support of the United States and its allies, as they attempted to counterbalance Soviet influence on conflicts in Malaya in the 1950s, Indonesia in 1965, and Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>46</sup> But after the Soviet Union collapsed and the strategic equilibrium was broken, these movements had the opportunity to expand in these countries (among others). This growth at national levels paralleled a newly-intensified Islamic identity for many migrant communities in Europe.<sup>47</sup>

The catalytic events of this period, such as the Rushdie *fatwa* in the United Kingdom and *l'affaire du foulard* in France, are generally recognised as the watershed for the new prominence of Muslim voices in the European public sphere.<sup>48</sup> It is essential to stress that these events were not so important, *per se*, but because of their temporal

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<sup>44</sup> Economist, 'Living with Islam', *Economist*, 18 March 1995.

<sup>45</sup> Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change*, 387. More generally see Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 35; John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2–3.

<sup>46</sup> Aziz Al-Azmeh, 'Islamic Fundamentalism', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon, 2001), 7934. Roy noticed that this support lasted until the Gulf War. Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 130–31.

<sup>47</sup> Mandaville, 'Towards a Critical Islam', 133.

<sup>48</sup> Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 39; Shane Brighton, 'British Muslims, Multiculturalism and UK Foreign Policy: "Integration" and "Cohesion" in and Beyond the State', *International Affairs* 83, no. 1 (2007): 7; Seán McLoughlin, 'The State, New Muslim Leaderships and Islam as a Resource for Public Engagement in Britain', in *European Muslims and the Secular State*, eds. Jocelyne Cesari and Seán McLoughlin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 59.

location at a specific historical junction. It was the new geopolitical environment following the end of the Cold War, and the increasing visibility of the Muslim presence in Europe, that made them into battlegrounds for contending forces.<sup>49</sup> While debates and activism had already existed at the local level, these trends helped propel them onto national agendas.<sup>50</sup> In other words, despite not being the initial causes of these phenomena, these episodes directed media and public attention to these ongoing processes, moving debates from the local to the national arena. This, in turn, was crucial to generating more structured policies and institutionalised activism. The Gulf War (1990–1991) furthered the political engagement of Muslim communities in Europe and the development of transnational ties among Muslim activists: the broad mobilisation in opposition to the war testified to this pattern.<sup>51</sup> These ties were strengthened by the Bosnian genocide (1992–1995), which reinforced the sense of belonging to a Muslim community transcending national and ethnic boundaries.<sup>52</sup> In particular, as Ahmed noticed, that the persecutions targeted secularised and ‘Europeanised’ Muslims seemed to undermine the possibility of real integration and acceptance in Europe, furthering the alienation in newly-established Muslim communities.<sup>53</sup> These historical developments had important repercussions by bringing considerably more attention to Muslim issues from governmental and international organisations.<sup>54</sup> The result was a gradual

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<sup>49</sup> Piscatori, ‘The Rushdie Affair and the Politics of Ambiguity’: 785.

<sup>50</sup> Steven Vertovec, ‘Muslims, the State, and the Public Sphere in Britain’, in *Muslim Communities in the New Europe*, eds. Gerd Nonneman, Tim Niblock and Bogda Szajkowski (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996), 171.

<sup>51</sup> Pnina Werbner, ‘Divided Loyalties, Empowered Citizenship? Muslim in Britain’, *Citizenship Studies* 4, no. 3 (2000): 309–10.

<sup>52</sup> Allievi, ‘Islam in the Public Space’: 18, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed and Hasting Donnan, ‘Islam in the Age of Postmodernity’, in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, eds. Akbar S. Ahmed and Hasting Donnan (London: Routledge, 1994), 7.

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the French context see Anne-Laure Zwillling, ‘L’enseignement de l’Islam dans les Universités en France: Une Histoire Mouvementée’, in *Droit Et Religion. Etudes En L’honneur De Francis Messner*, eds. Marc Aoun and Jeanne-Marie Tuffery-Andrieu (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2014), 239.

institutionalisation of the venues of knowledge production on the subject, and a more polarised debate in both academia and the public sphere. It also stimulated the expansion and diversification of the actors involved in the discussion of Islam, including academia, policymakers, media, and civil society organisations. This ‘typological expansion’ of the network of actors involved created a fertile ground for thinkers such as Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush positioned between different specialisations.

### **3.2.1 Polarisation of attitudes and debates on Muslims and Islam**

The socio-political developments discussed so far brought Islam and Muslims greater public attention but also resulted in more-polarised attitudes. On one hand, a negative perception found fertile ground in xenophobic and Islamophobic discourses across Europe (as documented in many reports during these years):<sup>55</sup> liberal and radical intellectuals who used to support ‘the Muslim cause,’ Cesari and El-Affandi pointed out, now turned critical towards them.<sup>56</sup> On the other, new Muslim and non-Muslim actors within the media, civil society, and national and international institutions, who attempted to promote dialogue and counterbalance negative perceptions of Islam, became interested in these thinkers as ‘moderate voices’. Their combined efforts led to the creation of fora for ‘moderate’ and ‘organic’ voices. To quote Ahmed: ‘While many news headlines

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<sup>55</sup> El-Affendi, ‘The People on the Edge: 22. Holub, ‘Intellectuals and Euro-Islam’, 176–77. See also the reports: Iqra Trust, *Research on Public Attitudes to Islam* (London: Iqra Trust, 1991). And Haut Conseil à l’Intégration, ‘Conditions Juridiques et Culturelles de l’Intégration: Mars 1992’, in *1990–2010: 20 Ans Au Service De L’intégration* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> El-Affendi, ‘The People on the Edge’: 22. Jocelyne Cesari, ‘Rethinking Secularism: Muslims in European Public Spheres and the Limits of Liberal Theories of Citizenship’, *The Immanent Frame: Secularisms, Religion and the Public Sphere*, 23 April 2010, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/04/23/muslims-euro-publics>.

tended to cast these confrontations in fairly stark terms, a number of television panel discussions and broadsheet leaders were informed by more moderate Muslim voices'.<sup>57</sup>

This polarisation within the broader society was reflected in the intellectual debates in these years.<sup>58</sup> They mostly gravitated around two main poles: on one side, a supposed ontological dichotomy positing that Islam and the West were fundamentally contradictory (what Lockman called the 'neo-orientalist' position);<sup>59</sup> on the other, a belief that the current situation within the Muslim world was the result of contemporary, historical and political circumstances, rather than deeply ingrained in the nature of Islam.<sup>60</sup> In 1990 Bernard Lewis published 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', an article in which he posited that the spread of Islamic fundamentalism arose from the clash between Western and Islamic civilisations and Muslims' anger towards the 'domination of infidels over true believers'.<sup>61</sup> The scholar saw Islam as incompatible with democracy and Islamic fundamentalism supplanting communism as the main 'threat' to the West. Lewis' ideas found fertile terrain in the concurrent debate over the Gulf War and were soon echoed by other public figures such as the *New York Times*' columnist Thomas Friedman.<sup>62</sup> Such claims gave spurious 'legitimacy' to American military intervention in the Middle East as they attributed the conflict to the nature of Muslim civilisation, rather than to the policies of the United States and its regional allies.<sup>63</sup> However, it was Samuel Huntington's work, above all, that popularised Lewis' ideas.<sup>64</sup> His article 'The Clash of

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<sup>57</sup> Ahmed and Donnan, 'Islam in the Age of Postmodernity', 9.

<sup>58</sup> Julie-Ann Davies, 'Clashing Civilisations or Conflicting Interests?', *Geopolitics* 13, no. 4 (2008).

<sup>59</sup> Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 220.

<sup>60</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London: Routledge, 1992), 190.

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Lewis, 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', *The Atlantic*, September (1990).

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Friedman, 'A Dreamlike Landscape, a Dreamlike Reality', *New York Times*, 28 October 1990; Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 219; Piscatori, 'The Rushdie Affair and the Politics of Ambiguity': 779.

<sup>63</sup> Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 218.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

Civilisations?’ published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, and expanded into the book *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* in 1996, fuelled the debate on the relationship between Islam and the West. It pushed intellectuals and activists – inside and outside academia – to either support or reject his position.<sup>65</sup>

In response to such literature, a broad scholarship disputed the existence of a monolithic ‘East’ and ‘West’ and saw the development of Islamism over the previous century as a reaction to modernity rather than the result of an ontological condition of Islam.<sup>66</sup> These scholars often referred to Edwards Said’s critique of Orientalism and questioned the existence of a solely Western view of modernity, suggesting the necessity to re-evaluate traditional Eurocentric canons as they had been applied to the study of Islam and Muslim societies.<sup>67</sup> The topic chosen for the annual BRISMES conference in 1997 was typical of this: ‘Rethinking Islam: New Lines of Interpretation of Islam in Society, Law and Politics by Muslim and Western Scholars’.<sup>68</sup> In parallel to the attention paid to radical Islam, therefore, these years also witnessed the proliferation of literature exploring the relations between Islam and democracy, civil society, human rights, the public sphere, interreligious dialogue, and related issues.<sup>69</sup> As Soroush noted during a 1997 interview: ‘In the various conferences and workshops that I have recently attended [...] the issue of Islam and Modernism has been very high on the agenda. [...] Human rights is also one of the interesting topics that continues to occupy the minds of many

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<sup>65</sup> Samuel Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs*, Summer (1993); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

<sup>66</sup> Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 219; Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam*, 190.

<sup>67</sup> Said, ‘The Clash of Ignorance’; Dale F. Eickelman, ‘Islam and the Languages of Modernity’, *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000); Muhammad Khalid Masud, Armando Salvatore and Martin van Bruinessen, *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>68</sup> ‘Brismes Annual Conference’, *Brismes Newsletter* 11, no. 1 (1996): 10. See also Georges Khalil, ‘The Working Group Modernity and Islam’, *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 2 (1999): 36.

<sup>69</sup> Abdul Aziz Said, Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Meena Sharify-Funk, *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers'.<sup>70</sup> Although this response represented the majority of scholars of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, as well as an increasing number of actors from outside the academe, it did not overcome – at least in the immediate term – the dominant negative narrative of the public debate.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, this narrative was important for Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush: by raising their profile, it provided them with greater access to the English-speaking world, often beyond their scholarly niches.

### **3.2.2 Typological expansion: new actors interested in contemporary Muslim thinkers**

The heightened interest in Islam and the polarisation of attitudes towards Muslims led to the increased involvement of, and collaborations between, actors from diverse fields in the production of knowledge on Muslims and Islam. This reflected the varying interests of the many actors involved. For Muslim activists and civil society organisations, both within and outside the Islamic world, these thinkers provided intellectual heft and legitimacy to existing public sentiments and demands. For activists in Europe countering Islamophobic discourses, they represented 'organic' voices testifying to the compatibility of Islam and 'Western' values. For organisations in Muslim-majority countries promoting interpretations of Islam in line with gender equality, human rights, and democracy, these authors provided a coherent framework for their claims.<sup>72</sup> For policymakers in Europe, promoting these thinkers, often through academic projects, was a way to foster greater social cohesion through a better understanding of Islam and Muslims, on one side, and

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<sup>70</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Seraj's Interview with Dr. Soroush', Abdolkarim Soroush Website, April 1997, [www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19970400-Seraj\\_Interview\\_with\\_Dr.\\_Soroush.htm](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19970400-Seraj_Interview_with_Dr._Soroush.htm).

<sup>71</sup> Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 248.

<sup>72</sup> Among them are organisations such as Reset Dialogues on Civilisation and Sisters in Islam.

the promotion of ‘moderate voices’ on the other.<sup>73</sup> Finally, for academics, collaborations with actors such as policymakers, grassroots organisations, and media fulfilled a sense of social responsibility instigated by Islamophobic discourses in the public sphere.<sup>74</sup> This increased collaboration across fields helped create cross-disciplinary platforms that favoured actors such as Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush.

### *Civil society*

Parallel to – and in dialogue with – Islamist discourses, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of an intellectual and socio-political condition (and project) that Asef Bayat and Olivier Roy have defined as ‘post-Islamism’,<sup>75</sup> which attracted actors who attempted ‘to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty’.<sup>76</sup> Bayat observed how post-Islamism often emerged from the necessity for political Islam to redefine itself once in power and saw examples of this trend all over the Middle East. For instance, in the rise of civil society, a fervid press, and more expansive intellectual debates in Iran during the 1990s; the new direction of the Hizbullah movement in Lebanon; the creation of an ‘inclusive’ Islamic party in Turkey; the formation of an ‘Islamoliberal’ reformist movement in Saudi Arabia; and the rise of the Al-Wasat party in Egypt as ‘an alternative to both militant Islamists and Muslim Brotherhood’.<sup>77</sup> These socio-political developments were closely intertwined, for Bayat and Roy, with the rise of an intellectual discourse combining Islam with attention to the individual, pluralism, universalism, and

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<sup>73</sup> Sara Silvestri, ‘Institutionalising British and Italian Islam’, in *Perceptions of Islam in Europe: Culture, Identity and the Muslim ‘Other’*, eds. Hakan Yilmaz and Çağla E. Aykaç (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> John L. Esposito, ‘2013 AAR Presidential Address: Islam in the Public Square’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 82, no. 2 (2014): 294–95.

<sup>75</sup> Asef Bayat, ‘What Is Post-Islamism?’, *ISIM Review* 16, Autumn (2005); Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*.

<sup>76</sup> Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic*, 11.

<sup>77</sup> ———, ‘What Is Post-Islamism?’.

human rights, democracy, and gender equality.<sup>78</sup> Thinkers such as Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush represented the intellectual face of these existing trends within broader Muslim societies. According to Roy, the emergence of a transnational Islamic identity during this period was leading a ‘de-territorialisation’ of Islam, which forced a renegotiation of the religion’s meaning, challenging traditional authorities within the community.<sup>79</sup>

By the 1990s Muslim activists were being presented as ‘organic’ authors in the European-Anglophone literature. Voll argued that thinkers such as Abdelwahab El-Affendi, Hassan Hanafi and Bassam Tibi started discussing what had previously been analysed mainly by non-Muslim scholars.<sup>80</sup> During the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, this ‘ethnic’ cultural production – often written in the languages of origin – did not permeate European national public debates.<sup>81</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, Alexandre Caeiro, and Dilwar Hussain noted that until the 1980s even debates on multiculturalism in Europe largely excluded minority voices: it mainly consisted of non-Muslim scholars writing about Islam.<sup>82</sup> By the second half of the 1980s, this had shifted to an increased interest in ‘organic’ voices able to speak for the community. In both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries, therefore, these thinkers were read and endorsed because they reflected sentiments and demands that already existed.<sup>83</sup> This can be seen in Soroush’s role as one of the leading intellectual voices of the reformist movement in Iran; the interest in Arkoun and Abu Zayd by Islamic youth movements in Indonesia; and the collaboration between the three thinkers and transnational, non-governmental

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<sup>78</sup> Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 26, 99.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 97–99.

<sup>80</sup> Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change*, 383–5.

<sup>81</sup> What Holub called ‘organic intellectuals’, ie writers and artists, of immigrant origins describing in their works their experiences as immigrants. See Holub, ‘Intellectuals and Euro-Islam’, 175.

<sup>82</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, Alexandre Caeiro and Dilwar Hussain, *Islam and Fundamental Rights in Europe* (Brussels: European Commission. Directorate-General Justice and Home Affairs, October 2004), 58.

<sup>83</sup> Bamyeh, ‘Introduction’, 15–17.

organisations such as Musawah, a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family.<sup>84</sup>

### *Policymakers*

Although these thinkers had already attracted the attention of both Muslim and non-Muslim segments of society, the interest of political actors had a significant role in their growing visibility in the public debate. Indeed, the 1990s witnessed the multiplication of initiatives by national and international institutions, targeting the production of knowledge on Muslims and Islam. The creation in 1990 of the European Association for Middle East Studies (EURAMES) as an umbrella organisation gathering different national Middle Eastern studies at the European level, the project Modernity and Islam in Germany in 1996, the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Muslim World (ISIM) in the Netherlands in 1998, and the Institut d'Études de l'Islam et des Sociétés du Monde Musulman (IISMM) in France in 1999, all exemplified this trend.<sup>85</sup> For the European Union and many European governments, involved in these years in the creation of 'national Islams,' thinkers such as Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush served a twofold purpose. First, as experts they were consulted to understand and map the Muslim reality, both domestically and internationally; second, as alternative authorities within Islam, they were promoted to emphasise the congruence between Islamic and 'European' values, to

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<sup>84</sup> Ken Miichi, 'Islamic Youth Movements in Indonesia', *IIS Newsletter* 32, November (2003); Mona Abaza, 'Civil Society and Islam in Egypt: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd', *Journal of Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies* 2, no. 2 (1995); Mahmoud Alinejad, 'Coming to Terms with Modernity: Iranian Intellectuals and the Emerging Public Sphere', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 13, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>85</sup> Derek Hopwood and Paul Dumont, 'Letter to the Members of the European Association for Middle Eastern Studies', *European Association for Middle Eastern Studies*, October 1995, <https://org.uib.no/smi/eurames/lp2.html>; Wolf Lepenies, 'Introduction', in *Transcript of the Carl Heinrich Becker Lecture of the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung* (Berlin: Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008), 21.

foster social cohesion within Europe, and espouse a favourable attitude towards the ‘West’ in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>86</sup>

During these years the European Union undertook a gradual formalisation of its relationship with Muslim communities: what had started in the 1980s as an *ad hoc* engagement between institutions, media specialists, and intellectuals, now acquired a more coherent structure.<sup>87</sup> This translated into more attention to, and therefore more funding for, the institutionalisation of knowledge production on Islam in Europe. In 1991, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and UNESCO jointly organised a colloquium, for which Arkoun acted as general *rapporteur*, on the contribution of Islam to European culture.<sup>88</sup> The resulting report, adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Recommendation 1162, expressed concerns about misrepresentations of Islam:

Islam has [...] suffered and is still suffering from misrepresentation, for example through hostile oriental stereotypes, and there is very little awareness in Europe either of the importance of Islam’s past contribution or of Islam’s potentially positive role in European society today. Historical errors, educational eclecticism and the over-simplified approach of the media are responsible for this situation.<sup>89</sup>

The document identified this as one the main causes of the prevailing idea of incompatibility between Islamic and European values: ‘The main consequence of such

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<sup>86</sup> Silvestri, ‘Institutionalising British and Italian Islam’. See also Silvio Ferrari and Rossella Bottoni, ‘The Institutionalization of Islam in Europe’, in *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>87</sup> Sara Silvestri, *Islam and the EU: The Merits and Risks of Inter-Cultural Dialogue* (Brussels: European Policy Centre, 2007), 1.

<sup>88</sup> Maria de Puig, *Report on the Contribution of the Islamic Civilisation to European Culture* (Brussels: Council of Europe, 1991); Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Conclusions by the General Rapporteur’, paper presented at the Council of Europe Colloquy on the Contribution of the Islamic Civilization to European Culture, Strasbourg, 28–30 May 1991.

<sup>89</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Recommendation 1162, ‘Contribution of the Islamic civilisation to European culture’, 19 September 1991, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=15196&lang=en>. (accessed 10 January 2020).

misrepresentation [...] is that Islam is too often perceived in Europe as incompatible with the principles which are at the basis of modern European society (which is essentially secular and democratic) and of European ethics (human rights and freedom of expression)'.<sup>90</sup> While acknowledging Europeans' responsibility, the document also pointed to Muslims' 'lack of critical intellectual examination or intolerance'<sup>91</sup> as contributing to this misrepresentation, implying the necessity of figures able to promote critical approaches to Islamic religion and knowledge. More explicitly, the document suggested measures to advance scientific knowledge on Islam, including the introduction of the study of Islam into mainstream disciplines to overcome the isolation of the departments of oriental and area studies:

Scientific research on Islamic matters should be encouraged, *inter alia*, by increasing the number of Arabic and Islamic professorial posts in universities. Islam should also be included in mainstream studies, for example Islamic history should be taught in history departments, Islamic philosophy in philosophy departments and Islamic law in law departments, and should not be relegated, as is often the case, to oriental language departments.<sup>92</sup>

Two years later, the European Commission funded the publication of the first directory of 'European expertise' (including both individuals and institutions), 'on the Middle East and North Africa', as well as Islam.<sup>93</sup> The project was undertaken by the recently-founded European Association of Middle Eastern Studies (EURASMES) and was the first attempt to map the principal individuals and institutions in the field of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies in Europe. The publication included Arkoun, but not Abu Zayd or Soroush, neither

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Emma Murphy, Gerd Nonneman, and Neil Quilliam, eds., *European Expertise on the Middle East and North Africa: A Directory of Specialists and Institutions* (Durham: European Association for Middle East Studies 1993), 2.

of whom emerged in the literature until the second half of the decade. Sara Silvestri noticed how European policies in these years were framed within the banner of ‘intercultural dialogue’ (ICD), as promulgated by Article 6.1 of the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities:

The Parties shall encourage a spirit of tolerance and intercultural dialogue and take effective measures to promote mutual respect and understanding and co-operation among all persons living on their territory, irrespective of those persons’ ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity, in particular in the fields of education, culture and the media.<sup>94</sup>

With the Barcelona Process (1995), this intercultural dialogue was formally endorsed by the European Union as a tool of foreign relations.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the Barcelona Declaration emphasised: ‘The importance of intercultural dialogue, and of dialogues between religions; the importance of the role the media can play in the reciprocal recognition and understanding of cultures; cultural exchanges, knowledge of other languages, implementation of educational and cultural programmes that respect cultural identities’.<sup>96</sup> With this aim, the Commission committed itself to support ‘periodic meetings of representatives of religions and religious institutions as well as theologians, academics’,<sup>97</sup> while urging member states to promote ‘organic’ voices. Article 9.4 stressed ‘the need for special measures with the dual aim of facilitating access to the media for persons belonging to national minorities and promoting tolerance and cultural pluralism’.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Council of Europe, ‘Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.’ In *European Treaty Series*, no. 157 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1995); Sara Silvestri, ‘EU Relations with Islam in the Context of the Emp’s Cultural Dialogue’, *Mediterranean Politics* 10, no. 3 (2005): 399; ———, *Islam and the EU: The Merits and Risks of Inter-Cultural Dialogue*.

<sup>95</sup> Pietro de Perini, ‘The Origin of Intercultural Dialogue Practice in European Union External Action’, *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>96</sup> European Commission. “Barcelona Declaration. Adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference.” November 27-28, 1995. [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/euromed/docs/bd\\_en.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/euromed/docs/bd_en.pdf). (accessed 20 March 2019).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Council of Europe, ‘Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities’.

Several European governments got directly involved in these years in the production of knowledge on Islam and Muslims. As Soroush recognised: 'I believe that in societies like this, both the Muslims and the governments have a duty to create an atmosphere of understanding and tolerance; an atmosphere in which no one feels constricted. European governments, in particular, are conscious of this and try to ensure that there's no tension'.<sup>99</sup> In Germany, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research funded a survey on the social and cultural scholarship on the Muslim world and committed itself to strengthen the field of Islamic studies.<sup>100</sup> Projects such as *Modernity and Islam*, started in 1996, were 'Initiated under the impression that in Germany, indeed in Europe as a whole, the level of scientific and intellectual interest in Islam neither reflects its growing political importance nor its role as a reference for modern and post-modern criticism'.<sup>101</sup> In the Netherlands, in 1998, the Minister of Education created the Netherlands' Centre for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, later renamed the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM).<sup>102</sup> In France, the government's attention to the production of knowledge on Muslims started during the 1980s and culminated with the establishment, in 1989, of the Haut Comité à l'Intégration (HCI), a governmental organisation where academics worked alongside policymakers to deal with issues relating to integration and Islam.<sup>103</sup> A second wave of attention by the French government led to the creation, in 1999, of the Institut d'Études de l'Islam et des Sociétés du Monde Musulman (IISMM) by the Ministry of National Education, Research,

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<sup>99</sup> Ghaffarian, 'Amsterdam Debate'.

<sup>100</sup> Khalil, 'The Working Group Modernity and Islam': 36.

<sup>101</sup> Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 'The Working Group Modernity and Islam'. <http://www.wiko-berlin.de/en/institute/projects-cooperations/projects/archive/working-group-modernity-and-islam> (accessed 5 April 2013).

<sup>102</sup> *ISIM Annual Report 2002* (Leiden: ISIM, 2003), 63.

<sup>103</sup> President of the French Republic, Decree 89-912, December 19, 1989 Portant Création d'un Haut Conseil à l'Intégration. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000515771>. (accessed 8 April 2019). Also, Thomas Brisson, conversation with the author, 2 July 2018.

and Technology.<sup>104</sup> In the United Kingdom – despite individual initiatives such as the first endowed chair at the Centre for Islamic Studies, SOAS University of London (1996) and the first named chair in Islamic studies in the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University (1996) – the government’s involvement came only in the aftermath of the 2005 London attacks. A paradigmatic example in those years was the effort of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), the primary association for Middle Eastern and Islamic studies in the country, to pressure the British government for greater involvement. As the president of the BRISMES wrote: ‘The UK is declining compared with its main competitors. France and Germany continue to fund major research institutions in the subjects. In the aftermath of 9/11, the US government increased spending on the Middle East and Central Asian languages from \$78 million to \$98 million’.<sup>105</sup> According to Seán McLoughlin, Islam held an ambiguous presence in British politics during the early to mid-1990s.<sup>106</sup> Despite entering the national agenda, initiatives concerning the new Muslim reality were left, until the middle 1990s, mainly to non-governmental actors. For instance, a report on ‘Islamophobia’ was commissioned in 1997 by the Runnymede Trust, an independent public policy body.<sup>107</sup> Although at a different pace, depending on the country, these years saw an institutionalisation and proliferation of venues for knowledge production on the issue.

European governments’ attention, however, was not merely geared towards better knowledge and understanding of the domestic and international Muslim reality. The second concern of these governments was in establishing Muslim authorities, traditional

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<sup>104</sup> École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, ‘Institut d’Études de l’Islam et des Sociétés du Monde Musulman – IISMM’, <https://www.ehess.fr/fr/institut-d%C3%A9tudes-lislam-et-soci%C3%A9t%C3%A9s-monde-musulman-iismm> (accessed 12 June 2019).

<sup>105</sup> Noel Brehony, ‘Letter from the President’, *BRISMES Newsletter* 18 (2003).

<sup>106</sup> McLoughlin, ‘The State, New Muslim Leaderships and Islam’, 57–58.

<sup>107</sup> Gordon Conway, *Islamophobia a Challenge for Us All* (London: Runnymede Trust, 1997). See also Zafar Khan, ‘Muslim Presence in Europe: The British Dimension – Identity, Integration and Community Activism’, *Current Sociology* 48, no. 4 (2000): 40.

and non-traditional, who promoted interpretations of Islam in line with ‘national’ values. In France, the Haut Comité à l’Intégration addressed the role of French institutions in the training of imams.<sup>108</sup> In the Netherlands, the government involved Amsterdam University and the ISIM in the training of Muslim religious leaders.<sup>109</sup> Other initiatives engaged more broadly with knowledge production and the related question of authority within knowledge. This was the case of the project ‘New directions in Islamic Thought’ funded in 2004 by the Norwegian government, which offered Muslim reform thinkers a forum to present and discuss their ideas and develop strategies for further action.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, the research programme ‘The Production of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe’ by ISIM in 2001–2002 engaged with the creation of ‘European’ forms of Islam, grounded in locally-acquired knowledge, to answer new issues Muslims in Europe faced in their daily life.<sup>111</sup> The European policies which established this framework – attention to the production of knowledge on Islam and authoritative ‘organic’ voices promoting social cohesion – created a fertile ground for individuals such as Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush to provide socio-political analyses of the Muslim world, while promoting the compatibility of Islam with ‘Western values’.

### *Academics’ public engagement*

The broader interest in the production of knowledge on Muslims and Islam was also reflected by a higher engagement of scholars, particularly in the field of Middle Eastern

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<sup>108</sup> Haut Conseil à l’Intégration, *Liens Culturels et Intégration: Rapport Au Premier Ministre, Juin 1995* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1995).

<sup>109</sup> *ISIM Annual Report 2002*. See also Ghaffarian, ‘Amsterdam Debate’.

<sup>110</sup> See Lena Larsen, Kari Vogt, and Christian Moe, eds., *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 2.

<sup>111</sup> Stefano Allievi and Martin van Bruinessen, eds., *Producing Islamic Knowledge: Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Martin van Bruinessen, ‘The Production of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe’, *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 8 (2001); ———, ‘The Production of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe’, *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 12 (2003); *ISIM Annual Report 2002*, 16.

and Islamic studies, with actors outside the academia. This new socio-political context, as Said noticed, brought to the frontline the role of intellectuals and academics not only as consultants and ‘knowledge technocrats’ for policymakers but also as critical voices in the public debate.<sup>112</sup> Several authors have pointed to the Gulf War (1990–1991) as a crucial moment for reshaping the relationship between Middle Eastern and Islamic scholars and the broader public, particularly the media.<sup>113</sup> According to Hafez, during the war, many scholars decided to put aside their traditional suspicion and engage with the media to challenge the dominant discourse.<sup>114</sup> As Lisa Hajjar argued:

To realise the political potential of the current generation of oppositional academics, we must extend our work beyond the narrow confines of the academy to play a more active role in influencing public consciousness. [Re]claiming the public sphere for serious discussion of the affairs of the nation and the place of the US in the world is the real challenge for progressives, including those in Middle East studies.<sup>115</sup>

Despite the increased interaction of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies scholars with media and policymakers, their impact on the broader debate remained limited. Roger Owen pointed out how, rather than influencing governmental or media policies, academic authority was often used to legitimise already set agendas.<sup>116</sup> Discussing the academic response to the Gulf War, Patrick Wilcken also noticed how, despite the sense of public commitment by many scholars, only those supporting the dominant narrative got much

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<sup>112</sup> Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*.

<sup>113</sup> Patrick Wilcken, ‘The Intellectuals, the Media and the Gulf War’, *Critique of Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (1995); Kai Hafez, Karin Horner, and Verena Klemm, ‘The Rise and Decline of Opinion Leaders: The Changing Image of the Middle East and Islam in German Mass Media’, in *Islam and the West in the Mass Media*, ed. Kai Hafez (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2000).

<sup>114</sup> Kai Hafez, *The West and Islam in the Mass Media: Cornerstones for a New International Culture of Communication in the 21st Century* (Bonn: ZEI, 2000), 3–4.

<sup>115</sup> Hajjar and Niva, ‘(Re)Made in the USA’.

<sup>116</sup> Roger Owen, discussion with the author, 17 January 2013. This emerged also in the study: Donald P. Mullally and Gerald M. Gillmore, ‘Academic Participation in Communication Policymaking’, *Journalism Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1973).

exposure in the public sphere.<sup>117</sup> Ahmed pointed to the many academic experts on Islam, taking part in television debates or acting as government advisors, who portrayed Islam in hostile terms.<sup>118</sup> Scholars such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington became prominent academic voices in support of the US-led ‘War on Terror’. Other scholars in the United States, such as Fouad Ajami, Daniel Pipes and Martin Kramer – previously isolated within their disciplines – got increasingly involved with the American government.<sup>119</sup> The difficulties of translating discussions of ‘oppositional academics’ into political reality were a central subject of the seminar ‘Cultural Aspects of Conflict in the Middle East’ at the London School of Economics in April of 1991.<sup>120</sup> As Ziba Mir Hosseini, an anthropologist working on Muslim societies concluded: ‘If one takes the seminar as a “barometer” of what anthropology was to contribute to the understanding of events in a major world crisis, then one must admit it to be very little in a world in which *realpolitik* rules’.<sup>121</sup>

The lack of space in the dominant arenas, particularly the mass media, pushed many dissenting scholars to engage with oppositional grassroots actors – including independent media and activists – who operated in parallel spheres, such as through the internet or staging demonstrations (for instance, against the war in Iraq in February and March of 2003), to make their claims.<sup>122</sup> Many Middle Eastern and Islamic studies scholars reclaimed the importance of going outside the ivory tower, where the public

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<sup>117</sup> Wilcken, ‘The Intellectuals, the Media and the Gulf War’. A similar debate on the role of intellectuals and academic in support or opposing the war remerged a decade later on the occasion of the Iraq invasion. See, for instance, Chris Hedges, ‘The Treason of the Intellectuals’, *Truthdig*, 7 July 2015, <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-treason-of-the-intellectuals>.

<sup>118</sup> Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam*, 187.

<sup>119</sup> Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 254–64.

<sup>120</sup> Wilcken, ‘The Intellectuals, the Media and the Gulf War’: 58.

<sup>121</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, ‘RAI Public Seminar on the Cultural Aspects of the Gulf War’, *Anthropology in Action*, Autumn (1991): 6. Quoted by Wilcken, ‘The Intellectuals, the Media and the Gulf War’: 59.

<sup>122</sup> Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 249.

visibility of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush represented an asset in the efforts of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies scholars to reach beyond academia.

### 3.3 Post-9/11

Developments during the new century – including attacks carried by Muslim extremists, as well as hostile policies by Western governments towards Muslim populations<sup>123</sup> – had the effect of accelerating and radicalising processes started in the previous decade. Increased attention to Islam and the Middle East multiplied the literature on the subject but also intensified the polarisation of the debate. This was reflected in academia, where the growth of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies was stimulated by a marked rise in funding and student enrolment and the mushrooming of related institutions. The creation of the Institute of Middle East Central Asia and Caucasian Studies at St. Andrews University in 2003, the Centre for the Advanced Studies of the Arab World (CASAW) in 2006, the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies at Cambridge University in 2007, and the Berlin-based ‘Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe’ (EUME) research program in 2006, were all indicative of this trend.<sup>124</sup> However, this interest in the production of knowledge on Islam was increasingly framed within a security dimension. In this context, discussions over interreligious dialogue acquired a more explicit meaning as counterterrorism measures. This was also reflected in the multiplication of platforms for these thinkers, as a result of the expansion of these initiatives at the global level, as well as the intensification of collaborations among actors

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<sup>123</sup> Examples included the attacks carried in New York (2001), Madrid (2004), London (2005), the murder of Theo van Gogh (2004) but also the Bush administration’s ‘War on Terror’, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Danish cartoon controversy (2005), the ban on the minarets (2006).

<sup>124</sup> For an overview see the report of Jasser Auda et al, *HEFCE Report: International Approaches to Islamic Studies in Higher Education* (London: HEFCE, 2008).

from different fields (academia, policymakers, media, and civil society organisations). These four features – intensification of initiatives on Islam, the polarisation of the debate on Islam, the focus on security, and the geographical and typological expansion of these thinkers’ platforms – will be discussed in this section with particular attention to their implications for the production of literature on Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush.

### **3.3.1 Polarisation and securitisation**

Openly hostile discourses, from Muslims and non-Muslims alike, flourished in Europe. Mutual mistrust is documented in several reports, like the ones by the Eurobarometer and the Pew Research Center.<sup>125</sup> In places, Islamophobic sentiments influenced European institutions’ attitudes towards immigration, Islam and Muslims. Many European governments, while keen to promote dialogue as a means towards social cohesion, became wary of the voters’ anxieties towards Muslim immigration and the resurgence of far-right parties. This coincided with security concerns, dictated by attacks perpetrated by radicalised Muslims in several European cities. Paradoxically, as Jocelyn Cesari has demonstrated, European governments juggled an eagerness for the socio-economic integration of their Muslim population, on one side, with the segregation suggested by security policies, on the other.<sup>126</sup> The migration policies in many European countries already reflected security concerns in the 1990s, but a substantially more robust

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<sup>125</sup> Pew Research Center, ‘Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other’, in *The Pew Global Attitudes Project* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2006); European Monitoring Center, *Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia* (Vienna: European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, 2006).

<sup>126</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, ‘Securitization of Islam in Europe’, in *Muslims in the West after 9/11: Religion, Politics, and Law*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari (London: Routledge, 2010), 10. See also Jef Huysmans, ‘The European Union and the Securitization of Migration’, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 38, no. 5 (2000).

securitisation process developed in the new century, strongly linked to the ‘War on Terror’. This security issues also coloured the production of knowledge on Islam. Gunning, for instance, pointed at the mushrooming of literature on security, as well as ‘radical Islam’, following 9/11.<sup>127</sup> In a 2003 letter to the British foreign secretary, Margaret Hodge MP, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stressed the importance of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies for the foreign policy aspects of the war against terrorism:

I have received the enclosed BRISMES Report on Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in the United Kingdom. This is a subject which the Foreign Affairs Committee has discussed in its inquiry into foreign policy aspects of the war against terrorism and I and my colleagues are aware of the great advantages which a tradition of excellent scholarship in such studies confers on this country.<sup>128</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings, the Blair government designated Islamic studies as ‘strategically relevant’, commissioned the first large-scale government report on the field, and allocated it an additional one million pounds in funding.<sup>129</sup> The government of the Netherlands’ interest in these fields was given impetus by a political shift and the rise of right-wing movements, marked by the murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in November 2004.<sup>130</sup> In Germany, Riem Spielhaus argued, research on Islam and Muslims was motivated by the state’s need to map the Muslim population. The

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<sup>127</sup> Jeroen Gunning, ‘A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?’, *Government and Opposition* 42, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>128</sup> Margaret Hodge, ‘Letter to the Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, from the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee’, *Parliament.uk*, 13 January 2003, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmfaaff/405/405we16.htm>. See also House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Fourth Report of Session 2005–06: Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism* (London: Stationery Office, 2006).

<sup>129</sup> Ataulloh Siddiqui, ‘Islam at Universities in England: Report Submitted to Bill Rammell MP, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education’, *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 28, no. 3 (2007); Liz Ford, ‘Teach Islam as Practised Beyond Middle East, Universities Urged’, *Guardian*, 4 June 2007.

<sup>130</sup> Joed Elich, publishing director at Brill Publishing, conversation with the author, 24 November 2014. See also Maurits S. Berger, ‘The Netherlands’, in *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

German government commissioned surveys and opinion polls to collect data on the Muslim presence in the country.<sup>131</sup> With a Foucauldian perspective, Hafez saw the establishment of Islamic theology departments in Germany as influenced by security concerns, actually intended to ‘discipline the Muslim subject’.<sup>132</sup> The ‘securitisation’ of policies towards Islam and Muslims generated questions about the legitimacy of initiatives promoting intercultural dialogues, including those involving Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush.

### **3.3.2 Typological expansion: heterogeneity of actors interested in Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush**

The new millennium saw intensified collaboration among actors from diverse fields in the production of knowledge on Islam. This trend, already discernible during the previous decade, now spread substantially, and was increasingly permeated by a security dimension. These cross-field collaborations created a fertile ground for individuals located at the intersection of academia and the public sphere.

#### *Policymakers: multiplication of initiatives promoting intercultural dialogue*

In response to the polarisation of society and suspected security threats, national and international institutions intensified their efforts to promote social cohesion through initiatives for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. While the notion of intercultural dialogue (ICD) had already excited European Union interest, it now became a much

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<sup>131</sup> Riem Spielhaus, ‘Germany’, *ibid.*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 109.

<sup>132</sup> Farid Hafez, ‘Disciplining the ‘Muslim Subject’: The Role of Security Agencies in Establishing Islamic Theology within the State’s Academia’, *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 2, no. 2 (2014).

higher priority.<sup>133</sup> In the aftermath of the New York attacks, the Prodi Commission organised two events in this direction: an inter-faith meeting gathering religious leaders representing Christianity, Islam and Judaism (December 2001); and a symposium of scholars and specialists, including Arkoun, to debate the modalities of intercultural dialogue in twenty-first-century Europe (March 2002).<sup>134</sup> The events resulted in the establishment of the High-Level Advisory Group – which included Fatima Mernissi, Malek Chaleb, Tariq Ramadan and Umberto Eco – charged with making concrete proposals for the Euro-Mediterranean area.<sup>135</sup> The group's recommendations led to the 2005 creation of the Anna Lindh Foundation, now one of the principal inter-governmental bodies intended to promote mutual understanding by bringing together civil societies across the Mediterranean.<sup>136</sup> Other initiatives, organised by European Commission president José Manuel Barroso culminated in Article 167 of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007/2009 and the proclamation of 2008 as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.<sup>137</sup> The Commission's statement declared that intercultural dialogue was:

At the heart of the European project and it is important to provide the means for intercultural dialogue and dialogue between citizens to strengthen respect for cultural diversity and deal with the complex reality in our societies and the coexistence of different cultural identities and beliefs. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the contribution of

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<sup>133</sup> Silvestri, *Islam and the EU: The Merits and Risks of Inter-Cultural Dialogue*, 2. See also Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 'The Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue'. Recommendation 1962, 2011. <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17973&lang=en>. (accessed 18 March 2019.)

<sup>134</sup> European Commission, 'EU Response to the 11 September Latest Update on European Commission Action', European Commission Press Release Database, 21 December 2001, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-01-452\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-01-452_en.htm). And ———, 'Encouraging Inter-Cultural Dialogue: The European Commission Brings Together Academics and Political and Religious Leaders', European Commission Press Release Database, March 18, 2002. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_02\\_425](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_02_425) (accessed 20 March 2019).

<sup>135</sup> Assia Bensalah-Alaoui and Jean Daniel, *Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area: Report by the High-Level Advisory Group Established at the Initiative of the President of the European Commission* (Luxembourg: European Commission, 2004).

<sup>136</sup> 'About the Anna Lindh Foundation', *Anna Lindh Foundation*, <http://annalf.it/en/apie-mus> (accessed 13 March 2019).

<sup>137</sup> European Parliament, and Council of Europe, 'Decision 1983/2006/Ec: European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008)', *Official Journal of the European Union* L412/44 (2006).

different cultures to the Member States' heritage and way of life and to recognise that culture and intercultural dialogue are essential for learning to live together in harmony.<sup>138</sup>

Similar policies were implemented at the national level.<sup>139</sup> In 2002 Germany appointed a Commissioner for Dialogue with the Islamic World, and in 2006 it initiated the first institutionalised dialogue between representatives of the German government and of Muslims in Germany: the German Islam Conference (DIK).<sup>140</sup> In Spain following the 2004 Madrid train bombings, prime minister José Luis Zapatero suggested the creation of a special bureau within the United Nations, the United Nations Alliance of Civilisation (UNAOC), as a joint initiative with the Turkish government to address intercultural and interreligious dialogue.<sup>141</sup> Spain's international institute Casa Árabe was established in 2006 with the purpose of 'building bridges, strengthening bilateral and multilateral political relations, promoting and assisting with economic, cultural and educational relations, and providing training and furthering understanding about the Arab and Muslim world'.<sup>142</sup> The United Kingdom's Foreign Office created programs addressing Muslim population in both Europe and the larger world: the 'Our Shared Europe' project (2007) aimed 'to strengthen the bonds of trust between Muslims and other majority and minority communities in Europe';<sup>143</sup> the 'Engaging with the Islamic World' program (2003) focused on Muslim majority countries with an annual budget of £1.52 million (raised to

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid. See also European Parliament, 'Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007', *Official Journal of the European Union* C 306/1 (2007).

<sup>139</sup> See Kristina Kausch, 'Europe's Engagement with Moderate Islamists', in *Islamist Radicalisation: The Challenge for Euro-Mediterranean Relations*, eds. Michael Emerson, Kristina Kausch and Richard Youngs (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2009), 142.

<sup>140</sup> German Federal Ministry of the Interior, 'German Islam Conference', <https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/community-and-integration/german-islam-conference/german-islam-conference-node.html> (accessed 13 March 2019). See also Spielhaus, 'Germany', 131.

<sup>141</sup> United Nations, *General Assembly Official Records: 59<sup>th</sup> Sess., 4<sup>th</sup> plen. mtg. at 3*, U.N. Doc. A/59/PV.52 (21 September 2004). <https://undocs.org/en/A/59/PV.52> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>142</sup> Casa Árabe, 'About Us', <http://en.casaarabe.es/p/about-us> (accessed 13 March 2019).

<sup>143</sup> Ehsan Masood, *Our Shared Europe: Swapping Treasures Sharing Losses Celebrating Futures* (London: British Council, 2008), 10.

£8.5 million in 2006).<sup>144</sup> Significantly, these initiatives included specific efforts to promote the understanding of Islam: the British Foreign Office's 2006 report set among its goals 'the fostering and promotion of a moderate version of Islam in Islamic countries and the UK'.<sup>145</sup> Engagement with Muslim scholars was valued as a means of countering radicalisation:

In partnership with Muslim governments, leaders, scholars and others, counter the ideological and theological underpinnings of the terrorists' arguments, and help prevent radicalisation and terrorist recruitment, particularly among the young, in the UK and overseas.<sup>146</sup>

In this framework, the study on 'reformist' intellectuals acquired a further meaning: as a legitimising source in support of intercultural dialogue, within an increasingly security agenda. The multiplication of these initiatives expanded the platforms for these thinkers. Arkoun spoke at the European Union's 'Encouraging intercultural dialogue' conference in Brussels in March 2002; he participated in the British Council seminar 'Representing Islam' in June 2003; and he was among the speakers at the Rabat conference, 'Dialogue among Civilizations: Fostering Dialogue among Cultures and Civilisations through Concrete and Sustained Initiatives' in June 2005, co-organised by UNESCO and the Anna Lindh Foundation, *inter alia*.<sup>147</sup> Casa Árabe promoted publications on Abu Zayd and

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<sup>144</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Global Opportunities Fund Annual Report 2005–2006* (London: Stationery Office, 2006).

<sup>145</sup> ———, *Departmental Report 1 April 2006 – 31 March 2007* (London: Stationery Office, 2007), 164.

<sup>146</sup> ———, *Active Diplomacy for a Changing World: The UK's International Priorities* (London: Stationery Office, 2006), 52. See also House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Global Security: The Middle East. Eight Report of Session 2006–07* (London: Stationery Office, 2007), 85.

<sup>147</sup> European Commission, 'Encouraging Inter-Cultural Dialogue'; Ibrahim Ado-Kurawa, 'Negotiation Identity and Representation: A Review of the Proceedings of British Council International Seminar on Representing Islam', *Gamji*, <http://www.gamji.com/article2000/NEWS2855.htm> (accessed 20 June 2019); Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri et al, *Dialogue among Civilizations: International Conference on Fostering Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations through Concrete and Sustained Initiatives, Rabat, Morocco, 14–16 June 2005* (Paris: UNESCO, 2005), 5.

hosted a memorial lecture in his honour in 2010.<sup>148</sup> Arkoun and Soroush participated in several UNESCO-organised conferences.<sup>149</sup>

### *Academia and the public sphere*

Some of these policies specifically addressed academia, pressuring scholars into greater public engagement. This was part of a broader trend: in these years many governments encouraged, coerced and cajoled academic institutions towards social impact. UNESCO reported “‘Public service’ is often included in academic job descriptions and sometimes influences the way professors allocate their time’.<sup>150</sup> The United Kingdom’s introduction of the ‘Research Excellence Framework’ (REF) to evaluate the impact of academic research is representative of this trend.<sup>151</sup> Such engagement became particularly relevant in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, given the political sensitivity of the subjects.<sup>152</sup> This pressure manifested itself in the development of close door interactions (academic-consultancy in the United Kingdom doubled between 2003 and 2009<sup>153</sup>) but also by direct and open contributions to public discourse. In 2005 UNESCO sponsored ‘Islam, media and public opinion’, a debate which gathered participants from academia, policymakers, the media, and civil society organisations with the explicit purpose of deconstructing the

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<sup>148</sup> Casa Árabe, *Annual Report* (Madrid: Casa Árabe, 2010), 26, 41; Casa Árabe, ‘Entrevista con Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd’, *Pilegue de la Memoria*, audiovisual, 21 September 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a15qJCgs-gQ>. (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>149</sup> Inwon Choue, Samuel Lee and Pierre Sané, eds., *Inter-Regional Philosophical Dialogues: Democracy and Social Justice in Asia and the Arab World* (Seoul: UNESCO, 2006), xi.; Fondation Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Conférence à L’UNESCO le 28/03/96’, YouTube video from a conference held at UNESCO on 28 March 1996. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-d3dD6xj6GY>. (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>150</sup> The same report observed also that ‘Universities are no longer expected to work in isolation; rather, they are perceived to be interactive players who work closely not only with industry but with community and government’. In Philip G. Altbach, Liz Reisberg and Laura Rumbley, *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution* (Paris: UNESCO, 2010), 140, 54.

<sup>151</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, ‘Ref Impact’, 2016, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFImpact> (accessed 24 May 2018).

<sup>152</sup> Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, *Trends in Global Higher Education*, 154.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 157–58.

concept of ‘a clash of civilisations’.<sup>154</sup> Among the changes after 9/11, ISIM’s professor Martin Van Bruinessen acknowledged the pressure to engage with mainstream media: ‘We were [...] under increasing pressure from the people who financed us – university administrators, and the ministries of education and foreign affairs – to join the talking heads on television and explain the security threat’.<sup>155</sup>

The creation of the internet portal Qantara in 2003 was an effort by the German government to promote dialogue with the Islamic world by bringing together academia and media.<sup>156</sup> The portal hosts debates and interviews of politicians, public figures and intellectuals, including Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush. In France, where academia had a traditional presence in the public debate, the *Nouvel Observateur*’s 2004 special issue on contemporary Muslim thinkers included the three scholars.<sup>157</sup> The publication, which included contributions from Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush, was one of the most significant attempts to translate discussions developed within academic and specialist circles into the broader public sphere. The year before Jean Daniel, the journal’s director, had acted as co-chair of the EU’s High-Level Advisory Group (established by Romano Prodi), showing the interplay between different spheres.<sup>158</sup> External pressure towards public engagement reinforced the standing of these thinkers, as publicly engaged scholars, within the academic field.

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<sup>154</sup> UNESCO, ‘Debate on “Islam, Media and Public Opinion” Held at UNESCO’, 5 July 2005, [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/single-view/news/debate\\_on\\_islam\\_media\\_and\\_public\\_opinion\\_held\\_at\\_unesco](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/single-view/news/debate_on_islam_media_and_public_opinion_held_at_unesco). (accessed 22 April 2019)

<sup>155</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, email to the author, 15 February 2015.

<sup>156</sup> Erin Taylor, ‘Winning Hearts and Minds’, *Magazine Humboldt Kosmos*, no. 87 (2006).

<sup>157</sup> Jean Daniel, ‘Les Nouveaux Penseurs de l’Islam: Ils Dénoncent l’Imposture Intégriste, ils Concilient l’Islam et la Modernité’. *Nouvel Observateur* Avril/Mai (2004).

<sup>158</sup> Bensalah-Alaoui and Daniel, *Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area*.

### 3.3.3 Geographical expansion

The new millennium also witnessed the emergence of a global network of venues of knowledge production – as well as readership for and about these thinkers – that created a possible new space of authority for them. In this ‘third space’ they could seek intellectual legitimacy beyond struggles at the national and local levels. Several elements contributed to this expansion.

First, globalisation and new technologies, linked to the proliferation of transnational platforms, favoured the movement and transmission of knowledge on these thinkers.<sup>159</sup> In academia, this trend was exemplified by initiatives such as the Islam in the West Program, begun in 2001, created with funding by both European and American institutions; and the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES), started in 2002, a joint effort by the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and the European Association for Middle Eastern Studies (EURAMES).<sup>160</sup>

Second, a surge of governmental outreach policies meant to shape the global discourse on Islam prompted numerous international initiatives (these include the Anna Lindh Foundation, the German-Arab university partnership Dialogue with the Islamic World, and the British Council’s Our Shared Europe, discussed earlier).<sup>161</sup> The development of institutional relations between the European Union and the Organisation

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<sup>159</sup> Grillo, ‘Islam and Transnationalism’: 862–3; Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, *Trends in Global Higher Education*, xv, 23–35. See also Philip G. Altbach and Ulrich Teichler, ‘Internationalization and Exchanges in a Globalized University’, *Journal of Studies in International Education* 5, no. 1 (2001); Marek Kwiek, ‘The Internationalization of Research in Europe: A Quantitative Study of 11 National Systems from a Micro-Level Perspective’, *Journal of Studies in International Education* 19, no. 4 (2015).

<sup>160</sup> Günter Meyer and Jörn Thielmann, ‘Letter to the Participants of WOCMES’, World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies, 28 September 2002, <http://davo1.de/tagungen/Wocmes/pages/1generalinfof.htm>; Center for Middle Eastern Studies, ‘Islam in the West Program’, *Center for Middle Eastern Studies Harvard University*, <https://cmes.fas.harvard.edu/projects/iw> (accessed 19 June 2018).

<sup>161</sup> This emerged for instance in European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World*. Document no. 52007DC0242. Brussels. 2007.

of Islamic Cooperation also has to be understood in light of this global outreach framework. These transnational initiatives often took the form of collaborations between governments or international organisations. This was the case of the 2005 workshop ‘Engaging with the Islamic World’, a joint initiative by the German Federal Foreign Office and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The workshop gathered ‘diplomats and government officials from all European Union member states, the European Commission and specialists from think tanks and academia’ to provide an overview of their initiatives to address dialogue with the Islamic World.<sup>162</sup> Similarly, in the aftermath of the uproar caused by the *Jyllands-Posten*’s Muhammad cartoons in 2005, Javier Solana, then-European Union minister of foreign affairs, facilitated greater cooperation between the European Union and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (now the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation).<sup>163</sup> These diplomatic efforts were not solely a prerogative of European countries: the joint forum ‘Civilisation and Harmony: The Political Dimension’, was organised in 2002 by the Turkish government with the European Union and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC),<sup>164</sup> and 2005’s Rabat ‘Conference on Fostering Dialogues Among Cultures and Civilizations’ was co-organised by UNESCO, the European Anna Lindh Foundation and the OIC, under the patronage of Moroccan King Mohammed VI.<sup>165</sup> (Arkoun chaired a working group there.) Similar conferences included the ‘Dialogue among Civilizations’ co-organised in 2004 by UNESCO’s national commissions in Kyrgyzstan – which included opening remarks

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<sup>162</sup> University of Leicester, ‘Engaging Constructively with the Islamic World – Towards a European Initiative’, News and Events Archive 2004–2013, <https://www.le.ac.uk/ebulletin-archive/ebulletin/news/press-releases/2000–2009/2005/03/nparticle-w5h-jn2-r7c.html> (accessed 23 May 2018).

<sup>163</sup> European Union, ‘Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)’, European Union External Action, 8 August 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/7932/organisation-of-islamic-cooperation-oic\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/7932/organisation-of-islamic-cooperation-oic_en).

<sup>164</sup> Silvestri, ‘EU Relations with Islam in the Context of the Emp’s Cultural Dialogue’: 397–98.

<sup>165</sup> Altwajiri et al, *Dialogue among Civilization*.

by the Russian and Iranian presidents, Vladimir Putin and Mohammad Khatami, respectively – and another in Korea in 2006.<sup>166</sup> In all these initiatives Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush were either present as speakers or discussed in papers. Diplomatic efforts also often targeted Muslim populations, directly, both in Muslim majority countries and in other ‘allied western states’.<sup>167</sup> Saba Mahmood discussed the case of the Bush administration’s ‘Muslim World Outreach’ plan (created in the aftermath of 9/11, with a budget of \$ 1.3 billion), whose aim was the promotion of ‘moderate Islam’ beyond national borders as part of the War on Terror.<sup>168</sup> According to Mahmood, Abu Zayd, Soroush and Hasan Hanafi – themselves critical of the Bush administration – were used as ‘soft power’ to counter radical interpretations of Islam. Dale Eickelman, James Piscatori and Hisham Aidi pointed out how these ‘state-driven soft-power initiatives’, were not exclusively European and North American, as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan increasingly targeted the Muslim diasporas in Europe.<sup>169</sup>

Third, the development of new geographical regions as venues of academic knowledge production in English on these thinkers upset the traditional power balances in the literature. Turkey, South East Asia, and the Gulf states achieved prominence as hosting venues and as centres for the production and dissemination of academic literature

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<sup>166</sup> Choue, Lee, and Sané, eds., *Inter-Regional Philosophical Dialogues*; Askar Akaev et al, *Dialogue among Civilizations: High-Level Conference (on) Eurasia in the 21st Century: Dialogue of Cultures, or Conflict of Civilizations? Issyk-Kul, 10–11 June 2004* (Paris: UNESCO, 2004).

<sup>167</sup> Hisham Aidi, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2014), xx.

<sup>168</sup> Saba Mahmood, ‘Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation’, *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006). See also ‘US Embassy Cables: A Quickfire Tour of Muslim Britain’, *Guardian*, 13 December 2010. LibForAll Foundation, ‘LibForAll Advice “Much Sought after” by U.S. Government’, *Solution in Sight*, Winter (2009): 7.

<sup>169</sup> Aidi, *Rebel Music*, xx; Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 150-153. Concerns over the rise of foreign funding’s in academic and Islamic institutions emerged in several European and North American countries. John Hannah, ‘Saudi Arabia Can Win Islam’s War of Ideas’, *Foreign Policy* (2018); Anthea Lipsett, ‘Concerns over Funding of Islamic Studies’, *Guardian*, 17 April 2008; Ben Leach, ‘“Extremism” Fear over Islam Studies Donations’, *Telegraph*, 13 April 2008.

globally.<sup>170</sup> Particularly after 9/11, the United States developed as an important forum for (and on) Muslim thinkers. According to Mustapha Tlili, 9/11 and the ensuing 'War on Terror' called for a 'solution by crisis' in the United States: an impetus for funding projects on Islam and Muslims.<sup>171</sup> Although it would be reductionist to ascribe the flourishing debate on Islam in the United States solely to the Bush administration's War on Terror – the group Progressive Muslims, for instance, was founded in open opposition to the government's policies – these years witnessed a mushrooming of funding for academic initiatives in this country: Harvard University's Islam in the West program in 2001; New York University's Centre for Dialogues: Islamic World – U.S. – The West in 2002; the Center for the Study of Muslim Networks at Duke University in 2002; and Georgetown's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs in 2006 are only some examples. This proliferation of debate on Islam and 'moderate Islam' in North America intensified the transatlantic movement of the three thinkers, but especially of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies scholars writing about them. As a visiting fellow at the Library of Congress in the fall of 2001, Arkoun delivered a joint lecture with Bernard Lewis on 'What went wrong?'; in 2002, he became a visiting fellow in NYU's Global Law Faculty. Abu Zayd gave lectures at Columbia University in 2007 and became a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan in 2008.<sup>172</sup> This was less true for Soroush, who had already spent most of his time abroad in North America. The proliferation of transnational

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<sup>170</sup> Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, *Trends in Global Higher Education*, iii. See also the 'Islamic Area Studies Project' (IASP) implemented by the Japanese government between 1997–2002 in Stéphane A. Dudoignon, Hisao Komatsu and Yasushi Kosugi, *Intellectuals in the Modern Islamic World: Transmission, Transformation, Communication* (London: Routledge, 2006), vii. British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 'Japanese Association for Middle Eastern Studies International Workshop: Changing Knowledge and Authority in Islam', *BRISMES Newsletter* 18, no. 2 (2004).

<sup>171</sup> Mustapha Tlili, interview with the author, 4 November 2011.

<sup>172</sup> New York University Law School, 'Global Law Faculty 2002–2003', *NYU Law Magazine*, Autumn (2002): 39; Mohammed Arkoun, 'What Went Wrong', paper presented at the Library of Congress, Washington, 7 May 2002; Hala Halim, 'Of Hermeneutics and Reform', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 871 (2007); University of Michigan, 'Panel Discussion: The Future of Islam', Vice President for Communications Michigan News, 9 April 2009, <https://news.umich.edu/panel-discussion-the-future-of-islam>.

initiatives led to the emergence of a global field for Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush by expanding their readership and audience internationally. At the same time, the involvement of governments in creating some of these platforms – and the security dimensions of their policies – challenged these thinkers’ legitimacy within the Muslim community.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter explored the historical context that helped stimulate the growing literature on Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush. The attention given to Muslims in both specialised and public debates – particularly after the end of the Cold War – reflected the polarisation of attitudes towards these subjects. This schism had a double effect: on one side, it hindered the influence of the three thinkers’ ideas in the broader dominant narrative; on the other, it expanded the number of actors interested in these thinkers. This chapter focused on this second trend, exploring how larger socio-political developments created a demand for the specific profiles and ideas reflected by the three thinkers. Heightened interest in Islam brought praise for ‘organic’ Muslim voices able to provide an ‘inside’ perspective on the subject. Similarly, the resources (ie funding) given to intercultural and interreligious dialogue favoured actors who promoted the compatibility of Islam with ‘Western’ values. Increased collaboration across different fields of knowledge production on Islam brought recognition to thinkers positioned between academia and the public sphere. In the process, a heterogeneous set of actors endorsed the work of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush. For some sections of society, such as students and civil society actors (Muslim and non-Muslim), they provided an intellectual framework that helped

legitimate existing demands and sentiments.<sup>173</sup> For political actors, they represented ‘moderate’ voices to be promoted as a counter-narrative to radical Islam. The development of transnational initiatives benefited individuals set between different geographical contexts and expanded their readership and audience beyond national borders. Operating in the global field allowed them, in part, to overcome power struggles that had challenged their intellectual authority within their national spheres and their authority at the grassroots level. The broader socio-political setting discussed so far underpinned such mechanisms, which are explored in the coming chapters. These include the interplay between that setting and Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush’s social capital, which favoured the transmission of knowledge on them and their selection by academics, policymakers, civil society actors as leading representatives of contemporary Islamic thought.

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<sup>173</sup> Bamyeh, ‘Introduction: The Social Dynamism of the Organic Intellectual’, 3.

## Chapter 4

### Social capital in the academic sphere

The previous chapter covered how social and geopolitical developments generated a renewed interest in Islam and Muslims in the European-Anglophone debate. The search for authoritative individuals to speak from within Islam produced many contending voices. The pre-eminence of some individuals over others, it is argued here, was not only determined by the content of their thought but by their social capital. This chapter will analyse this social capital by focusing on the network of actors with whom Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush engaged. In particular, given the role of academia as the primary venue for these thinkers, attention will focus on their academic contacts and their expansive intellectual networks. In mapping the individuals and institutions with whom the three scholars engaged, the chapter examines their initiations into this web and how its expansion fostered their elevation. This section builds on the previous analysis of the geographical and typological expansion of the network of platforms for contemporary Islamic thought. The geographic expansion of the transnational field allowed these thinkers to gain global recognition independent of their authority at the national level. The typological expansion meant an increased interest and involvement of actors from different parts of this network: academics, of course, but also civil-society activists, think-tanks, policymakers and journalists. Despite their different paths, the position of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush at a liminal space across different nations and genres allowed them to carve a space of authority as interlocutors across fields and regions.<sup>1</sup> The second part of the chapter takes a step closer by focusing on three institutes – nodes of the

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<sup>1</sup> Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, 'Introduction: Religion, States, and Transnational Civil Society', in *Transnational Religion and Fading States*, eds. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and James P. Piscatori (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 1; Mandaville, *Reimagining the Umma*, 5.

network – to explore the access of these scholars to the network in the first place. This resulted from the intersection of the institutes’ agendas (which sparked an interest for specific ideas and profiles) and the three thinkers’ social capital, ie personal relations with institutional actors.

#### **4.1 Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush’s pre-eminence in the European-Anglophone literature**

Until the first half of the 1990s, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush followed largely separate paths. Arkoun first appeared in the European-Anglophone academic literature in the 1970s, almost two decades before Abu Zayd and Soroush.<sup>2</sup> By the beginning of the 1990s, he was recognised in Europe as a leading authority on Islamic (and Middle Eastern and North African) issues, as illustrated by his inclusion in the first directory of European expertise on Middle East and Islamic Studies initiated by the European Council in 1993.<sup>3</sup> As a member of the previous generation, Arkoun entered European academia much earlier than the others, had lived there for nearly forty years before they appeared, and enjoyed a more established institutional affiliation as a professor at the Sorbonne from 1972. By contrast, Abu Zayd and Soroush arrived in Europe only at the end of the 1990s and occupied more precarious positions as visiting fellows (Soroush was mainly a visiting fellow, as was Abu Zayd until he was finally appointed to the University of Utrecht in

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<sup>2</sup> Arkoun’s publications in English during these years included: Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Islam Facing Development’, *Diogenes* 20, no. 77 (1972); ———, ‘The Islamic Consciousness: A Cultural Profile’, *Cultures*, no. 4 (1977); Mohammed Arkoun, Rowland, Paul, ‘Manifestations of Arab Thought in Western Islam’, *Diogenes* 24, no. 93 (1976); Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Scholars Whose Learnings Knew No Bounds’, *UNESCO Courier* 30, no. 12 (1977); ———, ‘New Perspectives for a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26, no. 3 (1989); ———, ‘The Death Penalty and Torture in Islamic Thought’, *Concilium*, no. 120 (1979); ———, ‘New Perspectives for a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue’; ———, ‘The Concept of Authority in Islamic Thought: “La Hukma illa ii-llah”’, in *Islam: State and Society*, eds. Klaus Ferdinand and Mehdi Mozaffari (London: Curzon Press, 1988); ———, ‘The Notion of Revelation’.

<sup>3</sup> Murphy, Nonneman, and Quilliam, eds., *European Expertise on the Middle East and North Africa*, 2.

2003). Scholars who specialised in Iran became interested in Soroush's work in the aftermath of its 1979 revolution, but he remained understudied by the broader scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Although gaining prominence independently in this initial phase, they were aware of each other's work. Abu Zayd was first introduced to Arkoun through the translations of his work into Arabic in the early 1980s, meeting him at the Cairo Book Fair around the same time. Abu Zayd first met Soroush at a symposium in Germany in 1990.<sup>5</sup> Soroush already knew of both Abu Zayd and Arkoun's work in Persian translations.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Arkoun had read both Abu Zayd and Soroush and was a signatory to the letter to President Rafsanjani in support of Soroush.<sup>7</sup> By the 1990s, however, these thinkers were increasingly discussed together in the European-Anglophone scholarship as part of a significant intellectual trend in contemporary Islam. Charles Kurzman and other scholars noticed the rise of literature on the subject:

A small group of Western scholars has begun to examine liberal Islam, in what amounts to a paradigm shift in the academic study of Islam. Building on earlier studies of regional diversity within Islam, the new focus on liberal Islam heralds an increasing recognition of ideological diversity within Islam.<sup>8</sup>

This trend is even more evident in the occurrence of their names in the literature published between the 1970s and 2008 (see Fig. 1).

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<sup>4</sup> This was confirmed by scholars who worked on or with Soroush, such as Charles Kurzman and Martin Van Bruinessen. Charles Kurzman, Skype interview with the author, 16 September 2015; Martin Van Bruinessen, email to the author, 15 February 2015. This might reflect the evolution of Soroush's thought from revolutionary Islamism to Islamic reformism.

<sup>5</sup> Ebtehal Younes, Abu Zayd's wife, email to the author, 5 September 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Soroush, Mumivand and Sokhanvar, 'A Congregation of Bees'.

<sup>7</sup> Soroush Abdolkarim, 'Seraj's Interview with Dr. Soroush', Abdolkarim Soroush Website, April 1997, [www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19970400-Seraj\\_Interview\\_with\\_Dr.\\_Soroush.htm](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19970400-Seraj_Interview_with_Dr._Soroush.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*, 4; Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 3.



**FIGURE 3.** Frequency of Arkoun, Soroush and Abu Zayd's names in the English literature between 1970 and 2008, based on the Google Books Corpora Database.<sup>9</sup>

Even Arkoun, the most established among the three in Europe, did not gain widespread attention until the 1990s. Since then, interest in his work has grown steadily, as reflected in numerous invitations to conferences around the globe (including the Muslim and Arab worlds) and the translation of his work into Arabic, Turkish and Indonesian.<sup>10</sup> Their emergence in the literature reflected socio-political developments discussed in the previous chapters: the conjunction of novel intellectual and social phenomena in the Islamic world – epitomised in their intellectual trajectories – and increased 'Western' interest in Muslim intellectuals. The publication of Abu Zayd's major work, *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ*, in 1991 and a series of articles by Soroush in *Keyhan-e Farhangi* between 1988 and 1990 (later republished in *Kian*) first drew intellectual attention in their own countries, Egypt and Iran, and among a few specialised scholars in the West.<sup>11</sup> But they only entered the broader European-Anglophone scholarship after Islam entered the public debate in Europe, following Abu Zayd's divorce case (1992–1995) and Soroush's high

<sup>9</sup> Google, 'Google Books Ngram Viewer'.

<sup>10</sup> Ursula Günther, 'Mohammed Arkoun', in *Encyclopedia of Islam Three*, eds. Kate Fleet, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 26.

<sup>11</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 1990); Soroush, 'Intellectual Autobiography', 19.

profile in the early 1990s as one of the leading voices within the Iranian reformist movement (*rowshanfekran-e dini*). Even Arkoun, already established in academic circles, did not gain recognition in the European-Anglophone scholarship until the 1994 translation of *Ouvertures sur l'Islam* into English as *Rethinking Islam*.<sup>12</sup> The decade, therefore, witnessed a shift of attention from specialised literature concerned with the intellectual aspects of their arguments to broader scholarship on the political implication of their work.

At the beginning of the 1990s, scholars like Stefan Wild and Ronald Nettler framed these thinkers' work as a phenomenon worthy of attention: the idea behind the Bonn conference Wild organised (inviting Arkoun and Abu Zayd) was to mark a 'change of paradigm', a 'shift of attention in Qur'anic studies,' ie a new interest in hermeneutical analysis of the Qur'an as literary text.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Nettler, Mahmoud and Cooper's aim in organising the conference 'Islam and Modernity' was to 'discuss the ideas of some important Muslim intellectuals of the twentieth century who have attempted to develop an Islamic outlook consonant with modern thought and institutions, yet rooted in religious tradition and its sources'.<sup>14</sup> In the second half of the 1990s emphasis shifted towards more explicitly engaged and political discourse. Mehran Kamrava explained that his analysis of these thinkers, *Innovation within Islam*, was dictated by recent geopolitical developments and 'the belief that the voices of reformist Muslim intellectuals deserved a wider hearing in English than had hitherto been the case'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in his working paper 'The clash within civilisations: Islam and the accommodation of plurality' (1999)

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<sup>12</sup> Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*. See also Günther, 'Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought', 136.

<sup>13</sup> Stefan Wild, *The Qu'ran as Text* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), viii.

<sup>14</sup> Nettler, Mahmoud, and Cooper, *Islam and Modernity*, xi. Also, Ronald Nettler, email to the author, 27 July 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Kamrava, *The New Voices of Islam*, ix.

Bernhard J. Trautner discussed Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush and other Muslim authors to challenge Huntington's ubiquitous paradigm.<sup>16</sup> The changed socio-political context also shaped the scholarship's interest in – and framing of – these thinkers. The next section will explore the structural transformations of the academic field underpinning these shifts, as reflected in the typological and geographical expansion of the network of actors involved in the production of knowledge on them.

#### **4.2 Social capital: the role of individual scholars**

Along with their publications, their increased transnational interactions with other actors were crucial for promoting these scholars' ideas and hence their emergence as academics and public figures in the European-Anglophone sphere.<sup>17</sup> This resulted from a synthesis of what Andrew Inkpen and Eric Tsang called 'individual' and 'organisational' networks: ie relationships developed with specific persons but also derived from pre-existing networks of organisations.<sup>18</sup> The following sections of this chapter will focus on the institutional aspect of this network – institutions, but also conferences and seminars (essential venues for debate and networking). However, single individuals, too, played crucial roles in promoting these thinkers. Indeed, as Friedman and Miller-Idriss noticed, initiatives undertaken by institutions are often strongly linked to and dependent on single individuals' efforts within institutions.<sup>19</sup> In the German context, Bert Fragner observed: 'sometimes certain German universities may give the impression of being strong and

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<sup>16</sup> Bernhard J. Trautner, *The Clash within Civilisations: Islam and the Accommodation of Plurality* (Bremen: InIIS-Arbeitspapier, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Z. Friedman and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, 'The International Infrastructure of Area Studies Centers: Lessons for Current Practice from a Prior Wave of Internationalization', *Journal of Studies in International Education* (2014): 96–97.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew C. Inkpen and Eric W. K. Tsang, 'Social Capital, Networks, and Knowledge Transfer', *Academy of Management Review* 30, no. 1 (2005): 151.

<sup>19</sup> Friedman and Miller-Idriss, 'The International Infrastructure of Area Studies Centers': 94–96.

traditional centres in Oriental Studies, but this depends in many cases much more on the personal setting at these places than on the institution proper'.<sup>20</sup>

These dynamics were reflected as well in the case of these thinkers; individuals (such as recognized academics, former students, members of their communities) often served as gatekeepers introducing and promoting these scholars into European-Anglophone literature in several capacities: 1) by transmitting knowledge about them through their publications or personal communications. Nettler discovered Soroush's work through John Cooper, lecturer in Persian Studies, with whom Nettler co-organised the 'Islam and Modernity' workshop at Oxford.<sup>21</sup> Jose Casanova learned about Soroush's ideas through colleagues at the New School of Social Research, Mahmoud and Ahmad Sadri (who knew Soroush and translated some of his work into English);<sup>22</sup> 2) by providing them access to resources and institutions. William Stokhof, executive director of Leiden University's International Institute for Asian Studies, arranged Abu Zayd's invitation to teach at Leiden.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Roy Mottahedeh was pivotal in bringing Soroush into the Harvard academic community; Jose Casanova helped establish his affiliation with the Berkley Center at Georgetown University and the Library of Congress. Alfred Stepan did the same at Columbia University;<sup>24</sup> 3) by endorsing these thinkers and thus enhancing their symbolic capital and legitimacy (particularly in the case of established scholars). Stefan Wild, an established orientalist and scholar of the Qur'an at the University of Bonn, for instance, was among the first to introduce the three thinkers in Germany's anglophone academic field. His long-lasting friendship and collaboration with Abu Zayd

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<sup>20</sup> Bert G. Fragner, 'Oriental Studies, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in Germany: An Overview' working paper, Islamic Area Studies Project, Tokyo, 2001, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Nettler, conversation with the author, 25 August 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Jose Casanova, conversation with the author, 9 June 2018

<sup>23</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 83.

<sup>24</sup> Roy Mottahedeh, conversation with the author, 11 June 2013; Jose Casanova, conversation with the author, 9 June 2018.

were instrumental in this sense.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Wild asked Soroush to give several talks in Germany; he had been introduced to Soroush through a former student (who taught German to Soroush in Tehran).<sup>26</sup> Wild was also among the first reviewers of Arkoun's work in Germany, he delivered the *laudatio* at the assignment of the Ibn Rushd Award to Arkoun in 2003, and he spoke at the 2009 conference in memory of Arkoun.<sup>27</sup>

The motivations that induced individuals to promote these thinkers often included, to different degrees, personal allegiances (shaped by master–student relationships, sense of community, friendship) and genuine interest in these thinkers' ideas. It is long-established practice for former students of renowned scholars to play a significant role in promoting and protecting their legacies. Thus this was not specific to Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush: Roger Owen, for instance, had already discussed how former students disseminated the ideas of Albert Hourani, the British-Lebanese historian of the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> Arkoun's former student Mustapha Tlili, the founder and director of the NYU Center for Dialogues: Islamic World – US– the West, involved the thinker in many of its initiatives. As Tlili recalled, 'In the aftermath of 9/11, having known Arkoun's ideas and

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<sup>25</sup> Stefan Wild, 'The Concept of Man in the Qur'an: Non-Muslim Perspectives', in *Humanism and Muslim Culture: Historical Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, eds. Stefan Reichmuth, Jörn Rüsen, and Aladdin Sarhan (Goettingen: V&R Unipress, 2012), 36. This was confirmed by Abu Zayd's widow. Ebtehal Younes, email to the author, 23 June 2013. See also And Wolf Lepenies, 'Einführung in Das Jahresthema Der Akademie 2007: Europa Im Nahen Osten – Der Nahe Osten in Europa', in *Festsitzung Zum Einsteintag 2006* (Potsdam: Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 16; Stefan Wild, 'Herdenkingsbijeekomst Nasr Abu Zayd', paper presented in Leiden, 17 September 2010. <http://media.leidenuniv.nl/legacy/speech-stefan-wild.pdf> (accessed 22 April 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, telephone interview with the author, 26 January 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Stefan Wild, 'Eine Kritik Der Islamischen Vernunft. Zu Den Gesammelten Schriften Mohammed Arkouns', *Die Welt des Islams* 26, no. 1/4 (1986); ———, 'Mohammed Arkoun, Ibn Rushd Preis Für Freies Denken'. See also ———, 'Modern Discourses of Superiority: Muslims and Christians in Contact', in *The Construction of Belief: Reflections on the Thought of Mohammed Arkoun*, eds. Aziz Esmail and Abdou Filali-Ansary (London: Saqi, 2012); Carool Kersten, 'Construction of Belief: Comparative Perspectives Conference, in Honour of Mohammed Arkoun', *Critical Muslims: Introducing Alternative Voices from the Muslim World*, 11 October 2001, <http://caroolkersten.blogspot.it/2009/10/construction-of-belief-comparative.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Owen, 'Albert Hourani and the Making of Modern Middle East Studies in the English-Speaking World: A Personal Memoir', in *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, eds. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Martin V. Woessner, *Heidegger in America*, 8–9.

him personally, it came naturally to ask him to collaborate with the centre'.<sup>29</sup> Navid Kermani, who studied with Abu Zayd, has played a critical role in the promotion of both Abu Zayd and Soroush in Germany.<sup>30</sup> Soroush's son Soroush Dabbagh, among the younger cohort of Iranian thinkers, has been particularly active in the promotion of his father's legacy through his writing and the establishment of the Sorhevardi Foundation in Toronto.<sup>31</sup> In Soroush's case, members of the Iranian diaspora promulgated his work in the European-Anglophone literature: the brothers Ahmad and Mahmoud Sadri, as well as Forough Jahanbakhsh, edited English translations of Soroush's books;<sup>32</sup> while Navid Kermani, Katajun Amirpur and Mehran Kamrava were vital for introducing Soroush to the German, and broader European-Anglophone, context.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the Ismaili network played an important role in the promotion of Arkoun's work.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond allegiances shaped by master–student relationships or sense of community, scholars engaged with Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush also because their ideas resonated with questions they were already asking. Wild organised the symposium 'The Qur'an as text' in 1993, inspired by the work of Arkoun and Abu Zayd, whom he invited as speakers. He was particularly impressed by Abu Zayd's *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ*:<sup>35</sup> 'Nasr Abu Zayd was and is the first author who explicitly and continually explored what he called and calls a humanistic understanding of the Qur'an'.<sup>36</sup> Abu Zayd's ideas therefore led to his invitation to the 1993 symposium (first encounter between Wild and Abu Zayd) which marked the incipit of their long collaboration. Similar dynamics

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<sup>29</sup> Mustapha Tlili, interview with the author, 4 November 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Wolf Lepenies, email to the author, 16 October 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Soroush Dabbagh, telephone interview with the author, 23 July 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, eds., *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*.

<sup>33</sup> Wolf Lepenies, email to the author, 19 October 2015.

<sup>34</sup> See this chapter, pages 167-68.

<sup>35</sup> Wild, 'Herdenkingsbijeekomst Nasr Abu Zayd'; ———, *The Qu'ran as Text*, xi.

<sup>36</sup> ———, 'The Concept of Man in the Qur'an: Non-Muslim Perspectives', 36.

contributed to the involvement of Arkoun and Abu Zayd in a 1996 workshop on modern Muslim intellectuals organised by Ronald Nettler at the University of Oxford.<sup>37</sup> Nettler was familiar with the three thinkers ‘from my interest in modern Islamic thought. I certainly knew about them in the 1990s’.<sup>38</sup> In particular, he was attracted by his interest in the medieval Sufism of Ibn Arabi, about which Abu Zayd had written extensively.<sup>39</sup> In all these cases, cultural capital (in the form of content valued by European scholars or the capacity to argue in an academic mode) was decisive in their selection. At the same time, their social capital – their acceptance into a network of scholars connected to Wild and Nettler – played an important role in bringing their publications to European scholars’ attention. This intertwine between social and cultural capital emerges also, for instance, in Abu Zayd and Arkoun’s membership on the advisory board of the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an* in the 1990s, which connected them to the field’s most significant scholars. Their expertise explains their participation, of course, but so does their position among the scholars orbiting around Jane McAuliffe, the encyclopaedia’s editor.<sup>40</sup> As McAuliffe, a specialist in the exegesis of the Qur’an described:

As I was starting the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* – Peri Bearman was the initial Brill editor on the project – I recruited a group of associate editors and then asked other leading scholars to join an advisory board. [...] Its members all wrote articles for the *EQ* and were a helpful source for ideas about other articles to include and authors to commission.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Nettler, Mahmoud, and Cooper, *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*. Ronald Nettler, email to the author, 27 July 2015; Ronald Nettler, conversation with the author, 25 August 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald Nettler, email to the author, 27 July 2015

<sup>39</sup> As Nettler recognized ‘I really admired him.’ Ronald Nettler, conversation with the author, 25 August 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Muzaffar Iqbal, ‘The Qur’an, Orientalism, and the Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an’, *Journal of Qur’anic Research and Studies* 3, no. 5 (2008).

<sup>41</sup> Jane McAuliffe, email to the author, 31 August 2018.

McAuliffe knew Arkoun from the early stages of her career:

I first met Mohammed at a conference in Switzerland hosted by the late Jacques Waardenburg [...] It was early in my career perhaps, while I was still a graduate student. I would occasionally run into him at conferences in the years that followed. In the early 1990s, when I was chair of the religion department at the University of Toronto, I invited Mohammed to give a lecture at the University of Toronto.<sup>42</sup>

She was introduced to Abu Zayd through professional connections. ‘I seem to remember meeting Nasr Abu Zayd and his wife at a dinner party in Leiden hosted by Peri Bearman, then an editor with Brill’.<sup>43</sup> Although the content of their thought was crucial for their recognition and the esteem of European academics, social capital contributed to scholarly attention. In short, such well-placed individuals – as nodes in a broader network – had a crucial role in mobilising knowledge and resources for these scholars, which mattered a great deal once the political context changed, and created demand for their specialised abilities.

#### **4.3 Social capital: mapping the network**

##### *Typological expansion*

The typological diversification of the actors discussing Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush was manifest inside and outside the academy. It involved scholars beyond those specialised in the study of Islamic thought and Qur’anic exegesis or Iranian studies, and it encompassed those engaged in the public debate, including civil society, media and policy-making. Within academia, their work excited intellectual historians (like Wild and Nettler), sociologists (such as Charles Kurzman) and political scientists (such as Mehran

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Kamrava). It also fascinated scholars beyond Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. Charles Taylor, a philosopher, and Jose Casanova, a sociologist of religion, engaged with their work; and even the *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought* discussed Arkoun's work.<sup>44</sup> The institutions who hosted them made significant efforts to overcome the marginalisation of Islamic studies through interdisciplinary initiatives and served as liaisons between these thinkers and the broader public. Projects such as the Working Group Modernity and Islam at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and the International Institute for the Study of Islam (ISIM) provided them with academic platforms. These projects were committed to promoting 'interdisciplinary research on social, political, cultural, and intellectual trends and movements in contemporary Muslim societies and communities'.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, they introduced these thinkers to the media, policymakers and civil society-actors.<sup>46</sup>

ISIM has contributed a great deal to bringing contemporary Islam and Muslim intellectuals to the attention of the public. ISIM was instrumental in introducing Tariq Ramadan, Olivier Roy, and Abdolkarim Soroush to wider audiences. The institute also facilitated courses for special focus groups and was frequently consulted by other ministries and civil society organisations.<sup>47</sup>

This academic outreach effort reflected both institutional policies (under increasing pressure from funding bodies<sup>48</sup>) and the personal commitment of specific individuals. Suha Taji-Farouki's edited volume on these thinkers was triggered by a recognition that

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<sup>44</sup> Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*; Kamrava, *The New Voices of Islam*; Christopher John Murray, 'Mohammed Arkoun', in *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought*, ed. Christopher John Murray (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> ISIM, 'ISIM', *ISIM Review*, no. 15 (2005). See also Carool Kersten, 'International Institute for the Study of Islam in Modern World (ISIM) Closed?', *Critical Muslims: Introducing Alternative voices from the Muslim World*, 22 December 2008, <http://caroolkersten.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2008-01-01T00:00:00Z&updated-max=2009-01-01T00:00:00Z&max-results=10>.

<sup>46</sup> ISIM, *ISIM Annual Report 2006* (Leiden, 2006), 53.

<sup>47</sup> Carool Kersten, 'Another Chance for ISIM?', *Critical Muslims*, 1 February 2009, <http://caroolkersten.blogspot.com/2009/02/another-chance-for-isim.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, email to the author, 15 February 2015.

‘the writings of such intellectuals have remained somewhat inaccessible to a wider English-reading public. This volume fills this gap’.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps even more indicative of this effort was Carool Kersten’s blog, *Critical Muslims*. A professor at King’s College, London, Kersten meant to introduce the works of these thinkers to the broader public:

Although there is at present a considerable interest in things Islamic outside the Muslim world, as a result of a series of deplorable events and developments, media coverage – and much scholarship too – is predominantly geared towards radical and extremist exponents of political Islam. This site is intended as a platform for presenting alternative currents of thought.<sup>50</sup>

Similar efforts were initiated outside academia. The idea of the volume *New Voices of Islam* was suggested to Kamrava by Turi Munthe, then commissioning editor at I.B. Tauris. Munthe was motivated by recent political developments, the American policy in the Middle East, and restrictions of academic freedom, which convinced him of the necessity to introduce an overlooked reality to the broader public and ‘complicate what was becoming an increasingly essentialist view of the politics of this place’.<sup>51</sup> This interest of I.B. Tauris, a specialised but not strictly academic publishing house, was indicative of a transition towards a broader European-Anglophone readership. By the end of the 1990s, the collaboration between these diverse actors increased. In 2004 the ‘New Directions in Islamic Thought and Practice’ project was launched as a partnership between the University of Oslo and the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, ‘a coalition of experts and representatives from religious and other life-stance communities, academia, NGOs, international organisations and civil society’.<sup>52</sup> Funded

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<sup>49</sup> Institute of Ismaili Studies, ‘Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an’, <http://www.iis.ac.uk/publication/modern-muslim-intellectuals-and-qur> (accessed 15 December 2015).

<sup>50</sup> Kersten, ‘Introducing Critical Muslim Thinkers’.

<sup>51</sup> Turi Munthe, telephone interview with the author, 22 July 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Larsen, Vogt, and Moe, eds., *New Directions in Islamic Thought*, 2.

by the Norwegian government, the project ‘offered Muslim reform thinkers a forum where they could present and discuss their ideas and develop strategies for further action, according to their agenda’. It involved Abu Zayd and Soroush, who contributed to the initiative through publications, and indirectly Arkoun (ie the academics involved in the project had collaborated with and written about Arkoun).<sup>53</sup>

Outside the academy, the growing political relevance of Islam further diversified the network of those engaged in the production of knowledge – on Islam, in general, and on these thinkers, specifically. This diversification included both grassroots actors and increasingly political initiatives. At the grassroots level, they enjoyed the support of several diasporic or religious networks. The Ismaili link expanded Arkoun’s profile beyond the francophone sphere into the larger European-Anglophone world (the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London played an important role in this process). In Soroush’s case, the Iranian diaspora contributed to the creation of platforms inside and outside academia; many of his lectures in Europe and North America were organised by Iranians living in Europe. Civil society organisations like the Musawah movement often hosted them and offered a perennial platform for their work in Muslim-majority countries as well as in Europe and North America. Although less involved with the Muslim community in Europe, Abu Zayd was awarded the Freedom of Thought Prize in 2006 by the Democratic Muslims of Denmark, a political organisation funded by Danish Muslims in the aftermath of the cartoon controversy.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the years, these thinkers also benefitted from the support of non-Muslim and non-diasporic civil-society organisations. For instance, the Reset Dialogue on Civilisation association (Reset.doc), founded in 2004, is acted as

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<sup>53</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, ‘The Changeable and the Unchangeable’, in *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition* eds. Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Ziba Mir-Hosseini, in *Gender and Equality in Muslim Family Law: Justice and Ethics in the Islamic Legal Tradition*, eds. Lena Larsen, et al. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 33, n.49.

<sup>54</sup> Politiken, ‘Demokratiske Muslimer Markerer Årsdag for Profettegninger’, *Politiken*, 5 June 2006,

a platform for different aspects of intercultural and interreligious dialogue (Abu Zayd served on its scientific committee). Reset Dialogue promoted the three thinkers' work through their website, publications, lectures and debates. These included a debate between Arkoun and Soroush in November 2006 and a lecture by Arkoun in Cairo in January 2007.<sup>55</sup>

This grassroots interest by both Muslim and non-Muslim actors increasingly matched political attention towards these figures. In April 1996, when Abu Zayd and Arkoun were invited to Toledo for the symposium 'Islam, Modernism and the West', the discussion had already gone beyond university circles to acquire a more public and political tone: not only did the event gather some of the key scholars in the field – Arkoun, Abu Zayd, Hasan Hanafi, Sadik al-Azm, Tariq Ramadan, John Esposito, Jocelyne Cesari and Jorgen Nielson – but it witnessed the presence of the crown prince of Spain. Coverage by the *Guardian* and its explicit mention as a point of reference for future policies in the EU's Barcelona Declaration highlighted the political significance of the event.<sup>56</sup> Being part of – or known by – the network of political actors, was important in this burgeoning interest. Bérengère Massignon recounted how in 1991, Jacques Delors, then president of the European Commission, organised one of the Commission's first conferences on inter-religious dialogue, to formalise the relations between religions and the Commission. According to Massignon, the absence of institutional representatives of the Muslim population in Europe and Arkoun's connection to the network of organisers – he had produced the report 'The Contribution of the Islamic Civilization to European Culture'

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<sup>55</sup> Reset Foundation, 'Filosofia Al Teatro Eliseo: Differenze. Le Parole Del Dialogo', *Reset.DOC*, 23 November 2006, <https://www.resetdoc.org/it/story/filosofia-al-teatro-eliseo-24-novembre-presentazione-del-nostro-sito/>; Reset Foundation, 'Mohammed Arkoun, the "Demystification" of the Qur'an', *Reset.doc*, 1 January 2012, <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/mohammed-arkoun-the-demystification-of-the-quran>.

<sup>56</sup> Gott, 'Reason Blinks in the Light of Faith'; European Commission, 'Barcelona Declaration. Adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference', 27–28 November 1995, [http://www.ceas.europa.eu/archives/docs/euromed/docs/bd\\_en.pdf](http://www.ceas.europa.eu/archives/docs/euromed/docs/bd_en.pdf).

for the Council of Europe – favoured his invitation to speak to the conference.<sup>57</sup>

Although the attention of political actors dated from before 9/11, the attack on the World Trade Center exacerbated ongoing dynamics, leading to the intensification and expansion of these transnational initiatives. The attention of political actors fostered a rise in funding (and, consequently, platforms) for these thinkers. As Nina Zu Furstenberg, co-founder of Reset.doc, recognised, ‘The idea of the association was already there, but it was easier to fundraise after 9/11’.<sup>58</sup> Several think tanks and political organisations devised debate platforms for these scholars. The Konrad Adenauer Initiative, a think tank associated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, published several working papers and organised initiatives on the three thinkers; among them, the 2005 conference ‘Progressive thinking in Contemporary Islam’, which had Abu Zayd among its speakers and included debates on Soroush and Arkoun’s ideas. Germany’s federal minister of the interior was among the participants.<sup>59</sup> In 2003 President Chirac named Arkoun – of the three scholars, the most engaged with Western governments – a member of the Stasi Commission on the application of the principle of *laïcité* in the French Republic. In 2008 president Chirac enlisted Arkoun’s help setting up the Fondation Chirac, dedicated to building a ‘dialogue between cultures and civilizations’, effectively adopting president Khatami’s rhetoric.<sup>60</sup> In 2003 Arkoun was invited by the British Council in 2003 to be a speaker at its ‘Representing Islam’ seminar. Even Soroush, who (according to Casanova)

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<sup>57</sup> Bérengère Massignon, ‘Islam in the European Commission’s System of Regulation of Religion’, in *Islam in Europe: Diversity, Identity and Influence*, eds. Aziz al-Azmeh and Eddie Fokas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 131.

<sup>58</sup> Nina Zu Furstenberg, Skype interview with the author, 9 April 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Troll, *Progressive Thinking in Contemporary Islam*. Other initiatives included working papers such as Jacobs, ‘Reformist Islam’; Eliane Etmueller, ‘Religion, Reform and Progress’, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, October 2008, [http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_14769-544-1-30.pdf](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_14769-544-1-30.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Chirac, ‘Speech by Jacques Chirac at the Award Ceremony of the Conflict Prevention Prize’, speech delivered at Fondation Chirac, Paris, 5 November 2010, <http://www.fondationchirac.eu/en/2010/11/speech-by-jacques-chirac-at-the-award-ceremony-of-the-conflict-prevention-prize-november-5-2010>.

generally attempted to avoid interactions with Western political actors, participated in the 2000 lecture ‘Islamic democracy and Islamic governance’ organised by the Middle East Institute (a Washington, D.C. think tank).<sup>61</sup> While the involvement of political actors and increased funding favoured the expansion of projects on these thinkers, the security dimension of these initiatives often threatened their legitimacy and grassroots support.<sup>62</sup> This was even truer after the geographical expansion of their network and their growing prominence in the global intellectual field: in this enlarged arena, they found themselves negotiating their own perceived roles as organic and critical intellectuals and governments’ interest in the exploitation of them for public diplomacy.

### *Geographical expansion*

The emergence of Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush was linked to the expansion and diversification of the network of actors interested in their work. During the 1980s and 1990s, Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush achieved prominence in different national contexts. In Muslim majority countries, Soroush proved popular in Iran; Abu Zayd, in Indonesia and Turkey; and Arkoun, in France and among intellectual circles in Morocco.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, they became known almost independently in the North-American and European-Anglophone literature: for example, Charles Kurzman, who produced a ground-breaking sourcebook on liberal Muslim thought, declared that he had not been influenced by academic production in Europe.<sup>64</sup> Towards the end of the 1990s, but particularly in the new millennium, the interconnection between national platforms

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<sup>61</sup> Soroush, Abdolkarim and Charles Butterworth, ‘Islamic Democracy and Islamic Governance: A Summary of Remarks by Abdolkarim Soroush and Charles Butterworth at the Middle East Institute, 21 November 2000’, Abdolkarim Soroush Website, [http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/By\\_DrSoroush/E-CMB-20001121-Islamic\\_Democracy\\_and\\_Islamic\\_Governance.html](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/By_DrSoroush/E-CMB-20001121-Islamic_Democracy_and_Islamic_Governance.html) (accessed 24 June 2013).

<sup>62</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, ‘The Securitisation of Islam in Europe’, in *Muslims in the West after 9/11: Religion, Politics and Law* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, email to the author, 15 February 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Kurzman, Skype interview with the author, 16 September 2015.

intensified, leading to a *de facto* global intellectual market. Of course, this was neither entirely new nor specific to these scholars: the intellectual sphere has always been transnational by nature, but improved communication technologies and higher scholar mobility (among other forces) intensified the flow of knowledge about, and selection of, actors internationally. These globalised conditions generated space for more independent voices, in some cases in competition with their national affiliations. They illustrate Arjun Appadurai's idea of 'translocality' as 'a space in which the hegemony of nationalist politics is challenged by forms of life which refuse to recognise the limits of the state as the limits of its politics'.<sup>65</sup> Such global venues carved space for Soroush, for instance, to exceed the confines of Iranian Studies and broach the broader fields of Islamic and religious studies. In the case of Arkoun, who produced mainly in Europe, this enlarged scope facilitated his career as an important voice from the Muslim world, as it enabled Abu Zayd's independent assurance from his grassroots base in Egypt.

This geographical expansion multiplied platforms for these thinkers and encouraged new regions in shaping the production of knowledge: the Persian Gulf, South East Asia and North Africa entered the international network of actors involved in the production of English literature on 'moderate' Islam. Georgetown University's 2008 conference 'Innovation in Islam: Traditions and contributions' in Qatar gathered Arkoun, Abu Zayd and other scholars associated with them: Ziba Mir-Hosseini, John O. Voll, Tariq Ramadan, Sherman Jackson.<sup>66</sup> Arkoun's former student Mustapha Tlili inaugurated New York University's Center for Dialogues: Islamic World – US – The West, which connected institutions and scholars from around the world (Arkoun, himself, was

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<sup>65</sup> Mandaville, *Reimagining the Umma*, 5; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 27.

<sup>66</sup> Kamrava, *The New Voices of Islam*; ———, *Innovation in Islam: Traditions and Contributions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

involved in several of its initiatives).<sup>67</sup> The International Institute for Qur'anic Studies (IIQS), an Indonesian initiative under the patronage of former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, involved both Abu Zayd and Soroush.<sup>68</sup> All three thinkers were discussed during the 2000 conference 'Intellectuals in Islam in the Twentieth Century: Situations, Discourses, Strategies' in Japan.<sup>69</sup> The creation of the ISIM – with its international character 'firmly established through a growing network of foreign institutions'<sup>70</sup> – appeared to many as the 'the beginning of a global network'<sup>71</sup> for this kind of scholarship.

Outside academia, the development of transnational initiatives at both the grassroots and established political levels furthered the global expansion of their networks. The Musawah movement is one such transnational organisation.<sup>72</sup> Co-founded in Malaysia by Ziba Mir-Hosseini in 2009, this foundation promotes 'equality in the Muslim family', by bridging intellectual debates and grassroots practices. Mir-Hosseini, among the main interlocutors of Abu Zayd and Soroush, was instrumental in disseminating their ideas beyond specialised fields. Sisters in Islam had a similar role. A civil society organisation based in Malaysia, its goal is promoting women's rights within the framework of Islam.<sup>73</sup> Frequently engaging these thinkers' works – Abu Zayd lectured there – the organisation combined intellectual debates, advocacy and public education. In the Middle East, their ideas were discussed by civil society organisations such as the

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<sup>67</sup> New York University, 'New York University's Center for Dialogues Explores Islam as Part of Europe's Identity in Sept. 25 Panel Discussion', 19 August 2008, [https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2008/august/nyus\\_center\\_for.html](https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2008/august/nyus_center_for.html).

<sup>68</sup> LibForAll Foundation, 'LibForAll Establishes International Institute of Qur'anic Studies', *Solution in Sight*, Winter (2009).

<sup>69</sup> Stéphane A. Dudoignon, Hisao Komatsu and Yasushi Kosugi, *Intellectuals in the Modern Islamic World: Transmission, Transformation, Communication* (London: Routledge, 2006), vii, 291, 99.

<sup>70</sup> Georges Khalil, 'The Working Group Modernity and Islam', *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 2 (1999): 36.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Kurzman, Skype interview with the author, 16 September 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Musawah, 'About Us', <https://www.musawah.org> (accessed 2 July 2019).

<sup>73</sup> Sisters in Islam, 'The Sisters in Islam Story', <https://www.sistersinislam.org.my/page.php?35> (accessed 2 July 2019).

Adyan Foundation, an international NGO based in Lebanon, meant to promote inter-religious dialogue.<sup>74</sup> Such organisations mediated between these thinkers and the broader society and were vital for introducing them to other institutions. Of a 1996 Sisters in Islam symposium in Kuala Lumpur, Georgetown's Casanova recalled, 'I met many of the Muslim intellectuals in that conference. I met, for instance, Arkoun for the first time there'.<sup>75</sup> These thinkers increasingly enjoyed the support of international organisations. Established in 2005, the United Nations Alliance of Civilization (UNAOC), for instance, supported such civil society organisations as the Adyan Foundation and its board included individuals like Emanuel Kattan and Danish Masood, who knew these scholars' work.<sup>76</sup> Soroush and Arkoun frequently collaborated with UNESCO, participating, for instance, in the UNESCO Philosophy Forum in 1996, 2004 and 2005.<sup>77</sup> Arkoun, in particular, nurtured a strong relationship with UNESCO: as juror for the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education (in 2002 and 2006), as a participant in the thematic debate 'Promoting quality education: education for peace, human rights and democracy' (April 2003), and as jury president for the UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture (2010).<sup>78</sup> The pinnacle of this engagement was Arkoun's speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2006.<sup>79</sup> The involvement of Arkoun and Soroush with these international organisations enhanced

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Driessen, *International Conference on Religions and Political Values, 26–28 November, 2014: Conference Report* (Lebanon: Adyan Foundation, 2014).

<sup>75</sup> Jose Casanova, conversation with the author, 9 June 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Emmanuel Kattan, former director of the British Council in New York, interview with the author, 1 November 2013; Danish Masood, UN Alliance of Civilization, interview with the author, 4 November 2013.

<sup>77</sup> Fondation Arkoun, 'UNESCO – Qui Sommes Nous? Le 28 Mars 1996' YouTube video, 20:42, 6 September 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGsfmqHsDOQ>; Abdolkarim Soroush, 'UNESCO Philosophy Forum', Abdolkarim Soroush Website, [http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/News\\_Archive/E-NWS-20000800-News\\_Update\\_On\\_Dr.\\_Soroush.html](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/News_Archive/E-NWS-20000800-News_Update_On_Dr._Soroush.html) (accessed 15 January 2016).

<sup>78</sup> UNESCO, *UNESCO Prize for Peace Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 2002); Koichiro Matsuura, 'Address on the Occasion of the Award Ceremony' (UNESCO Prize for Peace Education, Paris, 2006); UNESCO, *UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture: 9th Edition* (Paris: UNESCO, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, 'Third Informal Thematic Debate. Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: Obstacles and Opportunities. Introductory Remarks', *United Nations General Assembly 61st Session*, <https://www.un.org/ga/president/61/follow-up/thematic-civilizations/arkoun-statement.shtml> (accessed 30 June 2019).

their symbolic capital transnationally.

By the end of the 1990s and particularly after 9/11, some governments, wishing to shape the global debate over Islam, significantly increased their funding and transnational platforms proliferated. While these thinkers benefitted from the attention this brought them, it simultaneously undermined their legitimacy by implicitly linking their intellectual commitment to these governments' political agendas. Conferences and events in which these thinkers participated as speakers, or where their thought was debated, were often the result of public diplomacy efforts by these governments. Saba Mahmood discussed the Bush administration's Muslim World Outreach program and its interest in promoting figures like Abu Zayd and Soroush.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, the conference 'Who Speaks for Islam? Who Speaks for the West?' (Kuala Lumpur 2006) – at which Arkoun spoke – was organised in cooperation with the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations of Malaysia with funding from the governments of Malaysia, the United Kingdom and France.<sup>81</sup> The conferences 'Arabs between the Culture of Change and the Change of Culture,' (Marrakech 2004) and 'From the interpretation of the Koran to a modern reading of the Koran phenomenon' (Casablanca 2004) – in which Abu Zayd and Arkoun participated – were organised by the Arab Thought Foundation, founded by Prince Khalid Al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia.<sup>82</sup> While governments' attention to initiatives involving these thinkers favoured funding and multiplication of this kind of project, the security dimension often connected to this support risked undermining their legitimacy. It would be incorrect to adduce the multiplication of platforms during these years solely to governments' security interests. Indeed, they were often promoted by actors with

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<sup>80</sup> Mahmood, 'Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire'.

<sup>81</sup> Dialogues Islamic World-U.S.-The West, *Who Speaks for Islam? Who Speaks for the West?* (New York: Dialogues: Islamic World – U.S. – The West, 2006).

<sup>82</sup> 'Min Marākish 'ila al-dār al-bayḍa'. Ghazwū 'ilmānī li-mu'assasāt Sa'ūdiyya', *Maghress*, 9 December 2004, <https://www.maghress.com/attajdid/2405>.

critical stances against official policies: the previous chapter mentioned the Progressive Muslims Network, for instance, gathering academics and activists engaged with the three thinkers and who openly opposed America's domestic and foreign policies.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, attempts by governments to extend influence beyond their national boundaries found resistance, as ISIM professor Van Bruinessen corroborates:

The Bush White House had a policy to 'change the face of Islam', for which vast sums were earmarked. We have always been careful to dissociate ourselves from such efforts. We were interested in seeing how Islamic discourse develops, and we hoped we could perform a helpful function by providing a forum where Muslim thinkers could meet and discuss in relative freedom, but we did not have a policy of favouring 'good Muslims'.<sup>84</sup>

Finally, although these policies contributed greater opportunities and improved mobility for them, these scholars proved wary of the risks of being instrumentalised. To protect themselves, they either took critical stands against these policies, refused to collaborate, or used these platforms to urge 'change from within': such was the case, as will be discussed, with Arkoun's involvement with the Stasi Commission and Abu Zayd's acceptance of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Award in 2002.<sup>85</sup> Increased interest in Islam, and especially on the intellectual debate within Islam, produced a typological and geographical expansion of these networks. This contributed to greater participation within European-Anglophone academia, and later into a broader intellectual discussion. While 9/11 was not the *incipit* of this development, it added impetus to the trend, and reinforced role played by security considerations. While this section explored how this network of thinkers expanded, the next will focus on three specific institutions

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<sup>83</sup> Safi, ed. *Progressive Muslims*, 4–5.

<sup>84</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, email to author, 16 February 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, 'Lettre à Maurice Borrman, Paris, 16 Février 2004', in *Les Vies De Mohammed Arkoun*, ed. Sylvie Arkoun (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014); Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 81–83.

– as nodes of the network – to analyse how these thinkers entered the network in the first place.

#### 4.4 The network: three cases

As discussed so far, these thinkers gravitated around a specific network of institutions and individuals. This section will focus on their interaction with three specific nodes of this network, namely the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (WIKO), the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), and the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS). These centres were among the leading European-Anglophone academic institutions to promote these thinkers and their thought either by producing work on them or hosting them. This section investigates how the transmission of knowledge on these thinkers and their future collaborations with these institutes took place. These alliances reflected an institutional vision and interest in their ideas, but also contingency (personal connections, physical proximity, or institute scholars' familiarity with their work). Previous collaborations between these centres often facilitated the flow of knowledge on these thinkers. Although not formally linked, these centres enjoyed frequent association and sometimes shared scholars, including the intellectuals under study. For example, Amin Sajoo, Suha Taji-Farouki, Sajjad Rizvi – IIS-affiliated academics who wrote about Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush – presented or collaborated on projects at the ISIM.<sup>86</sup> The active cooperation between the ISIM and the IIS was confirmed by Abdou Filali-Ansary, founding director of the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim

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<sup>86</sup> See Aryn B. Sajoo, 'Revisiting the Muslim Public Sphere', *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 8 (2001): 37; ———, 'Muslim Modernities and Civic Pluralism', *ISIM Review* 21, no. Spring (2008); Suha Taji-Farouki, 'Ibn 'Arabi Meets New Age? Sufism and Sufi Spirituality in the West' (lecture, ISIM, Leiden, 13 December 2007); Matthijs Van Den Bos and Farzin Vahdat, 'Authority in Contemporary Shi'ism', *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 10 (2002).

Civilizations, and a member of the ISIM.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, two ISIM committee members worked on the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin's research project 'Islamic and Jewish Hermeneutics as Cultural Criticism': Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Tayob Abdulkader.<sup>88</sup> Taji-Farouki, another affiliate of IIS, became a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin in 2006/07.<sup>89</sup> In one sense, this pre-existing network of collaborations favoured both the flow of knowledge on them and their physical movement between institutes. But how did these thinkers enter the network in the first place? The next section will answer this question by focusing on each of the three institutes.

#### 4.4.1 International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM)

The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World represented one of the critical centres within the network of institutions that helped promote these thinkers. The institute was founded in 1998 by the University of Amsterdam, Leiden University and Utrecht University as a '[r]esponse to a need for further research on contemporary developments of great social, political and cultural importance in the Muslim world from social science and humanities perspectives'.<sup>90</sup> Funding came from the member universities together with the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO); the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) and the

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<sup>87</sup> Abdou Filali-Ansary, Skype interview with the author, 6 June 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 'Islamic and Jewish Hermeneutics as Cultural Criticism.'

<sup>89</sup> ISIM, 'ISIM Events', *ISIM Review*, no. 20 (2007): 63. Suha Taji-Farouki, Abdulkader Tayob, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Islamische Theologie: Internationale Beiträge Zur Hamburger Debatte* (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2002).

<sup>90</sup> National Academic Research and Collaborations Information System, 'Organisation: International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World – ISIM', 1 January 2009, <http://www.narcis.nl/organisation/RecordID/ORG1238811>. See also Dick Douwes, 'Editorial', *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 1 (1998); ISIM, 'Research Approaches and Thematic Profile', *ibid.*, no. 1 (1998); ———, 'A Short Description of the ISIM', *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 1 (1998).

Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Netherlands Development Cooperation.<sup>91</sup> The volatile political climate in the Netherlands following the murder of Theo Van Gogh and the rise of right-wing parties led the Dutch Ministry of Education to cease funding in 2009, resulting in the ISIM's closure.<sup>92</sup> Through eleven years of activity, the ISIM stood as an internationally renowned centre of interdisciplinary scholarship on contemporary Muslim politics and societies. Besides Abu Zayd and Soroush, many significant scholars of modern Muslim societies and intellectual trends within Islam engaged with the Institute: Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Asef Bayat, Hasan Hanafi, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Ebrahim Moosa, Tariq Ramadan, Oliver Roy, Amina Wadud and Sami Zubaida (*inter alia*). It was as a member of ISIM that Abu Zayd met and developed personal and intellectual relations with Soroush, who visited the institute at different stages, becoming a fellow there during 2006–7.<sup>93</sup> Their involvement with the ISIM reflected the Institute's interest on contemporary intellectual trends in Islam; as Martin van Bruinessen, one of ISIM's founders, affirmed:

We had dreams of making ISIM a place where academic interest in the world of Islam and Muslims' intellectual concerns intersected (...) We were interested in seeing how Islamic discourse develops, and we hoped we could perform a helpful function by providing a forum where Muslim thinkers could meet and discuss in relative freedom.<sup>94</sup>

Although the Institute was eager to cover the spectrum of perspectives within the Muslim world, particular attention was paid to debates on modernity and Islam; democracy; human rights and the relationship of intellectual discourses to the socio-political reality.

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<sup>91</sup> ———, 'A Short Description of the ISIM'.

<sup>92</sup> According to Joed Elich, publishing director at Brill, Van Gogh's murder 'represented for the Netherlands what the Rushdie Affair represented for the UK'. Joed Elich, conversation with the author, 24 November 2014.

<sup>93</sup> ISIM, 'Abdolkarim Soroush ISIM Visiting Professor at Vrije Universiteit', *ISIM Review*, no. 19 (2007).

<sup>94</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, email to the author, 15 February 2015.

This created fertile ground for these thinkers' ideas to germinate within the Institute. Not only did these themes constitute an essential part of these scholars' thinking, but their very identities as intellectuals were constructed at the crossroads of the academic and public spheres. The selection of (and the collaboration with) these specific individuals depended (in part) on members' previous familiarity with their work, as well as more contingent factors (eg physical proximity, personal relationships). For instance, as Soroush was already well known to the scholars involved with ISIM when it was first established,<sup>95</sup> they discussed his work from the very beginning.<sup>96</sup> This institutional regard led to his invitation to the 2000 ISIM Workshop: Muslim Intellectuals and Modern Challenges and ultimately to his fellowship at the Institute in 2006/07. Van Bruinessen's particular interest in Soroush's work coincided with the Iranian Revolution, prompted by translations of his work by a Turkish publisher.<sup>97</sup>

Abu Zayd's involvement with ISIM was greatly influenced by his affiliation (as a visiting professor in Islamic Studies) with Leiden University, one of ISIM's founding universities. Van Bruinessen revealed, '[Since] Abu Zayd was already living in the Netherlands [...], having a man of his stature around, it was rather obvious that we should invite him'.<sup>98</sup> His collaboration was, therefore, the result of both physical proximity – his affiliation with a founding institution at the project's creation – and the affinity of his thought with the Institute's vision. Unlike those two thinkers, Arkoun was never directly

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Kurzman, 'Liberal Islam Not a Contradiction in Terms', *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 2 (1999); Forough Jahanbakhsh, 'Abdolkarim Soroush New "Revival of Religious Sciences"', *ibid.*, no. 8 (2001); Jillian Schwedler, 'Transnational Islamist Debates About the Taliban', *ibid.*, no. 7 (2001); Farhad Khosrokhavar, 'New Social Movements in Iran', *ibid.*, no. 7 (2001); Matthijs van den Bos and Farzin Vahdat, 'Authority in Contemporary Shi'ism', *ibid.*, no. 10 (2002); Martin van Bruinessen, 'Islam, Women's Rights, and Islamic Feminism', *ibid.*, no. 9 (2002); Forough Jahanbakhsh, 'Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Reflection of Abdolkarim Soroush's Views', conference paper, Authority in Contemporary Shi'ism, Leiden, 2002; Abdulkader Tayob, 'Reading Religion and Religious in Modern Islam', *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 15 (2005).

<sup>97</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, email to the author, 15 February 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

involved with ISIM, although (as Van Bruinessen pointed out) he was ‘invited for some of our activities but he declined or could not for some reason’.<sup>99</sup> This despite being known and discussed by members of the institute and similar circles of scholars and institutions: the Brill publishing house, where Arkoun collaborated as editor of *Arabica*, was one of ISIM’s main publishing partners; he held a chair at Amsterdam University between 1991–1993 before ISIM was established; and he was on the academic board of the IIS, a frequent collaborator with ISIM. Van Bruinessen hinted at Arkoun collaborations with different academic/political groups in the Netherlands as a possible reason for resistance to partnership:

Arkoun had briefly held a chair in Amsterdam before ISIM was established; that chair was established at the initiative of the [Social Liberal Party] (in the Netherlands ‘liberal’ means pro-business and somewhat conservative, and the chair was expected to stimulate ‘enlightened’ understandings of Islam).<sup>100</sup>

Brill Publishers’ Joed Elich pointed to the diversity in approaches – Arkoun had a more philological approach, while ISIM’s orientation was towards contemporary social science – as well as Arkoun’s francophone inclinations – he insisted *Arabica* maintain its French edition – as possible reasons.<sup>101</sup> In other words, while ISIM’s penchant for specific themes encouraged engagement with these thinkers’ ideas, the direct involvement and collaboration of these specific scholars were contingent on social capital and proximity.

#### **4.4.2 The Working Group Modernity and Islam at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin)**

Launched in 1995 and active until 2006 as an ‘interdisciplinary research network of

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, email to the author, 15 February 2015.

<sup>101</sup> Joed Elich, conversation with the author, 24 November 2014.

scholars',<sup>102</sup> the Working Group Modernity and Islam were hosted by the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. It found funding from the Körber Foundation in Hamburg; Germany's Federal Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Technology; and the Federal Land of Berlin. All three thinkers became fellows, and each was related, in different ways, with the Working Group Modernity and Islam. Arkoun became a fellow in 1986/87 and fostered the intellectual milieu that inspired the creation of the Working Group. Abu Zayd and Soroush became fellows in 2002/04 and 2004/06, respectively.<sup>103</sup> The project was the brainchild of Rector Wolf Lepenies in conversation with other Middle Eastern fellows and aimed at understanding modernity from the Muslim perspective.<sup>104</sup> Fellows at the Institute would be chosen to meet specific considerations. First, an emphasis on voices from the Muslim world, to start a conversation 'with' rather than 'on' Islam.<sup>105</sup> Second, as noted by Al-Azmeh, a founding member of the working group, a particular desire for 'professional moderate Muslims':

The fellowships of Abu Zayd and Soroush were made in this mood. Their role inside was largely one of politico-cultural showcasing and of 'cross-cultural conversations', or interreligious 'dialogue' as well. In other words, WIKO promoted the emergence into the public sphere of what one might call professional moderate Muslims (Abu Zayd and Soroush are not the only ones), who generally offered critiques of religious conservatism that also conveyed an apologetic discourse for their religion.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Georges Khalil, 'The Working Group Modernity and Islam', *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>103</sup> Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, *Jahrbuch 1986/87* (Berlin: Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 1987); Abu Zayd, 'Living and Working at the Wissenschaftskolleg'; Abdolkarim Soroush, 'The Creative Omnipotence', in *Jahrbuch 2004/2005*, ed. Angelika Leuchter (Berlin: Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 2006).

<sup>104</sup> Youssef Hijazi, 'Institute for Advanced Study Berlin: Research Opportunities Also Open to Fellows from Islamic Societies: Interview with George Khalili', *Qantara*, 15 April 2005, <https://en.qantara.de/content/institute-for-advanced-study-berlin-research-opportunities-also-open-to-fellows-from-islamic>.

<sup>105</sup> Wolf Lepenies, 'Three and a Dozen Years', *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*, <http://www.wiko-berlin.de/institution/leben-und-arbeiten/rueckblicke/geschichte-der-institution/jubilaeumspublikation/volltexte-en/wolf-lepenies-three-and-a-dozen-years> (accessed 2 July 2015).

<sup>106</sup> Aziz al-Azmeh, email to the author, 19 October 2015.

Furthermore, these thinkers represented dissenting voices within Islamic circles: ‘They were recruited in the first place on account of their growing reputations for dissidence within Islamic circles: Abu Zayd on account of a well-known itinerary, Soroush on account of having defected and recanted the earlier days of participation in Khomeini's cultural revolution, the purification of Iranian universities, and so forth’.<sup>107</sup> In the specific cases of Soroush and Abu Zayd, Al-Azmeh stressed how their status as dissidents, and consequent exile, determined WIKO’s commitment to supporting them: ‘Both Soroush and Abu Zayd were also appointed because they had to fear for their [lives] at home, they were cases of emergency’.<sup>108</sup> Among those who could boast such profiles – voices from within the Muslim world, ‘professional moderates’ and dissenting voices – the choice of these specific thinkers often hinged on their social capital, (both interaction with specific circles and introduction to the Institute by individual scholars). In the cases of Abu Zayd and Soroush, Lepenies argued that a particular person was instrumental in their collaboration: ‘The appointment both of Soroush and Abu Zayd had certainly something to do with the fact that Navid Kermani was connected with the Kolleg who is Iranian and who was a pupil of Abu Zayd’.<sup>109</sup> On the other, Arkoun’s French profile guided his engagement with WIKO: ‘Mohammed Arkoun was a ‘normal’ choice, given his position in France and the rather close relations the Kolleg had with the French intellectual milieu during my tenure (1986–2001) at the Institute’.<sup>110</sup> This intertwining of the search for specific profiles and the influence of social capital in shaping selections was evident in the institute’s admission procedure. Georges Khalil, a coordinator for the Working Group Modernity and Islam, explained that scholars were either nominated by former fellows or

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Wolf Lepenies, email to the author, 19 October 2015.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

applied themselves, to be examined and selected by the academic advisory board.<sup>111</sup>

#### 4.4.3 The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS)

The Institute of Ismaili Studies in the UK developed into another (particularly significant) centre in the promotion of these thinkers' ideas in European-Anglophone academia. Several IIS publications discussed these thinkers, sometimes systematically engaging with their thought.<sup>112</sup> One main translation of Arkoun's work into English, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, was published in association with the IIS.<sup>113</sup> Established in 1977, the IIS advocated scholarship on Islam apart from its theological and religious heritage, emphasising the relationship between 'religious ideas to broader dimensions of society and culture'<sup>114</sup> with particular attention to modernity. Nettler suggested that this could be related to the traditional philosophical Ismaili conception of Islam which promoted the integration of Islam and modernity, as well as pluralism, interreligious dialogue and Sufism.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, the confrontation of Muslims (specifically the Ismaili community) with Modernity is a recurring theme for many key figures at the Institute. In a 1974 article, 'Modernization and Change in the Nizari Ismaili Community in East Africa', IIS Director Azim Nanji addressed the problem and its meaning for an

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<sup>111</sup> Hijazi, 'Institute for Advanced Study Berlin'.

<sup>112</sup> Tajji-Farouki, ed. *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*; Abdullah Saeed, 'Reading the Qur'an', in *A Companion to the Muslim World*, ed. Ayn B. Sajoo (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Ayn B. Sajoo, *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002). Even where not systematically discussed, other publications by the Institute, mentioned or referenced works by these thinkers in their bibliographies. See for instance ———, *Muslim Ethics: Emerging Vistas* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); Zulfikar A. Hirji, *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses Amongst Muslims* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Farhad Daftary, *Intellectual Traditions in Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

<sup>113</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

<sup>114</sup> Zuleikha Haji and Sehr Tejpar, 'For Students in IIS Graduate Programme, the Whole World Is a Field for Study', *The Ismaili*, 2015, <https://the.ismaili/our-stories/students-iis-graduate-programme-whole-world-field-study>.

<sup>115</sup> Ronald Nettler, conversation with the author, 25 August 2015.

Ismaili community in East Africa.<sup>116</sup> Evincing a similar stand, IIS board member Aziz Esmail underlined how ‘the teaching of our faith [...] advocated a harmony of the ancient and the modern’.<sup>117</sup> This focus on modernity and the Islamic intellectual tradition in its cultural and historical contexts drew the Institute to Arkoun, Soroush and Abu Zayd. Despite this common interest, however, IIS’s relationship with the three scholars proved to be very dissimilar. Arkoun enjoyed a close collaboration with the Institute and joined its board. Soroush was published by and presented lectures at the Institute but never enjoyed academic affiliation. Abu Zayd never interacted with the centre directly, although his thoughts and work were cited – to a lesser degree than Arkoun’s or Soroush’s – in publications and curricula within IIS. As at WIKO, the relationship of IIS to the Francophone tradition was crucial in introducing Arkoun to the London centre, given his authority in the French context. For some years IIS had a branch in Paris which formed and informed the scholarship of the London centre – with books for the library and itinerant scholars. Indeed, although located in England, IIS maintained an intense engagement with continental Europe’s scholarship.<sup>118</sup> The collaboration with Arkoun was fostered by these ties to the French intellectual world and his long relationship with the Ismaili community. Starting in 1981 Arkoun served as a jury member for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, and throughout the years he developed collaborations and friendship with different members of the institute.<sup>119</sup> As Aziz Esmail concedes, he was particularly impressed when first meeting Arkoun:

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<sup>116</sup> Azim Nanji, ‘Modernization and Change in the Nizari Ismaili Community in East Africa: A Perspective’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 6, no. 2 (1974).

<sup>117</sup> Aziz Esmail, ‘Mohammed Arkoun: A Personal Tribute and an Intellectual Assessment’, in *The Construction of Belief: Reflections on the Thought of Mohammed Arkoun*, eds. Abdou Filali-Ansary and Aziz Esmail (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 18.

<sup>118</sup> Shainool Jiwa, head of the Constituency Studies at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, conversation with the author, 21 October 2014.

<sup>119</sup> Carool Kersten, email to the author, 27 June 2013; Rizwan Mawani, Arkoun’s former student, telephone conversation with the author, 3 May 2014; Foundation Arkoun, ‘Institut Ismaélien London Oct 2010’, YouTube video, 54:43, 30 August 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzDOd2QjIII>.

Because my own experience of Islamic Studies had been a great disappointment. For this reason, Arkoun's approach struck me as a rare intellectual treat. [...] Islamic Studies makes sense only as a field built jointly out of contributions of perspectives such as those of history, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and philosophy. This is precisely what in its traditional form it has never been.<sup>120</sup>

And although my intellectual formation and temperament were different from his, and although my personal background, unlike his, was shaped by strong spiritual commitments, on the intellectual front he remained a constant interlocutor. This was especially so when we became colleagues on the Board of Governors of this organisation.<sup>121</sup>

Thus, Arkoun's vision complemented the interests of the Institute's members. Brahimi discussed the collaboration in Weberian terms, as the 'elective affinity' between Arkoun and the Institute, with its network of scholars introducing him to the IIS community, ie his actual social capital.<sup>122</sup> In 1993, following an organisational restructuring of the Institute and the creation of a new Department of Academic Research and Publications under the deanship of Dr Aziz Esmail, Arkoun was appointed Senior Research Fellow and entered the Board of Governors at the Institute.<sup>123</sup> From this position, he implemented some of his main ideas for a reformation of Islamic studies. Indeed, together with Aziz Esmail, Arkoun became the principal intellectual designer of the Institute's Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH).<sup>124</sup> Modelling these scholars' ideas, the Graduate Program focused on the 'inter-relationship (of ideas and meanings to social and political forces) as one of the keys to an integrated understanding of' the study

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<sup>120</sup> Esmail, 'Mohammed Arkoun', 17, 20.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 28–29.

<sup>122</sup> Mohamed Brahimi, 'Elective Affinity as an Intellectual Connection: A Review of Mohammed Arkoun's Relation to the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS)', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 31, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>123</sup> Omar Ali-de-Unzaga, 'Introduction: A Bibliographical Sketch', in *Fortresses of Intellect: Ismaili and Other Islamic Studies in Honour of Farhad Daftary*, ed. Omar Ali-de-Unzaga (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 18.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 21.

of Islam.<sup>125</sup> Throughout the 1990s Arkoun's classes were required foundational courses.<sup>126</sup> He also authored chapters in several edited volumes of the Institute, besides his monumental monograph, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, published in collaboration with the IIS.<sup>127</sup> The proximity of the institute to the Iranian tradition, owing to the Ismaili heritage, favoured attention to Iranian intellectual trends and thinkers in dialogue with them (Soroush and Abu Zayd, but also Ziba Mir-Hosseini, An-Na'im and others). Indeed, Soroush was known by many of the faculty and students of the institute:<sup>128</sup> his works appeared in various syllabi of the programme and were recognised in several IIS publications as part of the newest generation of Islam's reformist tradition.<sup>129</sup> Unlike Arkoun, however, Soroush never held an institutional affiliation with IIS, and his involvement was limited to occasional lectures and assorted publications on his work.<sup>130</sup> This might be explained by the Institute's contacts with a different network of Iranian thinkers – Seyyed Hossein Nasr, for instance, had a long history of collaboration with them – but also by the varied attitudes taken by IIS members towards Soroush. For example, while Filali-Ansary recognised Soroush as a reformist connecting 'Islamic thought and modern values',<sup>131</sup> he considered him merely an 'innovative

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<sup>125</sup> Institute of Ismaili Studies, *The Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities: 2015 Prospectus* (London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015).

<sup>126</sup> Rizwan Mawani, phone conversation to the author, 3 May 2014.

<sup>127</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, 'Present-Day Islam between Its Tradition and Globalization', in *Intellectual Traditions in Islam*, ed. Farhad Dafa'iy (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000); ———, 'Locating Civil Society in Islamic Contexts', in *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Aryn B. Sajoo (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

<sup>128</sup> This emerged in discussion with different members of the Institute, during my visit to the Institute in May 2014.

<sup>129</sup> Abdou Filali-Ansary, 'Islam's Reformist Tradition', *Project Syndicate*, 19 July 2004, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/islam-s-reformist-tradition?barrier=true>.

<sup>130</sup> Publications by IIS scholars discussing Soroush's thought include: Aryn B. Sajoo, 'The Ethics of the Public Square: A Preliminary Muslim Critique', *Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophizing*, no. 3 (2001), <http://them.polylog.org/3/asa-en.htm>; ———, *Muslim Ethics*; Farid Panjwani, 'The "Islamic" in Islamic Education: Assessing the Discourse', *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 7, no. 1 (2004); Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 'Debating Women: Gender and the Public Sphere in Post-Revolutionary Iran', in *Civil Society in Comparative Muslim Contexts*, ed. Aryn B. Sajoo (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Hirji, *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam*; Saeed, 'Reading the Qur'an'; Sajoo, *Civil Society in the Muslim World*.

<sup>131</sup> Filali-Ansary, 'Islam's Reformist Tradition',

theologian', unlike Arkoun and Abu Zayd, who adopted and adapted the approach and tools of modern scholarship to Muslim societies.<sup>132</sup> Arkoun also saw Soroush's project as specific to the Iranian situation.<sup>133</sup> Despite this diversity of views, the interest of IIS scholars in themes and approaches reflected in Soroush's work led to several publications by the Institute on this thinker. Likewise, the Institute's commitment to studies on the Qur'an and its interpretation – IIS dedicated an entire series to the subject: the Qur'anic Studies Series – favoured the discussion of Abu Zayd's work in these publications.<sup>134</sup> In sum, the combination of socio-political developments, the three thinkers' ideas, and social capital contributed to their access to WIKO, ISIM and IIS and consequently into the broader European-Anglophone academic sphere.

#### 4.5 Agency

While the above analysis examined the role of actors and institutions in selecting and promoting these thinkers' work, it would be mistaken to conclude that these scholars exercised no agency in their promotion, passively fulfilling the role assigned them by these institutes. Indeed, they actively exploited these platforms and their social capital to promote their thought, initiating collaborations, furthering their publications, and expanding their network. Chapter 2 already discussed Arkoun's active role in using his social capital (other scholars, former students) to reach a larger public.<sup>135</sup> In 2008 Abu Zayd was among the promoters of the International Institute of Qur'anic Studies (IIQS),

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<sup>132</sup> Abdou Filali-Ansary, Skype interview with the author, 6 June 2014.

<sup>133</sup> Daryoush Mohammad Poor, faculty member at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, interview with the author, 14 May 2014.

<sup>134</sup> Kermani, 'From Revelation to Interpretation'; Abdullah Saeed, *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>135</sup> See chapter 2, page 70.

developed as a branch of the LibForAll Foundation, based in Indonesia with collaboration from the Netherlands, Egypt and the United States.<sup>136</sup> Abu Zayd also invited Soroush to join IIQS's board of advisors.<sup>137</sup> Arkoun and Abu Zayd took part in the 2002 creation of the al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya l'il-l-Taḥdīth al-Fikrī, a foundation pushing scholarly work with a broader social impact. The institution, created in Beirut but based in Geneva, with financial support from a Libyan businessman, involved many prominent Arab intellectuals (including Filali-Ansary, Aziz Al Azmeh, Jalal Sadiq Al-Azm). Although it only lasted three years and produced mainly in Arabic, this project represented a significant attempt to coordinate the transnational network of Arab thinkers.<sup>138</sup> In the Persian-speaking world, Soroush was involved with several institutions meant to bring intellectual discussions to public debate, such as the Knowledge and Research Institute (Moassese-ye Ma'refat-o Pazhuhesh) in Tehran, and the Sohrevardi Foundation in Toronto.<sup>139</sup>

Even when they were not the initiators, they used the institutional resources of their hosts to reinforce and propagate their thought. At the Wissenschaftskolleg, Abu Zayd actively engaged with the German academic community: 'Besides concentrating on my research project [...] I also tried to be part of the German academic community in general and that of Berlin in particular'.<sup>140</sup> Likewise, Soroush stated that: 'In addition to my research work, my stay in Berlin provided me with a good opportunity to take part in

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<sup>136</sup> LibForAll Foundation 'LibForAll Establishes International Institute of Qur'anic Studies'. Ruthie Blum Leibowitz, 'Promoting Moderate Islam: An Interview with Holland Taylor', *PJ Media*, 26 November 2011, <http://pjmedia.com/blog/promoting-moderate-islam-an-interview-with-holland-taylor>.

<sup>137</sup> Soroush, Mumivand and Sokhanvar, 'A Congregation of Bees',

<sup>138</sup> Pierre Abi Saab, 'Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya l'il-l-Taḥdīth al-fikrī, tu'lin wildātuha min Bayrūt', *Al-Hayat*, 1 May 2004, <http://www.alhayat.com/article/1206110>; Al-awān, 'Al-ḥadātha wa-l-ḥadātha al-'Arabiyya: Mū'tamar 'ishhār al-mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya l'il-l-Taḥdīth al-fikrī', *Al-Awan*, 8 December 2013. Wael Abu Uksa, scholar working on Mohammed Arkoun, email to the author, 27 July 2013.

<sup>139</sup> Soroush Dabbagh, telephone interview with the author, 23 July 2019.

<sup>140</sup> Abu Zayd, 'Living and Working at the Wissenschaftskolleg', 15.

seminars and to present papers on the subject of my project'.<sup>141</sup> And: 'The lectures that I delivered in Germany and other countries added further pages to the record of my activities over the past academic year'.<sup>142</sup> In some instances, they condescended to engage with institutions despite opposing visions, while very wary of the risks of being instrumentalised. In Abu Zayd's own words:

In going about my work (as part of a long line of reform), I was (and still am) growing increasingly frustrated. The press and even some intellectuals within the academy want me to parrot their ideas about Islam, which usually means casting Islam in a negative light [...]. I am not supposed to say what I think. I am supposed to say what people want to hear.<sup>143</sup>

In such cases, the decision to collaborate was prompted by what Bockman and Eyal called 'alignment of interests'<sup>144</sup> – eg using a platform to promote their thought or gain access to material and symbolic resources – or the hope of changing its agenda 'from within'. Emblematic of this was the episode described by Abu Zayd on the occasion of his acceptance of the 2002 Roosevelt Four Freedoms Award. Informed by the American Ambassador William J. Vanden Heuvel, co-chairman of the Roosevelt Institute, that he had been chosen to send Americans and Muslims, both, the message 'that we are not against Muslims', Abu Zayd appeared at the ceremony wearing a Palestinian *keffiyeh* to signal support for that cause, and his speech criticised American policies in the Middle East.<sup>145</sup> Attempts to shape the agenda from within were often frustrated by the results, as Arkoun lamented in a letter to his friend Maurice Borrmans:

I will not start telling you about the Commission of Laïcité in which I sat. Too complicated, and especially disappointing, because the policies

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<sup>141</sup> Soroush, 'The Creative Omnipotence', 193.

<sup>142</sup> ———, 'In the Name of God', in *Jahrbuch 2005/2006*, ed. Angelika Leuchter (Berlin: Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 2007), 162.

<sup>143</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*.

<sup>144</sup> Bockman and Eyal, 'Eastern Europe as a Laboratory for Economic Knowledge': 328.

<sup>145</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 81–83.

have hardly followed our wise recommendations.<sup>146</sup>

Similar disagreements were among the reasons for Soroush's decision to leave the Iranian Commission for the Cultural Revolution in 1983:

The methods that were being used in universities and in the country's political sphere as a whole were also not to my liking. I told Mr. Khamenei frankly once that things had taken a different turn and I was no longer able to go along with it.<sup>147</sup>

In a few instances, they succeeded in influencing individuals' or institutions' views. Former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's idea of 'civil society' (*jam'eh-ye madani*), for instance, was shaped by Soroush's work. Particularly in the case of institutions, their degree of impact – ie their propensity and ability to absorb these thinkers' perspectives – depended not only on institutional culture but also on more practical issues. These included different types of institutional frameworks: some were single projects (like 'Modernity and Islam'); others, complex institutions (like ISIM and IIS). Another practical desideratum was the extent of their integration into the management of the programs (eg the position they held, or the time they spent there). A final practical consideration was personal commitment. For instance, the three thinkers' influence was minor at the Wissenschaftskolleg, where their affiliations were limited to one or two years of fellowship. As WIKO's Lepenies confided: 'Soroush was not long enough at the Kolleg to exert a substantial influence'.<sup>148</sup> Al-Azmeh, a founding member

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<sup>146</sup> 'Je n'entreprendrai pas de te parler de la Commission de laïcité où j'ai siégé. Trop compliqué, et surtout décevant, car les politiques n'ont guère suivi nos sages recommandations.' Mohammed Arkoun, 'Lettre à Maurice Borrmans, Paris, 16 Février 2004', in *Les Vies De Mohammed Arkoun*, ed. Sylvie Arkoun (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2014), 340. [Translation my own].

<sup>147</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, 'The Story of the Cultural Revolution: A Conversation with Dr. Soroush', Abdolkarim Soroush Website, October 1999, [https://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19991000-The\\_Story\\_of\\_the\\_Cultural\\_Revolution.html](https://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19991000-The_Story_of_the_Cultural_Revolution.html). The Commission, and Soroush as its member, was criticised for supporting the policy of closing down all the universities in order to purify them.

<sup>148</sup> Wolf Lepenies, email to the author, 16 October 2015.

of the Working Group Modernity and Islam at WIKO, confirmed this concerning Abu Zayd and Soroush: ‘As far as I know, neither of these two [...] had any significant influence on the way in which WIKO organised its programs’.<sup>149</sup> The relatively short periods he spent with these institutions, in not especially high-ranking positions, probably explain Soroush’s minimal impact, compared to the others, on the programmes of the centres that hosted him. Abu Zayd, for instance, had a significant role in shaping the ‘Modernity and Islam’ group at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Lepenies, again: ‘Abu Zayd was involved in the daily business of the “Modernity and Islam” group, and [...] he was of major influence both on an intellectual and, given his individual sort, on a personal basis’.<sup>150</sup>

As a member of the WIKO project ‘Islam and Jewish Hermeneutics as Cultural Criticism,’ Abu Zayd co-directed the 2003 Summer Academy, ‘The Hermeneutics of Border: Canon and Community in Judaism, Christianity and Islam’. Significantly, during the ‘Discourse Analysis and Islamic Studies’ course, Abu Zayd introduced students to his methodology, using discourse analysis as a tool to study Islamic texts and apply to broader Islamic Studies.<sup>151</sup> Eventually, these initiatives expanded to inform a more extensive academic curriculum in Germany.<sup>152</sup> the 2006 project ‘Europe in the Middle East – the Middle East in Europe (EUME)’ had among its explicit theoretical references the work of Abu Zayd. Similarly, Arkoun gave prestige to the Institute of Ismaili Studies programme as a member of the board of governors, as recognised by Abdou Filali-Ansary, director of the Institute, and Omar Alí-de-Unzaga, its academic coordinator.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Aziz al-Azmeh, email to the author, 19 October 2015.

<sup>150</sup> Wolf Lepenies, email to the author, 17 October 2015.

<sup>151</sup> *ISIM Annual Report 2003* (Leiden: ISIM, 2004), 29.

<sup>152</sup> Nina Zu Furstenberg, Skype interview with the author, 9 April 2014.

<sup>153</sup> Omar Alí-de-Unzaga, academic coordinator of the Qur’anic Studies Unit at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, conversation with the author, 13 May 2014.

In other instances, although not directly involved with setting the agenda, their thought shaped the philosophy behind these institutions. As van Bruinessen recognised, Soroush and Abu Zayd had a more long-term influence on the vision of the ISIM: ‘Neither Abu Zayd nor Soroush was directly involved in planning or policy making at ISIM. But their thought was important in framing the discussions and indirectly had an impact on the choices we made’.<sup>154</sup> Echoing this appraisal, Lepenies pointed to Arkoun’s ideas as deeply impressing him and contributing to the intellectual milieu that led to the establishment of the Working Group Modernity and Islam.<sup>155</sup> The third level of influence concerned the scholars with whom they engaged: while fellows at the WIKO, Soroush joined a discussion group ‘Religion and Contingency’, which included (among others) Charles Taylor and José Casanova. As Taylor recalled: ‘We had a number of very fruitful discussions, and some of my chapters were worked over in our exchanges and were immensely improved as a result’.<sup>156</sup> By the end of these discussions, Taylor questioned, for instance, the use of the term ‘secularism’: ‘I suggest that we shouldn’t use the term ‘secularism’ anymore because it now embraces such a multitude of different and conflicting meanings that it is unable to render any service to learning’.<sup>157</sup>

In conclusion, although structural factors mainly determined the attention these thinkers received – socio-political context, institutional frameworks, cultural and social capital – these examples show how they actively sought to develop their network. Although it is difficult to estimate their influence, or how they were influenced, they exercised agency by using the resources provided to expand their networks. At the same

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<sup>154</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, email to the author, 15 February 2015.

<sup>155</sup> Wolf Lepenies, email to the author, 19 October 2015; Lepenies, ‘Three and a Dozen Years’; Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin ‘Abdolkarim Soroush’, *ibid.*, <https://www.wiko-berlin.de/en/fellows/fellowfinder/detail/2005-soroush-abdolkarim>, (accessed 12 October 2015).

<sup>156</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘A Memorable Year’, in *Jahrbuch 2005/2006* (Berlin: Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 2007), 173. See also Abdolkarim Soroush, ‘In the Name of God’, *ibid.*, ed. Angelika Leuchter (Berlin: Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 2007), 161–62.

<sup>157</sup> ———, ‘In the Name of God’, 162.

time, these platforms facilitated active engagement with other individuals and institutions through which they hoped to shape the discourse.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

The emergence of Abu Zayd, Soroush and Arkoun in the academic sphere was influenced by the interaction between the socio-political context and their social capital (here discussed as the network these thinkers engaged). Indeed, while the first created the demand for specific ideas and profiles (as discussed in chapter 3), their social capital contributed to their coming to the attention of ‘gatekeepers’ to the European-Anglophone world in response to those demands. The analysis of the three institutes within the network showed the same pattern on the smaller scale: the institutes’ goals created interest in individuals with who could fulfil them, and Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush’s thought and social capital favoured their being chosen for the purpose. In this process, the agency of these thinkers is visible in their efforts to shape the vision of the actors they encountered. Once inside, the network favoured the transmission of knowledge and the physical mobility of these thinkers. The expansion of this network at the geographical and typological level increased the number of actors associated with the three thinkers augmenting their authority. Geographically, the broadening of regions involved in the production of academic knowledge in English on Abu Zayd, Arkoun and Soroush contributed to their growing popularity at the transnational level, less strictly dependent on their authority within a single country. Typologically, the expansion of these networks across fields (academic, public, political) reinforced their legitimacy across spheres. On one hand, their affiliation with academic institutions (especially prestigious ones) reinforced their authority in the public sphere, through the symbolic capital conferred by

these connections; on the other, their emergence as public intellectuals able to address current social phenomena brought increasing scholarly attention to their work.

## Chapter 5

### **From social capital to legitimacy: conversion of capitals within and across fields**

The previous chapter analysed the social capital of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush. More precisely, it explored how their social capital expanded within European-Anglophone academia. We saw that new socio-political contexts, discussed in chapter 3, broadened and diversified these thinkers' social network: actors from other fields became interested in them and in promoting their thought. This network expanded both geographically (across spaces) and typologically (across fields). The increased heterogeneity of their network shaped and extended their authority. This chapter takes this a step further by exploring how this enhanced social capital was transformed into intellectual legitimacy through the accumulation of symbolic capital. In short, this chapter moves the focus of analysis from social capital to the conversion of social capital into symbolic capital. The network of actors in which they were embedded allowed the mobilisation and conversion of forms of capital within and across fields; the accumulation of symbolic capital, ultimately shaped their intellectual legitimacy. The exchange rate for this conversion, it is here claimed, was established by power dynamics within specific fields, as well as across fields. Given the position of these figures between contexts, discussed in chapter 2, this was particularly significant. To elaborate: the chapter will first discuss the concept of conversion of capitals in the existing literature, especially in regarding Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush; next, the conversion of capitals across fields and its influence on their legitimacy will be interrogated. The first part will unfold in two ways: initially mapping conversions between social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital for Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush; subsequently focusing on accolades and awards as specific instances of conversion into symbolic capital. The chapter's second part locates capital conversion

within a larger macrostructure to explore how the conversion across fields influenced Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's legitimacy. To the degree a field of origin was considered more legitimate, it conferred greater symbolic capital; when a field of origin was deemed less legitimate, its symbolic capital was less valued. Perhaps paradoxically, the first condition of conversion ('downward transition') contributes to legitimacy; the latter ('upward transition') hinders it. The chapter illustrates this by focusing on two of the principal intellectual 'theatres of operation' – academia and media – and, within academia, on power dynamics across different disciplines and regions.

### **5.1 Conversion of capital: a literary review**

The broad literature on the role of social capital in mobilising resources and capitals was summarised in chapter 1. Part of this literature argued that resources and capitals are not only mobilised but also converted into capitals valuable in each field.<sup>1</sup> As will be seen, the heterogeneity of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's social capital facilitated the flow of forms of capitals across fields to be converted ultimately into symbolic capital. This flow and conversion of capitals, it is argued, contributed to their intellectual legitimisation. Bourdieu first introduced the idea of conversion of capital, seeing it as the basis for actors' strategies 'aimed at ensuring the reproduction of capital (and the position occupied in the social space)'.<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu's analysis focused on the conversion of capitals to maintain the status quo (ie the reproduction of existing social hierarchies); more recent scholarship has explored the role of conversion in the emergence of actors within a single field. Lin, for

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<sup>1</sup> Nan Lin, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 164; Paul S. Adler and Kwon Seok-Woo, 'Social Capital: Prospects for a New Concept': 21.

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', 254; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 126. See also Olivier Driessens, 'Celebrity Capital: Redefining Celebrity Using Field Theory', *Theory and Society* 42, no. 5 (2013): 554–55; Scott and Marshall, 'Cultural Capital', 143.

instance, saw conversion as a possible means of self-promotion within the social structure.<sup>3</sup> Gil Eyal, Iván Széleányi and Eleanor Townsley detailed the conversion of actors' cultural capital into political capital during the post-communist transition in Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, József Böröcz and Caleb Southworth analysed the conversion of intellectuals' cultural capital into economic capital during Hungary's late socialist period.<sup>5</sup> Tobias Pret, Eleanor Shaw and Sarah Drakopoulou Dodd took a more holistic approach, examining the conversion of multiple forms of capitals (economic, social and symbolic) in the development of craft entrepreneurship.<sup>6</sup> These works, however, mainly focused on the conversion of capital within one field.<sup>7</sup> And while it looked at transition and conversion across time, Eyal's work on the re-introduction of capitalism in Eastern Europe was limited to the conversion of capitals within the same regional field.<sup>8</sup> Other scholarship more explicitly engaged with conversion across diverse spatial or typological fields. Michele Lamont, Johanna Bockman and Gil Eyal analysed conversion across different national fields.<sup>9</sup> Olivier Driessens and David Giles discussed the transition across typologically diverse fields, what they called 'field migration' – ie 'a reflection of the capital accumulated [...] which opens up opportunities for penetrating other fields and diversifying their activities within their established field'.<sup>10</sup> Driessens and Giles'

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<sup>3</sup> 'If a banker donates money to the needy and the transaction is well publicized, it generates social credit and social recognition for the banker. Likewise, an esteemed physicist may lend her or his reputation in advertising a product and generate handsome monetary returns.' In Lin, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action*, 164.

<sup>4</sup> Gil Eyal, Iván Széleányi and Eleanor Townsley, *Making Capitalism without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> József Böröcz and Caleb Southworth, 'Decomposing the Intellectuals' Class Power: Conversion of Cultural Capital to Income, Hungary, 1986', *Social Forces* 74, no. 3 (1996).

<sup>6</sup> Tobias Pret, Eleanor Shaw, and Sarah Drakopoulou Dodd, 'Painting the Full Picture: The Conversion of Economic, Cultural, Social and Symbolic Capital', *International Small Business Journal* 34, no. 8 (2016).

<sup>7</sup> David C. Giles, 'Field Migration, Cultural Mobility and Celebrity: The Case of Paul McCartney', *Celebrity Studies* 6, no. 4 (2015): 540.

<sup>8</sup> Eyal, Széleányi and Townsley, *Making Capitalism without Capitalists*.

<sup>9</sup> Lamont, 'How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher'; Bockman and Eyal, 'Eastern Europe as a Laboratory for Economic Knowledge'.

<sup>10</sup> Giles, 'Field Migration, Cultural Mobility and Celebrity': 540.

concept of ‘migration’ captured both the mobility and convertibility of capital.<sup>11</sup> Jane Arthur and Sylvia Shaw scrutinised Russell Brand’s use of celebrity, cultural and social capital to gain political legitimacy.<sup>12</sup> Giles analysed Paul McCartney’s transition from the field of pop music into classical music.<sup>13</sup>

Although these studies focus on what they call ‘celebrity capital’ as a tool to secure legitimacy in other fields, they can also shed light on the broader dynamics of conversion across fields. Indeed, their theoretical approach is used here to better understand the migration of Muslim thinkers to the European-Anglophone intellectual field. In particular, they broach the idea of power dynamics across fields in what Giles called ‘upward’ and ‘downward’ migration, further elaborated in this chapter.<sup>14</sup> Although Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush did not possess ‘celebrity capital’ as defined by Driessens (ie *frequent* appearance in the media), they certainly benefited from symbolic capital provided by the media.<sup>15</sup> Examination of the mobilisation and conversion of their social capital in the migration between the fields of media and academia yields two results: first, it provides evidence for how interactions across fields furthered these thinkers’ ascendancy; second, it further illuminates their function as public intellectuals, and how this shaped their increased prominence in the scholarship. Before detailing how conversion across fields occurred, this study will focus on conversions of capitals, *per se*. An overview of direct and indirect conversions of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush’s

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<sup>11</sup> Olivier Driessens, ‘The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 6 (2013): 648; ———, ‘Celebrity Capital’: 549; Giles, ‘Field Migration, Cultural Mobility and Celebrity’; Jane Arthurs and Sylvia Shaw, ‘Celebrity Capital in the Political Field: Russell Brand’s Migration from Stand-up Comedy to Newsnight’, *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 8 (2016).

<sup>12</sup> ———, ‘Celebrity Capital in the Political Field: Russell Brand’s Migration from Stand-up Comedy to Newsnight’.

<sup>13</sup> Giles, ‘Field Migration, Cultural Mobility and Celebrity’.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 541.

<sup>15</sup> Driessens, ‘Celebrity Capital’: 543.

social capital into symbolic capital will be followed by an exploration of three awards they received, as specific cases of conversion of social capital into symbolic capital.

**5.2 Mapping conversion of capitals**

In elaborating a theoretical framework, chapter 1 described how an accumulation of symbolic capital shapes legitimacy. This chapter argues that this accumulation – and, therefore, legitimacy – arose from the conversion of different forms of capital into symbolic capital. In exploring the process of this conversion, this section identifies two patterns (see table 1). First, direct conversion of capital: social into symbolic, is characterised by the endorsement of these thinkers by actors (individual or institutional) holding symbolic capital. Second, indirect conversion of capital: a roundabout path of conversions of capitals, from the social variety through other forms leading to symbolic capital. This path should be understood as circular – that is, without specific starting or ending point – but construed here as linear, viz a segment of the whole circular path.

**Direct Conversion:**



**Indirect Conversion:**

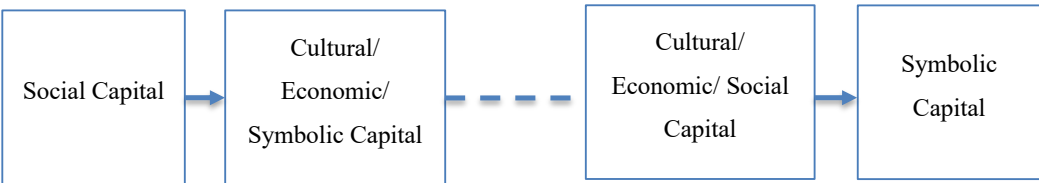


**FIGURE 4. Scheme of direct and indirect conversions:** In the first case, social capital is directly converted into symbolic capital. In the second case, social capital undergoes a path of conversions, which finally leads to symbolic capital.

These two patterns can also be seen in these thinkers' intellectual and professional trajectories (appendix 1 expands the diagrams by bringing evidence from Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's biographies). Direct conversion of social into symbolic capital (highlighted in grey) took place through the endorsement of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush by actors with authority or prestige. Abu Zayd's selection for the Roosevelt Medal was based on directives from the editor of a Zeeland's newspaper and William Stokhof, executive director of Leiden University's International Institute of Asian Studies (and the man who brought Abu Zayd to Leiden).<sup>16</sup> Arkoun's appointment at the Sorbonne, a position that conferred considerable institutional prestige, was urged by Professors Robert Brunschvicg and Claude Cahen;<sup>17</sup> his selection for the Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal was influenced by his acquaintance with the selection committee, having participated in two previous selections (in 1996 and 1999).<sup>18</sup> Soroush's invitation to Harvard University, a position that significantly augmented his reputation, came at the request of Professor Roy Mottahedeh.<sup>19</sup> Of course, social capital *per se* did not compel these selections and their legitimation: rather, the interplay between different forms of capital, particularly cultural and symbolic, complicated these processes. This interplay is studied as paths of conversions here. For all three thinkers, social capital not only helped shape their ideas and interests (converting social into cultural capital), but also opened access to resources and institutions (converting social capital into economic and, in time, social capitals). For example, Soroush attended the Alavi Institute, a prestigious high school in Tehran. Its founder, Ali Asghar Karbaschian, and its director, Reza Rouzbeh, were not only instrumental in shaping his thought but also in guiding his subsequent

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<sup>16</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 83.

<sup>17</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *La Construction Humaine de l' Islam*, 409.

<sup>18</sup> Irene Bierman, *The Experience of Islamic Art on the Margins of Islam* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2005), vi; ———, *Text and Context in Islamic Societies* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2004), vi.

<sup>19</sup> Roy Mottahedeh, conversation with the author, 11 June 2013.

scholarly career. Karbaschian's criticism of clerics and Rouzbeh's emphasis on science in the understanding of religion left a profound imprint on the young student. The two men pushed Soroush to pursue studies abroad and put him in touch with Haj Abolfazl Kordahmadi, a merchant who funded his studies in the United Kingdom (conversion to further social and economic capital).<sup>20</sup> While doing his masters' degree in analytical chemistry at the University of London, Soroush was introduced to the philosophy of science and such thinkers as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn and Friedrich von Hayek (converting economic capital into cultural capital).<sup>21</sup> These experiences enriched his intellectual coffers, raising awareness of current debates in the European-Anglophone world and providing the lexicon for participation, which compounded his cultural capital. This, in turn, favoured the expansion of his social capital, ie the network of individuals engaging with him: for instance, having learned of Soroush's work, Martin van Bruinessen invited him to an ISIM workshop on Muslim Intellectuals. As van Bruinessen revealed:

I was myself very much interested in Soroush, whom I found one of the most interesting as well as courageous thinkers. [...] So, he was the first to whom I wrote [...] Soroush was already a celebrity by the time ISIM was established and we were very much aware of him. The workshop just mentioned was the occasion of our first contact. We were very pleased he could come, and we stayed in contact since.<sup>22</sup>

The workshop represented the first encounter between Soroush and the Institute and led to Soroush's visiting fellowship at ISIM in 2006. The relationship with van Bruinessen was also instrumental in putting him in touch with institutions to support him financially (conversion of social to economic capital):

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<sup>20</sup> Mehran Kamiyab, 'Abdolkarim Soroush: Ma'refat va modara', BBC Persian, 28 May 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmdatUqu188>.

<sup>21</sup> Benzine, *I Nuovi Pensatori dell' Islam*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, email to the author, 12 February 2015.

We approached several universities and the Free University in Amsterdam was eager to host him. I do not recall exactly how we arranged this financially, but I believe the Free University put up most of the necessary money. Finding enough money is always a hassle, and it rapidly became more difficult. I should have liked to offer him a comfortable salary and a quiet place to think and write, but he had to divide his time between Leiden and Amsterdam.<sup>23</sup>

Social capital was significant in Abu Zayd's case as well. It contributed to his accumulation of cultural capital: directly, through engagement with prominent thinkers (such as his teacher Hassan Hanafi or Amin Al-Khuli, editor of the magazine *Al-Adab* where Abu Zayd contributed articles);<sup>24</sup> and indirectly, via literary gatherings (friends who introduced him to the thought of Taha Hussein, Muhammad Hussein Haykal and Sayyid Qutb).<sup>25</sup> A Ford Foundation fellowship in 1978–1979 (economic capital) allowed him to study at the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; there he was introduced to the hermeneutics of science, as well as the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricœur and Eric Donald Hirsch (conversion into cultural capital).<sup>26</sup> This cultural capital, in turn, attracted the interest of new actors (expansion of his social capital) who proved instrumental in promoting his thought. This was the case with Navid Kermani, Fred Leemhuis, Stefan Wild and William Stokhof, all of whom had important roles introducing his thought to European academia.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the support and friendship of Stefan Wild, an established scholar in Oriental Studies, contributed to Abu Zayd's legitimacy in the European-Anglophone context (social capital to symbolic capital). As discussed in chapter 4, Wild first came across the thinker through his work *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ*:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Benzine, *I Nuovi Pensatori Dell' Islam*, 187.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>27</sup> Ebtehal Younes, email to the author, 23 June 2013; Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 83.

When I convened a symposium at Bonn University in 1993 with the theme ‘The Qur’an as Text’, it was natural that one of the first participants who came to my mind was Nasr [Abu Zayd]. He had published a book ‘The Concept of Text’ (*Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ*) in Beirut/Casablanca in 1990. In this book, Nasr attempted to apply the approach of text-linguistics and a theory of communication to the Qur’anic text. [...] I had not heard of Nasr before, but I liked the book.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, Abu Zayd’s cultural capital contributed to his entering a European network of scholars (social capital), which in turn promoted his profile. Arkoun followed a similar path. His thought was shaped from an early age by particular individuals; in high school, he recalled, ‘The philosophy class, [...] was provided by M. Vié-Le-Sage. I received a lot from him, but also the history and French teachers’.<sup>29</sup> Later, in Paris during the 1960s, he entered intellectual circles and debates which profoundly impressed his thought:

I found myself involved in discussions and animated explanations about structuralism, on Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Ricœur, Braudel and Le Goff [...]. I do not want to forget a man who had gathered a whole circle around ‘semiotics’: A. J. Greimas. I also met Bourdieu, in Paris, and not during his fieldwork in Algeria: he was a subtle man, friendly too, with a very strong intellectual commitment.<sup>30</sup>

His friendship with thinkers of different faiths – like Ricœur (of Protestant origin), Claude Geffré (a Catholic Dominican theologian), and Joseph Maila (a Catholic political scientist with whom he corresponded after 9/11) – had a profound impact on him.<sup>31</sup> These relationships not only helped him amass cultural capital but were sometimes instrumental

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<sup>28</sup> Wild, ‘Herdenkingsbijeenkomst Nasr Abu Zayd’.

<sup>29</sup> ‘La classe de philosophie, [...] était assurée par Monsieur Vié-Le-Sage. J’ai beaucoup reçu de lui, mais aussi de professeurs d’histoire et de français.’ In Arkoun, *La Construction Humaine De L’ Islam*, 213. [Translation my own].

<sup>30</sup> ‘Je me suis trouvé mêlé aux discussions et aux explications animées autour du structuralisme, de Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Ricœur, Braudel, Le Goff [...]. Je ne voudrais pas oublier un homme qui avait réuni tout un cercle autour de la “sémiotique”: A. J. Greimas. J’ai rencontré aussi Bourdieu, à Paris donc, et non pas lors de son travail de terrain en Algérie: c’était un homme subtil, amical aussi, avec un engagement intellectuel très fort.’ Ibid, 417. [Translation my own].

<sup>31</sup> Benzine, Delorme, and Deway, ‘Mohammed Arkoun, Tisseur De Passerelles’: 10.

in gaining him access to institutions and positions. Even family connections could prove consequential. Arkoun's uncle pressed his enrolment in the French Catholic School in Oran, opening the door to the French educational system.<sup>32</sup> In the account of his friend Christian Delorme:

An uncle who believed in his ability to study managed to get him admitted to a French-speaking school in Oran [...] He spoke neither Arabic nor French and therefore could not be entitled to it, but the priests gave him permission to follow the class. He has never ceased to feel grateful for them.<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, Louis Massignon opened the door to Paris for Arkoun:

Even later, it was thanks to Professor Louis Massignon, a great Christian Orientalist figure, that he was admitted to Paris to the *agrégation d'arabe*, whereas the colonial system would have precluded access to him.<sup>34</sup>

Brunschvicg and Cahen, eminent professors at Sorbonne, supported his candidacy to the professorship there, in Arkoun's own words:

Brunschvicg and Cahen urged me, on the contrary, to stay. Given my indecision, the first one told me to consult the dean, an exquisite man, to whom I related my discussions with Blachère. Following this visit, he appointed me [...]. I like to think that the support of these friends, rigorously ethical, of my nomination, confirmed their appreciation for my work.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Benzine, *I Nuovi Pensatori Dell' Islam*, 94.

<sup>33</sup> 'Un oncle qui croyait dans ses capacités à étudier, est parvenu à le faire admettre dans une école francophone d'Oran [...] Il ne parlait ni l'arabe ni le français et ne pouvait donc pas y avoir droit mais les prêtres lui ont donné l'autorisation de suivre la classe. Il n'a jamais cessé d'éprouver de la gratitude à leur égard.' Benzine, Delorme, and Deway, 'Mohammed Arkoun, Tisseur De Passerelles': 8. [Translation my own].

<sup>34</sup> 'Plus tard encore, c'est au professeur Louis Massignon, grande figure orientaliste chrétienne, qu'il devra d'être admis à Paris à l'agrégation d'arabe, alors que le système colonial voulait le lui interdire.' *ibid.* [Translation my own].

<sup>35</sup> 'Brunschvicg et Cahen me poussaient au contraire à rester. Devant mon indécision, le premier me dit d'aller consulter le doyen, un homme exquis, auquel je racontai mes discussions avec Blachère. À la suite de cette visite, c'est moi qui fus nommé, [...]. J'aime à penser que le soutien de ces amis, d'une éthique rigoureuse, à ma nomination sanctionnait leur estime pour mon travail.' In Arkoun, *La Construction Humaine de l' Islam*, 409. [Translation my own].

The prestige of the Sorbonne contributed to Arkoun's symbolic capital and intellectual legitimacy. Thus, although social capital was never the sole factor in these thinkers' selection and elevation, it certainly contributed to it. More broadly still, the conversion of different forms of capital guaranteed their social mobility and, ultimately, their emergence as authoritative voices in the European-Anglophone intellectual field. Reading these intellectual and professional trajectories through the lens of conversion of capitals need not imply a mechanistic understanding of the process of legitimation. Instead, this analysis is offered as an epistemic tool to unravel the complex interplay between material contexts and ideas. While this section provided an overview of paths of conversions, the next will focus on the final aspect of these conversions – conversion into symbolic capital – by analysing three awards which Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush received.

### **5.3 A case of conversion of capital: awards as symbolic capital**

The previous section provided an overview of the conversions of capitals Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush experienced. To better understand how conversion took place and how it shaped these thinkers' recognition, this section analyses three prizes and awards they received. Among the best indicators of social recognition, in Bourdieu's view, such prizes exemplify symbolic capital; as such, they play an essential role in authorising the consecration of individuals.<sup>36</sup> In the case of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush, these prizes are often mentioned in their biographies, when they were introduced at lectures or conferences, and in interviews, to reinforce their legitimacy. Analysing these awards

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<sup>36</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Swartz, *Symbolic Power, Politics, and Intellectuals*, 48. This has been further expanded by authors such as Samuel Clark, *Distributing Status: The Evolution of State Honours in Western Europe* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2016); Avner Offer, *The Nobel Factor: The Prize in Economics, Social Democracy, and the Market Turn* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

spotlights the conversion of other forms of capital into symbolic capital. All three thinkers received various awards and honorary recognitions throughout their lives. In 1996 Arkoun was made a Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur, in 2001 he was asked to deliver the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, he received the Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal from UCLA in 2002, and the Ibn Rushd Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2003.<sup>37</sup> The same prize was awarded two years later to Abu Zayd, who also received one of the Roosevelt Institute's Four Freedoms Awards (Freedom of Worship Medal) in 2005 and the Prize of Freedom of Thought by the Muslim Democrats Society in Denmark in 2006.<sup>38</sup> Soroush received the Erasmus Prize in 2004, together with Fatima Mernissi and Sadik Jalal Al-Azm. He was named one of the world's most influential people by *Time* magazine in 2005 and one of the most influential intellectuals by *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect* magazines in 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010.

### 5.3.1 The Erasmus Prize

The prize is presented annually to individuals and institutions who contribute substantially to European culture and society, and previous awardees had included individuals such as Jürgen Habermas, Isaiah Berlin, Jean Monet and Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>39</sup> In 2004, the year Soroush won it, the theme of 'Religion and Modernity' was dictated (as expressed by the committee) by 'recent global developments in the political and social sphere'.<sup>40</sup> That attention to Muslim thinkers addressing religion and modernity

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<sup>37</sup> Wild, 'Mohammed Arkoun, Ibn Rushd Preis Für Freies Denken'.

<sup>38</sup> Ludo Abicht, *Islam and Europe: Challenges and Opportunities* (Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2008), 191.

<sup>39</sup> Praemium Erasmianum Foundation, 'Former Laureates', <http://www.erasmusprijs.org/Prijswinnaars?lang=en> (accessed 30 January 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Erasmus Prize 2004 Awarded to Sadik Jalal Al-Azm, Fatema Mernissi and Abdolkarim Soroush', Abdolkarim Soroush Website, 14 April 2004, <http://drsoroush.com/en/erasmus-prize-2004-awarded-to-abdolkarim-soroush/>.

reflected the general interest Islam had excited in those years, and it was indicative of the committee's particular investment in a counter-narrative to the mainstream debate surrounding Islam. As the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation explained:

At present, many people are asking themselves how Islam can be reconciled with modernity. Each in their own way, the sociologist Fatima Mernissi from Morocco, the religious critic Sadik Jalal Al-Azm from Syria, and the Islamic reformist thinker Abdolkarim Soroush from Iran have all helped reconcile processes of modernisation and cultures that are shaped by religion.<sup>41</sup>

These thinkers' confrontation with Islam and modernity, along with their critical approach to the issue, conferred a valued cultural capital, which influenced their selection. This estimation is acknowledged in the statement of the selection committee: 'The three laureates have, each in their own way, occupied themselves with the question of how modernisation processes and cultures which are permeated by religion can be combined. They deserve a worldwide audience'.<sup>42</sup> It was also conceded in conversation with the director of the Erasmus Prize, Max Sparreboom: 'An open, critical mind is what we found most important to highlight, a characteristic found in both religious and secular people, Erasmus would have liked this idea'.<sup>43</sup> In this selection process, nuances of the nominees' thought took a back seat to other criteria valued by the committee:

The one characteristic these very different people have in common is a brave, critical, personal approach to their surrounding environment. Their personal beliefs were considered of less importance. By choosing three such independent thinkers, the board hoped to make clear that this selection did not mean that it followed the political or religious viewpoint of any one of them.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Martina Sabra, 'Erasmus Prize 2004: Important Figures from the Islamic World Awarded', *Qantara*, 22 April 2004, <https://en.qantara.de/content/erasmus-prize-2004-important-figures-from-the-islamic-world-awarded>.

<sup>42</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Erasmus Prize 2004 Awarded to Sadik Jalal Al-Azm, Fatema Mernissi and Abdulkarim Soroush'.

<sup>43</sup> Max Sparreboom, email to the author, 17 February 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

In other words, both Soroush's social capital (his status as a voice from within the Muslim community), and his cultural capital (his intellectual production on Islam and modernity and the critical approach he developed), made him valuable. But what, in particular, about Soroush – among all possible and apposite Muslim candidates – captured the attention of the committee? Soroush's social capital was crucial in bringing his name to the attention of the committee:

The board of our foundation was assisted by a small committee of experts in politics and religion. One of these persons made a clear plea for Abdolkarim Soroush, whose history he knew. Sure, there were also other intellectuals who were mentioned, but Mernissi, Al-Azm and Soroush were on everybody's list.<sup>45</sup>

In short, the historical and political contexts – discussed in chapter 3 – shaped the demand for specific profiles and ideas, making Soroush's cultural and social capital more valuable. In such contexts, his social capital expanded awareness of him (and of his cultural capital), solidifying his subsequent selection. In this sense, the award becomes a concrete example of conversion of cultural and social capital into symbolic capital: the recognition given by the award contributed to his authority within the intellectual field.<sup>46</sup>

### **5.3.2 Roosevelt Medal**

In June 2002 Abu Zayd received the Franklin Roosevelt Freedom of Worship Medal in Middelburg, the Netherlands. The prize awarded jointly by the Roosevelt Institute in New York and the province of Zeeland in the Netherlands, honours 'men and women whose achievements have demonstrated a commitment to the principles which President

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> But, also, economic capital: the award came with a monetary reward of 50.000 euros.

Roosevelt proclaimed in his historic [Four Freedoms] speech'.<sup>47</sup> Abu Zayd's medal was awarded in conjunction with four other medals: the Freedom Medal awarded to Nelson Mandela; the Freedom of Speech Award to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; the Freedom from Want Medal to Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland; and the Freedom from Fear Medal to Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon. In his autobiography, Abu Zayd pondered the reasons behind his selection: 'I wondered why the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, an American institution, would select me to be the recipient of this award? Why me? Why this year? Blame it all on my critical mind'.<sup>48</sup> Once again, the historical and political contexts shaped the Institute's decision to reflect specific ideas and profiles, including Abu Zayd's. As Ambassador William vanden Heuvel, co-chairman of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, explained to Abu Zayd: 'We needed to give a message to the Muslim world and to the American people that we are not against Muslims. To tell you the truth, we had no idea about you'.<sup>49</sup> Given these premises, the Institute decided that 'if they could find a Muslim scholar or individual who believed in the basic principles Roosevelt stood for, they'd like very much to award the prize to that individual'.<sup>50</sup> Abu Zayd satisfied the Institute's two requirements: a Muslim scholar with a commitment to freedom of religion.<sup>51</sup>

We see, once again, how social capital facilitated the transmission of knowledge and suggested the selection of Abu Zayd among all individuals meeting the Institutes' requirements. Indeed, as the Ambassador explained to Abu Zayd:

'[The Institute] left that matter in the hands of the people of Zeeland in the Netherlands, and to our surprise the editor of the newspaper of

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<sup>47</sup> Roosevelt Institute, 'About the Awards', Franklin Roosevelt Four Freedoms Awards, <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/fdr-four-freedoms-awards-1/> (accessed 12 January 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 81.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> 'The trustees of the award stated that Abu Zayd's career and work exemplify the importance of continued commitment to freedom of religion and conscience.' In ISIM, 'News: Four Freedom Medal': 2.

Zeeland pointed us in your direction.’ The editor was at Leiden University in 1995 on a six-month scholarship. He knew me [Abu Zayd] only by name and forwarded my name to a representative from the Institute with the caveat, ‘I don’t know anything about Abu Zayd’s work.’ During the time this particular editor was studying at Leiden, most people knew about the problems I had faced in my country – problems that eventually forced me into exile.<sup>52</sup>

The nomination process was indirect and convoluted:

The editor also passed on the name of Professor William Stokhof, executive director of Leiden University’s international Institution for Asian Studies, the man behind bringing me to Leiden University in 1995. Ambassador Vanden Heuvel contacted Professor Stokhof, who then nominated me for the award.<sup>53</sup>

As with Soroush, while historical-political circumstances defined the selection committee’s criteria – and, therefore, the required types of capital – social capital secured the knowledge about (and ultimate selection of) Abu Zayd. In turn, again, the award bestowed not only economic capital but, especially, symbolic capital, which furthered Abu Zayd’s recognition and consolidated his authority in the intellectual field.

### **5.3.3 Giorgio Levi Della Vida Award**

Throughout his career, Arkoun received a multitude of prizes and awards that cemented his authority within the intellectual field. Some of these awards were specifically academic: Officier des Palmes Académiques (1979), Giorgio Levi Della Vida Award Medal (2002), and Doctor Honoris Causa, University of Exeter (2000). Others addressed his broader public commitment: Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur (1984), Officier de la Légion d’Honneur (1996), Commandeur de la Légion d’Honneur (2004), Ibn Rushd Prize

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<sup>52</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 82–83.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

(2003) and the Doha Prize for Culture (2010).<sup>54</sup> Of these, the 2002 Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal granted by the UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies is the one most often cited to corroborate his academic authority. Many publications on Arkoun draw attention to it, as did his biography for the sixty-first United Nations General Assembly.<sup>55</sup> The Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal, established in 1967 by Professor Gustav E. von Grunebaum, founder and first director of the Centre for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA is ‘awarded biennially to give recognition to an outstanding scholar whose work has significantly and lastingly advanced the study of Islamic civilization’.<sup>56</sup> By the year of his award in 2002, Arkoun certainly presented the requisite profile: the cultural capital accumulated through his abundant production as well as the symbolic capital that signifies an ‘outstanding’ scholar. For instance, he had been a keynote speaker at the Middle East Studies Association’s annual conference in 1995, seven years before the award. But what determined his selection from among the many scholars possessing both the required cultural and the symbolic capital? According to the award’s rules, its recipient:

[...] is selected by a committee appointed by the chancellor of the University of California, Los Angeles, meeting under the chairmanship of the director of the Near Eastern Center. The composition of the committee is intended to reflect the conviction that Near Eastern studies are most creative and effective if integrated with other historical and social science research.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Fondation Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Biographie: Mohammed Arkoun’, <http://www.fondation-arkoun.org/biographieprmoahmedarkoun.html>. (accessed 30 January 2018).

<sup>55</sup> Arkoun, ‘Third Informal Thematic Debate. Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace’; Jon Armajani, *Dynamic Islam: Liberal Muslim Perspectives in a Transnational Age* (New York: University Press of America, 2004), 6; Filali-Ansary and Esmail, eds., *The Construction of Belief*, 8; Neal Robinson, ‘Mohammed Arkoun’, in *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 66.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Giorgio Levi De La Vida Medal’, *Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 116, no. 2 (1966): 8; Speros Vryonis, *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages: Fourth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), i.

<sup>57</sup> ———, *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages: Fourth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference*, i.

Since its inception in 1967 until 1993 the award committee included a core group of scholars: Georges Anawati, Amin Banani, Franz Rosenthal, George Sabbagh, Bertold Spuler, Andreas Tietze and Speros Vryonis. Despite some changes, the committee remained substantially the same for almost three decades.<sup>58</sup> Arkoun was already involved, to a certain extent, with the group of scholars orbiting the award. He had known Gustav E. von Grunebaum – director and founder of the UCLA’s Center for Near Eastern Studies and one of the creators of the award – since 1964.<sup>59</sup> He had been a visiting professor at UCLA in 1969 when he became close to Robert Brunschvig, who had received the first Giorgio Levi Della Vida Award in 1968.<sup>60</sup> However, he got closer to the award with the appointment of Irene Bierman as the Center’s new director in 1995. This period also witnessed a radical restructuring of the award committee.<sup>61</sup> Arkoun was appointed as a member of the committee for the 1996 and 1999 awards (together with Bierman, Leonard Binder, Suraiya Faruqi, Stephen Humphrey, Nikkie Keddie and George Makdisi).<sup>62</sup> His relationship with Irene Bierman might have contributed to these appointments. In the words of Richard Hovannisian, associate director of the Center between 1978 and 1995, ‘Of course with the passage of so many years, people retired or died, so perhaps it is not so unusual for new directors to appoint people with whom they have a special relationship’.<sup>63</sup> Although his previous two memberships to the award committee did not ensure his eventual selection as the recipient of the Giorgio Levi Della Vida award in 2000, they certainly created the social capital which vehiculated knowledge of his work

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<sup>58</sup> As Hovannisian explained, ‘the importance and grandeur of the Della Vida conferences began to decline, and funding decreased from the university’. Richard Hovannisian, email to the author, 9 November 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, ‘L’Islam Moderne Vu Par le Professeur G. E. Von Grunebaum’, *Arabica* 11, no. 2 (1964).

<sup>60</sup> Charles Pellat, ‘Les “Studia Islamica” Ont Vingt Ans’, *ibid.*, 21, no. 1 (1974): 1.

<sup>61</sup> Jere L. Bacharach, ‘The State of Middle Eastern Studies in Institutions of Higher Education in the United States’, *MELA Notes* 62, no. Spring (1995): 2.

<sup>62</sup> Bierman, *The Experience of Islamic Art on the Margins of Islam*, vi; ———, *Text and Context in Islamic Societies*, vi.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Hovannisian, email to the author, 9 November 2017.

and shaped the selection. Once again, in a context where Arkoun commanded the cultural and symbolic capitals required by the award, his social capital drove knowledge of his work and person, which shaped the final decision, if not entirely dictating it.

As these three cases illustrate, the socio-historical context shaped the demand for specific ideas and profiles. Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's resources – ie their ideas and membership in particular communities (as Muslims and as academics) – became valuable capital. In this context, their social capital conveyed knowledge of them, contributing directly or indirectly to their selections. The awards, in turn, increased their symbolic capital, legitimating their authority. While all three thinkers' social mobility was accelerated by these conversions, the context in which conversion occurred directed their different intellectual trajectories. The early migration of Arkoun to another Western academic field (France) favoured him in the European sphere, in contrast to Abu Zayd and Soroush, who accessed it from more peripheral national contexts (Iran and Egypt) and often from the public to the academic sphere. The next section will elaborate just how power relations (between the fields they migrated to and from) influenced their capitals' conversions and, ultimately, their legitimacy.

#### **5.4 Conversion of capitals across fields and subfields**

Social capital, it has been argued, contributes to the creation of intellectual legitimacy through the accumulation, mobilisation and conversion of various forms of capital, culminating in symbolic capital. The previous sections discussed the direct and indirect conversion of social into symbolic capital. Individuals, however, are simultaneously positioning for power *within* their respective fields; at the same time, they are

participating in power struggles *between* their field and multiple other fields.<sup>64</sup> These power dynamics shape the conversion of capitals in the migration from one field to another. Accordingly, this section takes a step forward and explores the conversion of capitals across the fields cultivated by Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush. This is particularly relevant given the position of these three thinkers across different spheres. Indeed, as demonstrated in chapter 2, they were located at the intersections of different intellectual arenas (eg academia and media) as well as diverse cultural-geographical spheres. These diverse interactions greatly influenced their emergence. This section will also explore how such power dynamics shaped their intellectual legitimacy. To elaborate this point, the section will first establish the existence of hierarchies among spheres; second, it will explore how power dynamics affected conversion of capitals and legitimised these thinkers in the receiving field. This will be done through a focus on two main intellectual venues in which these thinkers operated: academia and media.

#### **5.4.1 Power relations among fields**

Scholars have posited the existence of hierarchical structures between fields of knowledge production. Higher positions, this literature claims, correspond to higher symbolic capital, and consecration power.<sup>65</sup> This structure is reflected at all levels: across fields, within fields and among cliques. Bourdieu distinguished between ‘orthodox’ actors and fields – those which hold central positions and ‘pursue conservation strategies’<sup>66</sup>; and ‘heretics’ – those in peripheral positions, challenging the authority of

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<sup>64</sup> Bourdieu called this ‘relative autonomy’ of the field. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 37; —, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 248. See also Buchholz, ‘What Is a Global Field?’.

<sup>65</sup> Swidler and Ardit, ‘The New Sociology of Knowledge’: 317; Hammer, ‘Identity, Authority, and Activism’: 460.

<sup>66</sup> Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 124, 229.

orthodoxy ‘by proposing new forms of symbolical capital [...] trying to gain entry and rise up in the field’.<sup>67</sup> Arkoun similarly saw the ‘struggle for hegemony between the cognitive models’ as linked to the ‘political competition between social groups in the same society as well as by the nation-states on the geopolitical level’.<sup>68</sup> Arkoun also stressed the spatial and typological dimensions of these hierarchies. Spatially, relative power accrues in different nations, regions and localities, determining the degree of influence each has on the global sphere. This explains why some nations or regions influence the global field more than others, or some localities influence the national fields more than others. Noam Chomsky, a public intellectual in the United States, is more renowned than Soroush, a public intellectual in Iran. In the academic field, several authors stressed the still dominant role of Western academia in dictating global academic debates.<sup>69</sup> Henry Trotter and Mayumi Ishikawa’s studies analysed power disparities between regional or national scholarships within the broader global academic field and its impact on the development of African and Japanese scholarship.<sup>70</sup> Monika Krause further elaborated the interaction between hierarchies among spaces of knowledge production and what she called ‘model systems’ within the discipline of sociology.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 229. Bourdieu pointed out ‘several of the attacks against academic orthodoxy come from intellectuals situated on the fringes’. In Bourdieu, ‘Intellectual Field and Creative Project’: 111; ———, *Distinction*, 250. Eickelman and Piscatori challenged the idea of centre and periphery, suggesting multiple centres struggling to retain their autonomy: it is here argued that this relative autonomy is present in the power dynamics internal to each field; however, different fields are ultimately competing over the same symbolic and material resources. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, ‘Social Theory in the Study of Muslim Societies’, in *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, eds. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori (London: Routledge, 2001), 12-13.

<sup>68</sup> Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 110.

<sup>69</sup> Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 6; International Social Science Council, *World Social Science Report: Knowledge Divides* (Paris: International Social Science Council, 2010); Philip G. Altbach, ‘Centers and Peripheries in the Academic Profession: The Special Challenges of Developing Countries’, in *The Decline of the Guru: The Academic Profession in Developing and Middle-Income Countries*, ed. Philip G. Altbach (Chestnut Hill: The Boston College Center for International Higher Education, 2002).

<sup>70</sup> Henry Trotter, *Seeking Impact and Visibility: Scholarly Communication in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: African Minds, 2014), 1; Mayumi Ishikawa, ‘University Rankings, Global Models, and Emerging Hegemony: Critical Analysis from Japan’, *Journal of Studies in International Education* 13, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>71</sup> Monika Krause, ‘“Western Hegemony” in the Social Sciences: Fields and Model Systems’, *The Sociological Review* 64, no. 2 (2016).

Empirically, national disparities can be detected from an overview of the h-index charts (Figures 1 and 2). Such bibliometric indicators as the h-index, SJR (SCImago Journal Rank) and Impact Factors are increasingly used by the academic community to evaluate the academic impact and quality of journals and scholars, delimiting access to funding and jobs. A higher h-index corresponds to a higher influence and output within the global academic structure. As the figure shows, within the humanities, Western Europe and North America exert the highest regional impact on global academic production.

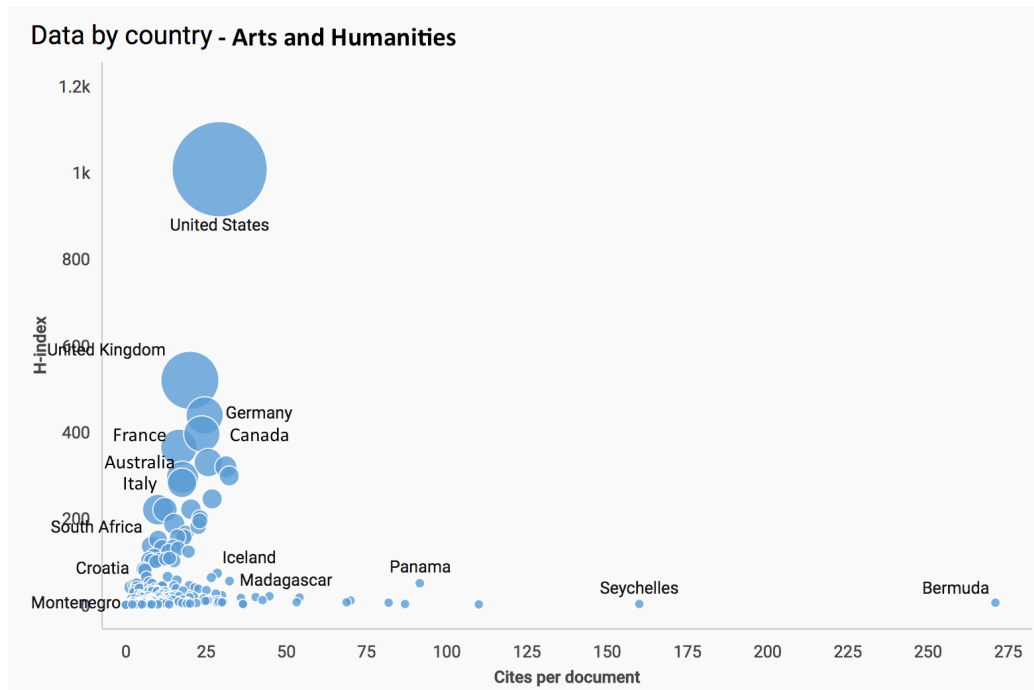


**FIGURE 5. Impact of academic articles in the arts and humanities by country (1996-2016).** The h-index (axes y) quantifies the prolificacy and scientific impact of a journal based on the number of citations it received. It 'expresses the journal's number of articles (h) that have received at least h citations. It quantifies both the journal's scientific productivity and scientific impact'. 'Cites per document' (axes x) indicates the average number of citations received per document. The dimension of the bubble represents the number of documents published by the country: the bigger the bubble, the higher the number of published documents.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> SCImago, 'World Report', SJR – SCImago Journal & Country Rank, 2007, <http://www.scimagojr.com> (accessed 27 January 2018).

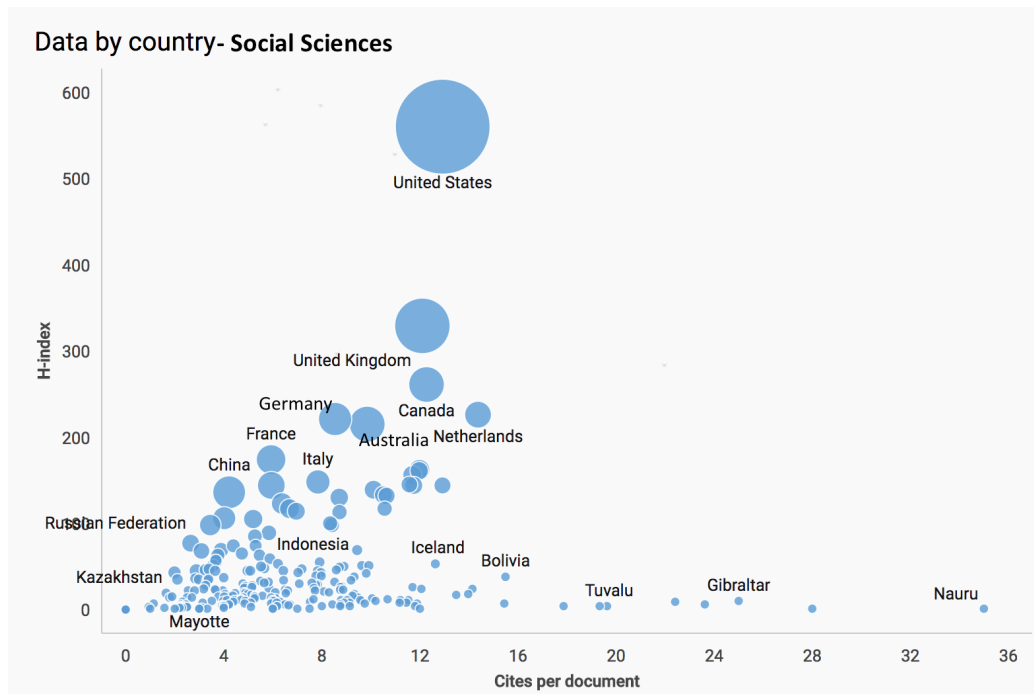


**FIGURE 6. Impact of academic articles in the social sciences by country (1996 – 2016).**

These disparities also exist at the typological level, for instance, as Bourdieu noticed, in the perceived distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Academia commands a higher status, which translates into its power to consecrate and legitimise actors in the intellectual field.<sup>73</sup> In the case of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush, as will be seen, their positions within academia played a vital role in their legitimacy in the intellectual field. Within the academy, scholars like Wael Hallaq emphasised the power disparities between central domains (science, philosophy, law) and peripheral ones (literature, art, religion and Islamic studies) and the consequent difficulties faced by the latter for shaping the research agenda.<sup>74</sup> Bacharach recognised the issue of the ‘low impact’ of disciplines like Middle Eastern studies in 1995:

<sup>73</sup> ‘The Academy claims the monopoly of consecration of contemporary creators. It contributes to the organization of the intellectual field in respect of orthodoxy by a type of jurisprudence which combines tradition and innovation’ in Bourdieu, ‘Intellectual Field and Creative Project’, 179. See also ———, *Distinction*, 326.

<sup>74</sup> Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 194.

Almost unique to Middle East studies is the lack of impact we have on other fields. [...] The fact that a leading political economist has to argue with her colleagues that data from our region on such issues as human migration, rentier states, remittances, and definitions of ethnicity is critical for their work means that we have not 'sold' our scholarship to others in comparative and international studies.<sup>75</sup>

Being situated in disciplines – Islamic Studies, Middle Eastern studies – at the fringes of the academic field weakened the legitimacy of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush in broader academia, at least in the short run. Power relations, therefore, determined legitimacy not only within a field but across fields. Before detailing this, it is worth mentioning another point. Beyond fields and subfields, Randall Collins identified a third level of hierarchy: cliques of scholars, often representing schools of thought, competing for power within each field or subfield.<sup>76</sup> The power structures of these cliques (ie the dominance of some over others) also govern the acceptance and legitimation of specific individuals within subfields. McLaughlin demonstrates this in his discussion of the rise and fall of Erich Fromm concerning Marxist and Freudian cliques of scholars.<sup>77</sup> It is also tackled in Lamont's work on the ascent of Jacques Derrida in the United States, seen in conjunction with the arrival of postmodernist philosophy and the importation of French authors into the American intellectual scene.<sup>78</sup> The rise of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush were likewise linked to the emergence of a clique of scholars, especially Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Amina Wadud, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Fatima Mernissi and Sadik Jalal al-Azm. These individuals appeared with them in print and in public; in some cases, they collaborated with them.<sup>79</sup> More important still, they enjoyed cordial, collegial

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<sup>75</sup> Bacharach, 'The State of Middle Eastern Studies in Institutions of Higher Education in the United States': 3.

<sup>76</sup> Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies*.

<sup>77</sup> McLaughlin, 'How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual'.

<sup>78</sup> Lamont, 'How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher': 584.

<sup>79</sup> They are discussed, for instance, by Abu Zayd in his overview of contemporary Islamic thinkers Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 86–93; Richard C. Martin and Abbas Barzegar, *Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); El-Affendi, 'The People on the Edge'; Mandaville, 'Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge'.

acquaintance and (with some) deeper friendship. Separate and parallel to this clique were others cliques organised around the thinkers Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Timothy Winter, to name two. Mapping the cliques of contemporary Islamic thought scholars and their power dynamics falls beyond the scope of this study, but it represents an important topic for further research. The following section will elaborate on how prior power relations – and shifting ones – across fields and subfields shaped and circumscribed Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush’s intellectual legitimacy.

#### **5.4.2 Power relations among fields and intellectual legitimacy**

Once the existence of power relations among fields, subfields, and cliques of actors is acknowledged, it is possible to address how these hierarchies shaped actors’ legitimacy in their transition from one field to another. Legitimacy, the previous section argued, depends not only on the position of the actor within a specific field or subfield but also on the position of these within the broader structure. In other words, an analysis of the conversion of social capital into symbolic capital must not only consider exchange rates across forms of capital but also across fields and subfields. Giles and Driessens tackled the implication of fields’ power dynamics on actors’ cultural legitimacy in their treatment of ‘field migration’.<sup>80</sup> Giles scrutinised Paul McCartney’s ‘upward transition’ from pop music to classical music. Despite the musician’s efforts, and the support of several classical music institutions, he did not succeed in securing sufficient status – legitimacy – within the classical music field.<sup>81</sup> Driessens considered a similar case, that of Rik Torfs, a Belgian canon law scholar whose presence in the media at least initially limited his

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<sup>80</sup> Giles, ‘Field Migration, Cultural Mobility and Celebrity’; Driessens, ‘Celebrity Capital’.

<sup>81</sup> Giles, ‘Field Migration, Cultural Mobility and Celebrity’.

legitimacy in the academic field: ‘his celebrity capital proved to be not only a strategic asset but also a serious handicap’.<sup>82</sup> Migration across fields, as Giles concluded, depended ‘on the hierarchical nature of the migration, and in which direction the celebrity is attempting to move’.<sup>83</sup>

In line with Giles’ evaluation, it is argued here that a direct correlation exists between the status of a field of origin and the legitimacy accorded in the receiving field. Where the field of origin is considered more estimable or authentic (what Giles called ‘downward migration’), it promotes legitimacy. Where deemed inferior, ‘upward migration’, it restricts legitimacy. Finally, transitional periods, marked by intense shifts in power between two fields, favour hybrid actors set between the dual contexts. The next sections will develop these ideas by looking at the situations of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush in the academic and media spheres (among the most critical intellectual fields for these thinkers). More specifically, it will analyse how power relations between fields and subfields conferred or consolidated these thinkers’ legitimacy. This will be done by first exploring an instance of downward migration, where the transition augmented legitimacy, succeeded by an analysis of how the shifting power dynamics between fields – academia and media – favoured the access and ascent of the three thinkers. The section will conclude with an exploration of the limits on their legitimacy that ‘upward migration’ entailed. By contemplating the transit of these thinkers between academia and media – and between subfields in the academy – this study will analyse at two levels (across fields and between subfields) two of the main venues of these thinkers’ intellectual activity.

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<sup>82</sup> Driessens, ‘Celebrity Capital’: 556.

<sup>83</sup> Giles, ‘Field Migration, Cultural Mobility and Celebrity’: 541.

*Downward transition: across fields*

In ‘fields’ migration’, it has been argued, actors are more likely to acquire legitimacy where their fields of origin hold higher symbolic power, in what Giles and Driessens called ‘downward transition’.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, as discussed in chapter 1, the three thinkers successfully amassed authority in those spheres in which their fields of origin were considered more legitimate: ie spheres where their Middle Eastern and Muslim origins, on one side, and their belonging to both the academic and media spheres, on the other, were considered assets. This kind of conversion can be traced in their downward transition from the academy to the media. As discussed earlier regarding the cultural sphere, a field of restricted cultural production occupies the dominant position *vis-à-vis* one directed at a mass audience: academia, in this view, assumes a significant role in the consecration of legitimate culture.<sup>85</sup> This was evident, for instance, in the emphasis journalists placed on these thinkers’ academic affiliations. Indeed, whenever Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush appeared in the press, their intellectual legitimacy was underlined by reference to their academic status, which was seen to reinforce their accreditation in the media or public sphere. Headlines like ‘A questioning approach to Islam puts maverick professor in the limelight’,<sup>86</sup> assertions like ‘A *Guardian* story about Abdolkarim Soroush described him as an Iranian academic and as being potentially “Islam’s Luther”’,<sup>87</sup> or ‘Academics offering radical interpretations of the Koran put their lives at risk [...] Dr Nasr Abu Zayd, formerly a lecturer in Koranic Studies at Cairo University, provoked a national outcry in Egypt over his book *The Concept of the Text*’,<sup>88</sup> illustrate this tendency.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 229.

<sup>86</sup> Evans, ‘A Questioning Approach to Islam Puts Maverick Professor in Limelight’.

<sup>87</sup> Don Cupitt, ‘Humanity and Hope’, *Guardian*, 22 November 1997.

<sup>88</sup> Abul Taher, ‘Querying the Koran’, *ibid.*, 8 August 2000.

This constant references to their academic affiliation in the media compounded their symbolic capital, increasing their authority in the public sphere. Although reference to an individuals' profession may be a normal part of journalistic praxis, its use often appeared to emphasise the authority of these figures (eg 'The most notorious case was in 1995 when Nasr Abu Zayd, the prominent Cairo University linguist [...]'<sup>89</sup>). Throughout the years, their regular association with prestigious universities reinforced this habit. Harvard, Princeton, Yale and the Sorbonne were names to be conjured with and were always mentioned in their biographies prepared for public occasions. Consider Soroush's biography for the Erasmus Prize:

From the year 2000 onwards Abdolkarim Soroush has been a Visiting Professor at Harvard University teaching Islam and Democracy, Quranic Studies and Philosophy of Islamic Law. Also a scholar in residence at Yale University he is currently teaching Islamic Political Philosophy at Princeton University. For the next academic year, he will be a visiting scholar in the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin.<sup>90</sup>

Or Arkoun's biography for the UN General Assembly:

Professor Arkoun has taught as a visiting professor at UCLA, Princeton University, Temple University, the University of Louvain-la-Neuve, the Pontifical Institute of Arabic Studies in Rome and the University of Amsterdam; New York University 2001 and 2003. He served as a Steering Committee and a jury member for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture from 1981 to 1998. He is presently Emeritus Professor, La Sorbonne (Paris) as well as Senior Research Fellow and member of the Board of Governors of The Institute of Ismaili Studies (London).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> In Ashraf Khalil, 'Scheherazade Faces Jail as Her 1001 Tales Are Branded Indecent', *Times*, 7 May 2010. See also Robin Wright, *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 33.

<sup>90</sup> Praemium Erasmianum Foundation, 'Abdolkarim Soroush: Biography', <https://erasmusprijs.org/en/laureates/abdolkarim-soroush/biography/> (accessed 31 January 2018). Similarly, Gareth Smyths on the Financial Times Weekend Magazine identified Soroush as 'the Iranian writer now at Harvard'. Gareth Smyth, 'Silenced Voices', *Financial Times Weekend Magazine*, 14 February 2004, 87; Evans, 'A Questioning Approach to Islam'.

<sup>91</sup> Arkoun, 'Third Informal Thematic Debate. Civilizations and the Challenge for Peace: Obstacles and Opportunities. Introductory Remarks'. See also Gifford Lectures 'Mohammed Arkoun', <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lecturers/mohammed-arkoun> (accessed 31 January 2018).

This ‘downward transition’ – from academia to media – bolstered their intellectual legitimacy within the media and the public sphere. However, as will be discussed in the next section, while Arkoun’s access to the European-Anglophone context developed mainly through academic channels (and, only subsequently, through his public role), Soroush and Abu Zayd acceded primarily as a result of their emergence into the public debate.

### *Shifting power relations across fields*

Power relations among fields are historically contingent and continuously changing.<sup>92</sup> Any transition across such shifting fields might register as downward or upward migration. These transitional phases, it is here argued, favoured actors positioned between fields. In this sense, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush’s appearance reflected a period of shifting power relations across fields. The importance of their positions between different spatial-cultural contexts was already addressed from a socio-historical perspective in chapter 3. As just seen, the high symbolic capital assigned to academia sanctioned these thinkers’ intellectual legitimacy in the media sphere. The last decades, however, have witnessed dynamic shifts in power between mass-cultural production and specialised production, as recognised by a broad scholarship.<sup>93</sup> This not only jolted academia’s power to consecrate and bestow recognition but also galvanised the media’s power to shape legitimacy within academia.<sup>94</sup> The new emphasis on the social impact of academic knowledge sparked interest in individuals engaged outside specialised circles. In this

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<sup>92</sup> Andrew M. McKinnon, Marta Trzebiatowska, and Christopher Craig Brittain, ‘Bourdieu, Capital, and Conflict in a Religious Field: The Case of the “Homosexuality” Conflict in the Anglican Communion’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 3 (2011): 359.

<sup>93</sup> Nick Couldry, ‘Media Meta-Capital: Extending the Range of Bourdieu’s Field Theory’, in *After Bourdieu: Influence, Critique, Elaboration*, eds. David Swartz and Vera L. Zolberg (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 180–81. Bourdieu recognised ‘the growing importance of mass-audience fields of cultural production in contemporary societies.’ Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 229.

<sup>94</sup> Michelle Stack, *Global University Rankings and the Mediatization of Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

altered context, the positions of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush between fields – along with the constant flow and conversion of capitals across fields – reinforced their legitimacy. This transitional phase created a niche for Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush. The European-Anglophone academic field of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies studied their public personalities and profiles as representative of the contemporary debates within the Muslim world. At the same time, their academic positions granted intellectual legitimacy within the media. The increasing recognition and relevance of the media buttressed their selection within the academy. Many scholars noticed how the new wave of academic attention was after these figures' appearance on elite media.<sup>95</sup> The first British newspaper article on Arkoun appeared in the *Guardian* in 1991, on Abu Zayd in a 1993 *Economist* piece concerning his divorce case, and on Soroush in the *Guardian* in 1995.<sup>96</sup> Several scholars agree that Abu Zayd's popularity beyond the specialised sphere (and sometimes within it) was primarily driven by his forced separation proceedings and the media coverage of the case:

It is unfortunate that recognition of Abu Zayd's important contribution to Islamic thought has only come through his widely-publicized confrontation with the university and now the religious court. Readership of his work in Egypt has soared since his tenure case became public, still, most know more about his struggle for academic freedom than about the challenges his work poses to the institutional and intellectual hegemonies of the religious authorities.<sup>97</sup>

And:

The debate that raged concerning the Egyptian literary scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd soon attracted more attention than the content of his

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<sup>95</sup> Here the term 'elite media' is used for media which set the agenda of public debate, as per Chomsky. Noam Chomsky, 'What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream', *Z Magazine*, October (1997).

<sup>96</sup> *Guardian*, 'Ramadan in France', *Guardian*, 26 March 1991; *Economist*, 'Is This Islam?', *Economist* 328, no. 7818 (3 July 1993) 40; Robin Wright, 'An Iranian Luther Shakes the Foundations of Islam', *Guardian*, 1 February 1995.

<sup>97</sup> Bakr, Colla, and Abu Zayd, 'Silencing Is at the Heart of My Case': 27. For a brief overview of Abu Zayd's divorce case see his biography in chapter 1.

books. [...] Owing to the volatile political nature of the scandal, the useful insights on how Muslim Qur'anic studies could be reformed and embedded in an international scholarly debate on Islam which were highlighted in Abu Zayd's book 'The Concept of the Text' [*Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ*] were largely disregarded.<sup>98</sup>

Esther Nelson, the co-author of Abu Zayd's memoir *Voices of Exile*, described having been introduced to Abu Zayd through Mary Anne Weaver's 1998 *New Yorker* dispatch 'Revolution by Stealth'.<sup>99</sup> Arkoun's *Rethinking Islam*, the English-language edition of his *Ouvertures sur l'Islam*, was reviewed by the *New York Times*, which 'served to spread awareness of Arkoun in the English-speaking world'.<sup>100</sup> Emblematic of this raised awareness was the choice of Arkoun the following year as a keynote speaker at the Middle East Studies Association's annual conference in 1995.<sup>101</sup> In Soroush's case, the first notices appeared in the press and subsequently in the academic field.<sup>102</sup> In the mid-1990s, attempting to redeem Iran's image in the international arena, President Rafsanjani invited Western journalists to visit and report about the country.<sup>103</sup> Once in situ, some came to know about Soroush and his work. American foreign affairs analyst Robin Wright wrote one of the first articles in English in 1995. As the journalist recalled:

I'd first heard about Soroush in a Tehran University classroom a couple of years earlier. Students in a political science class talked excitedly about his latest writings. A magazine called *Kiyan*, which means source or foundation, had just been launched to publish his columns – and the fiery debates they ignited. During subsequent visits to Iran, his name

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<sup>98</sup> Kermani, 'From Revelation to Interpretation', 169.

<sup>99</sup> Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, ix.

<sup>100</sup> Lapidus, 'Islam without Militance'. Robert Lee, email to the author, 26 June 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Washington Post, 'Conventions', *Washington Post*, 4 December 1995.

<sup>102</sup> Economist, 'Second Thoughts', *Economist*, no. 7944 (1995); Wright, 'An Iranian Luther Shakes the Foundations of Islam'; Economist, 'Voting for Nuances', *Economist*, 9 March 1996; Evans, 'A Questioning Approach to Islam'; Abdolkarim Soroush, 'A Conversation with Abolkarim Soroush', *Q-News International*, 14 June 1996; Valla Vakili, *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996); Abdolkarim Soroush, 'The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge', in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Religious Politics of Abdolkarim Soroush* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1999).

<sup>103</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush's friend, conversation with the author, 28 June 2013.

came up more and more often in discussions at coffeehouses, seminaries, bookshops, think tanks and newspaper offices. His work was at the heart of a growing debate within Iran about both its political future and the evolution of Islam as faith.<sup>104</sup>

Between 1995 and 1996 several articles about Soroush appeared for the first time in the English-language press before most European-Anglophone scholars had written on their work.<sup>105</sup> This time discrepancy might be explained by differences in the publication process, as academic work usually takes years before publication, while media articles are published in a matter of days or weeks. It is also plausible that their appearance in elite media is what attracted further scholarly attention to them, particularly in the field of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. This continuous cross-fertilisation across the academic and public spheres led to the constant conversion of capitals across these fields. In the context of shifting power dynamics, these thinkers benefited from academia's higher status but also its new openness to the media sphere. This transitional phase carved a space – the academic subfield of contemporary Islamic thought – for hybrid figures like Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush. Whether this translated into dominance in the broader academic field also depended on power dynamics between this subfield and other academic disciplines, as will be explored in the next section.

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<sup>104</sup> Wright initially met Soroush in November 1994 at the Research Institute for Human Sciences (the first of more than of a dozen interviews and meetings, according to the journalist). Wright, *The Last Great Revolution*, 33, 40.

<sup>105</sup> ———, 'Shaking the Foundations', *Toronto Star*, 31 January 1995; ———, 'An Iranian Luther Shakes the Foundations of Islam'; Peter Waldman, 'Reformers Crusade to Modernize Islam', *Globe and Mail*, 16 March 1995; Lamis Andoni, 'An Iranian "Martin Luther" Preaches Islamic Reforms', *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 April 1995; ———, 'Iran's Islamic Rule under Fire by Revolutionaries', *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 April 1995; Economist, 'Second Thoughts'; Economist, 'Voting for Nuances'; Evans, 'A Questioning Approach to Islam'; Soroush, 'Cry for Help by Iranian Thinker', *ibid.*, 7 June 1996.

*Upward transition: across subfields*

So far it has been argued that downward migration, from academia to the media, favoured the consecration of Arkoun, Soroush and Abu Zayd in the English-speaking press, and that shifting power relations between the spheres opened a space for the three thinkers in the academy. Where their fields of origin were considered valuable – where their Middle Eastern and Muslim backgrounds and their engagement with diverse publics were seen as assets – their advancement was assured. This section will explore cases where transition across fields – specifically, migration from a less powerful to a more powerful arena – hindered legitimacy. This analysis entails evaluating the position of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies – and, more pertinently, the (sub-)subfield of contemporary Islamic thought – in the broader academic field. Chapter 1 surveyed the literature on contemporary Muslim thinkers, showing how Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush emerged from the most discussed names in this literature – in other words, how they achieved intellectual legitimacy within the subfield of contemporary intellectual thought within Islam. This section expands the scope beyond that specific subfield to argue that Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush did not rise to particular prominence within the broader academic field. This becomes evident by looking at indicators of their impact on academic research (h-indices) and their relative absence in academic curricula. As for research: very few of their works appear in the two main academic databases: Web of Sciences (from Thomson Reuters) and Scopus (from Elsevier). As for their presence in university curricula: an overview of academic course syllabi in English evinces the infrequency of these thinkers' works compared to those of other scholars. Columbia University's Open Syllabus Project, is among the most comprehensive databases of academic syllabi, encompassing over a million college courses from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia

and New Zealand.<sup>106</sup> A comparison of some of the most cited works – such as Said’s *Orientalism* (2302 times), Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* (1884 times) or Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1958 times) – provides perspective on these thinkers’ presence in the broader university curricula. Arkoun’s *Rethinking Islam* appears ten times; *none* of Soroush and Abu Zayd’s works appears in the database at all. The wide gap between them and the dominant scholars gives a sense of their position within the broader academic field (despite the limitations of this kind of research, where searches are limited – to authors and titles – and the database is not comprehensive, excluding books that discuss their thought without naming them).<sup>107</sup>

Despite entering academia and gaining legitimacy within the subfield of contemporary Islamic thought, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush were nevertheless located at the fringe of the larger academic field. If one takes their publications as a form of cultural capital, its conversion into the European-Anglophone academic sphere was penalised both typologically and spatially. Typologically, their non-academic publications (from public engagement) were devalued compared to peer-reviewed articles’ esteem within more ‘orthodox’ disciplines. Despite the intensifying emphasis on academics’ public commitment and media participation, publication in peer-reviewed journals remained the key criterion of legitimacy, particularly in ‘orthodox’ sectors of academia. Media articles, reports, or appearances counted for little. Of course, Arkoun, Soroush and Abu Zayd could boast extensive publication, but not in English.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, once present in the academy, the transition from more marginal disciplines

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<sup>106</sup> Open Syllabus Project, ‘Open Syllabus Explorer’, <http://explorer.opensyllabusproject.org> (accessed 7 November 2017).

<sup>107</sup> Indeed, some of the syllabi collected during the research for this study – from courses at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, Leiden University, King’s College London, and Boston University – do not appear in the database, even though they feature publications by Arkoun, Abu Zayd or Soroush.

<sup>108</sup> A collection of the three thinkers’ articles in peer-reviewed journals has been created based on the HOLLIS+ database (which includes all Harvard Collections, Licences Articles and Open Access Data). The list excluded book reviews authored by the thinkers for academic journals.

– Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies – to more ‘orthodox’ fields in the social sciences and humanities, impeded transmission of knowledge of them, as well as compromising their legitimacy in more central disciplines. It seems indicative that while Edward Said and Samuel Huntington, mentioned above, engaged with Islam in their work, both came from more central disciplines: comparative literature and political science.

Spatially, their academic publications in their national fields – even those in English – were undervalued in the transition to the European-Anglophone field. A comparison of Arkoun and Abu Zayd sheds light on these geographical power dynamics. Abu Zayd came out of Egyptian academia, while Arkoun rose in the French sphere (a more powerful national academic field than Egypt’s).<sup>109</sup> Consequently, Arkoun’s francophone journal articles, as well as his French institutional affiliation as a Sorbonne professor, bestowed greater symbolic capital in the conversion into the broader European-Anglophone academic sphere. Two journals, *Arabica* and *Alif*, exemplify these disparities. Arkoun published many French articles in the former; Abu Zayd wrote in English for the latter.<sup>110</sup> Both journals are peer-reviewed and produce articles in English and other languages: Brill’s *Arabica* publishes in the Netherlands in English and French; *Alif*, published by the American University of Cairo, appears in English, French and Arabic. *Arabica* occurs on the Scopus journal rankings; *Alif* does not appear in the database, despite being produced by one of the most prestigious universities in the Middle East.<sup>111</sup> In other words, coming from the stronger national field of France, Arkoun’s cultural and social capital enjoyed a higher exchange rate for conversion into the

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<sup>109</sup> See earlier discussion.

<sup>110</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, ‘The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur’an’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 23 (2003); ———, ‘The Sectarian and the Renaissance Discourse’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 19 (1999); Arkoun, ‘L’Islam Moderne Vu Par le Professeur G. E. von Grunebaum’; ———, ‘Pour une Histoire Réflexive de la Pensée Islamique’, *Arabica* 51, no. 3 (2004); ———, ‘Imaginaire Social et Leaders Dans le Monde Musulman Contemporain’, *Arabica* 35, no. 1 (1988); ———, ‘Islam et Développement Dans Le Maghreb Indépendant’ *Arabica* 29, no. 2 (1982).

<sup>111</sup> SCImago, ‘Journal Rankings’, SJR — SCImago Journal & Country Rank, 2007, <http://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php> (accessed 31 January 2018).

European-Anglophone academic sphere compared to Abu Zayd's. At the same time, the peripheral position of his subfield of Islamic studies and the intellectual debate within contemporary Islam, compared to other disciplines such as philosophy or political science, impeded Arkoun's legitimation in the wider academy. Thus, their 'upward transition' to the broader academic sphere frustrated the extension of their authority. This did not unsettle Soroush excessively; his main concern was the Iranian community and his role as public intellectual there. He saw academia merely as a venue for that pursuit. Neither was Abu Zayd discouraged; his main interlocutors were Islamic studies scholars and the Muslim community in Muslim-majority countries. It did, however, concern Arkoun. He sorely felt the tension between his engagement with central academic debates and his limited recognition by, and influence over, the broader academic community.<sup>112</sup>

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter analysed the conversion of Arkoun, Abu Zayd, and Soroush's social capital into symbolic capital as a basis for their intellectual legitimacy. This entailed first mapping the conversions of capitals for each of the three thinkers, then analysing power relations across fields and their effects on these conversions. Their social capital, it was argued, was converted directly and indirectly into symbolic capital. Further analysis explored awards as cases of symbolic capital: where context valued specific ideas and profiles, their social capital promoted knowledge of them and their selection. After establishing the existence of such power relations across fields at both the spatial and typological level, the next section elaborated on the impact of these dynamics in

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<sup>112</sup> Benzine, Delorme and Deway, 'Mohammed Arkoun, Tisseur De Passerelles': 19–20; Günther, 'Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought', 138.

downward, upward and shifting-power migrations. Despite coming from regions academically less potent than the European-Anglophone world – Iran for Soroush, Egypt for Abu Zayd – these arenas provided the kind of resources valued in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. This, in turn, favoured their entrance into that world. The higher status assigned to academia in the broader intellectual field legitimised them in the anglophone media, for instance. However, the marginal position of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies compared to more prestigious disciplines limited their legitimacy in the broader academic field. While tracing the emergence of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush in the European-Anglophone intellectual field, this chapter demonstrated the importance of the dynamics among fields – and the position of these individuals beyond and between specific fields – in the process of legitimation.

## Conclusion

To tackle the question of ‘who speaks for Islam?’, this thesis has identified three leading Muslim intellectuals in the European-Anglophone scholarship over the past half-century – Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Abdolkarim Soroush – and analysed the socio-historical processes through which they gained their authority and legitimacy. Thus, the study has not examined the substance of contemporary Muslim intellectual debates, *per se*. Instead, its goal has been to explore the mechanisms of intellectual legitimisation across different communities, and more specifically, how these processes played out in the English-language scholarship on Islam in Europe. Propounding these Muslim thinkers as a case study to understand the broader processes of intellectual legitimisation and translations of authority across contexts has three benefits. First, studying how ideas and individuals are translated in the European context illuminates not only how the ‘other’ has been constructed but also how this ‘other’ implicitly questions dominant assumptions. For instance, European scholars such as Jürgen Habermas, Jocelyne Cesari and Jose Casanova have employed the work of these Muslim thinkers as evidence to challenge the concept of a single modernity, as well as the secular paradigm as the fundamental basis for democracy. Second, the political relevance that Islam, and Muslim voices (religious or secular), have gained in the current debate provides more explicit evidence of the interplay between political actors (such as governments), social actors (such as academics, the media and civil society), and these thinkers’ agency: while it emphasised the significant role played by such social and political actors to create a space for these thinkers, the study also elaborated on Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush’s agency to negotiate their emergence into the European academic world. For this purpose, it borrowed Spivak’s notion of ‘strategic essentialism’ to investigate how they chose to accept the essentialising categories projected upon them as a tool to reframe the debate.

Third, focusing on the germinal years of what has been variously called “European/Western Islam” (whose debates included these thinkers) has a twofold benefit: it sheds light on how intellectual authority crystallises from fluid relationships into institutional frameworks; it challenges cyclical understandings of authority formation as a mere reproduction of the status quo, by exploring how shifts in authority and therefore power structures take place.

In particular, the thesis considered the central role of social capital for their legitimisation. It argued that the emergence of these three thinkers was closely linked to their participation in a transnational network of scholars and institutions. This network favoured both their initial selection as well as the transmission of knowledge about them. Further, it identified three interplaying elements in this process: the socio-political context, their ideas and profiles, and their social capital. The socio-political context, at both domestic and international level, renewed ‘Western’ interest in Islam; domestically, the significant Muslim presence in Europe forced a reconsideration of previously unquestioned assumptions; internationally, the overall re-emergence of religion in the public sphere – and Islam in particular – resulted in a polarisation of attitudes towards Islam. In response to the appearance of a ‘clash of civilisations’ narrative, new actors became interested in these thinkers. For some political actors, this reflected an attempt to maintain social cohesion by promoting ‘moderate understandings’ of Islam. Their work allowed some social actors to question the idea that Islam is incompatible with ‘Western’ values, as well as to promote progressive interpretations of the sacred sources within the Muslim community. This created a demand for these thinkers’ specific profiles and ideas: ie ‘organic’ Muslim voices who promoted the congruence of Islam, on one hand, and modernity, democracy and human rights, on the other, through a synthesis of Islamic tradition and modern social theories. For this purpose, the network of relationships in

which they were embedded played an essential role in their selection from among all the actors with similar profiles.

In analysing their social capital, this study identified two moments – access to a network, and expansion of that network; and two variables – knowledge about these thinkers, and their selection. Their inclusion in a more extensive network favoured transmission of this knowledge. As a result, many individuals came across these thinkers through media outlets (publications by them and about them, as well as interviews), or via colleagues who already knew them or their work. The broader and more heterogeneous the network, the higher the possibility of transmission of knowledge about them. Their selection represented a second but critical variable in the expansion of their social capital. Selection meant not just the promotion and appropriation of their ideas (for instance, authors citing their work), but also collaboration and material and institutional support (facilitating their access to resources, networks, institutions). This model demanded specific profiles and ideas to fit a preconceived agenda, with a network to select them and disseminate knowledge of them. This was sometimes reproduced at the institutional level, as discussed in the cases of the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, the Institute of Ismaili Studies, and the working group Modernity and Islam at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

In these processes, ties existing among actors served as the infrastructure through which knowledge and different forms of capital were mobilised and ultimately converted into cultural legitimacy. Soroush's high school teacher put him in touch with a *bazari* (trader) who provided him with financial support (economic capital) to pursue his studies in London. Arkoun's engagement with the Parisian intellectual circle, which included thinkers such as Lévi-Strauss, Foucault and Derrida shaped his thought in tune with current debates (cultural capital). These conversions were influenced not only by

dynamics internal to each field but also by power relations (periphery vs centre) as they migrated through different geographical and typological fields. Their ‘upward migration’ from peripheral fields to more central ones (from the Middle East to European academia, or from Islamic studies to political science and philosophy) hindered their legitimacy. By contrast, their ‘downward migration’ from more authoritative fields such as academia to less prestigious ones such as mass media, contributed to their legitimacy. Their position across different geographical and typological fields favoured their recognition and legitimacy in the context of still-fluid Islamic authority formation in the European-Anglophone scholarship, and structural changes in their intellectual field. In particular, the globalisation and specialisation of knowledge created a demand for mediating figures, able to interpret across genres and contexts. The same hybridity, however, undermined – at least in the short-term – their authority in more orthodox fields (such as more established academic disciplines beyond the fields of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies).

#### *Contributions of this study*

The thesis contributed to five themes specific to the study of Islam. First, it enriched the scholarship on how authority (and specifically intellectual authority) is legitimated in Islam by mapping and analysing the role of personal and institutional ties in this process, and by exploring the transposition and translation of such authority beyond the Muslim community. This analysis included the perspectives of gatekeepers (such as academics, journalists, and individuals involved with international organisations), and investigated how they came to know about, and select, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush. Second, it provided a historical account of the study of Muslim intellectual thought in European-Anglophone academia. Despite the existence of a literature on Islamic or Middle Eastern

studies at the national level, few works have analysed the scholarship on contemporary Muslim intellectual thought in its transnational setting. In particular, this study provided a map of the institutions and individuals involved in this process. Third, the thesis contributed to the literature on transnational Islam in general, and especially transnational Islamic public space (understood as ‘the field of Islamic reference and debate’<sup>1</sup>) with a new examination of the mechanisms through which this space was formed. While it recognised, in line with previous literature, the emergence of a ‘liminal space’ as an essential venue for the rise of these thinkers, this study perceived this venue as far from neutral and explored the role of political and social actors in shaping this space. In dialogue with the literature on the global intellectual field, this study challenged the assumption of a free circulation of ideas and thinkers; in fact, this distribution is quite uneven. This is not only because of the exclusion of some actors from transnational networks but also because – even among actors who could access this space – some geographical and typological poles have more power to define the legitimacy of ideas and individuals. Such power disparities and their impact on the ‘upward’ and ‘downward’ transitions of Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush were analysed according to two geographical and typological dimensions. These disparities are evident when comparing their emergence as public intellectuals: Arkoun, from the French academic field (though born in Algeria), followed a very different trajectory than that of Abu Zayd or Soroush, from Middle Eastern countries. Fourth, the thesis unpacked the definition of intellectuals, and specifically Muslim intellectuals, by exploring the social mechanisms through which this notion has been constructed. This was discussed by examining the tension between the three thinkers’ self-perception as intellectuals *à la* Gramsci (what Zygmunt Bauman defined as ‘legislators’ within their community) and their expected role as interpreters

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<sup>1</sup> Bowen, ‘Beyond Migration’: 880.

across communities (reflecting Bauman's conception of intellectuals as 'interpreters'). Fifth, and finally, the study contributed to the sociological debate of field theory: while most of the literature on cultural legitimation has focused on dynamics within a single field, the interaction between Muslim thinkers from North Africa and the Middle East with European-Anglophone scholarship allows an exploration of power dynamics and interactions across fields.

### *Further research*

The constraints of a doctoral dissertation have limited this study to Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush's emergence in the English-language scholarship in Europe, leaving at least five future avenues of enquiry. 1) The subject would benefit from a comparison of thinkers gaining legitimacy, as discussed in this thesis, to scholars who did not. For instance, why did a thinker such as Mostafa Malekian, who belonged to similar intellectual circles as Soroush in Iran, not emerge in the European-Anglophone scholarship? 2) As mentioned in the introduction, all three examples are men. Given that the study's starting point was to investigate the most discussed figures in the literature, in a field that remains male-dominated, this was unavoidable. In recent years, however, the work of women such as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Asma Barlas and Ziba Mir-Hosseini has gained space in the debates and should be included in any future analysis; 3) The geographical limitation to Europe could be expanded to explore, for instance, trans-Atlantic networks. Especially after 9/11, there was a fair amount of collaboration between (and travel to facilitate) these thinkers and North American scholars. Although this was based more on individual initiatives than institutional arrangements, these interactions certainly shaped the debate within transnational Islam, as well as the discussion of Islam in the public sphere in North America; 4) This study has focused on

processes at the transnational level, which was significant for opening a space for these thinkers to emerge from power struggles within specific national spheres. The interaction between the transnational and the national arenas and the modalities through which they responded to each other also requires further analysis; 5) Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush are among the most analysed figures in the literature on contemporary 'Muslim intellectuals'. However, the contemporary Muslim debate in Europe and North America presents a more diverse and complex reality characterised by different clusters of individuals including religious as well as secular figures. These include imams, such as Yahya Sergio Pallavicini, Mustafa Ceric, and Suhaib Webb; individuals with a more academic character, such as Hossein Nasr and Timothy Winter; and others who are more nationally based, like Ziauddin Sardar and Tariq Modood in the United Kingdom – rarely discussed in conjunction with Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Soroush.<sup>2</sup> Further research could map the broader intellectual field of contemporary Muslim debate, and the diverse intellectual cliques within it. Methodologically, this could benefit from greater use of quantitative analysis and digital humanities, while citations analysis could help achieve this goal and to estimate the reception and impact of these thinkers on the subsequent literature.

In conclusion, this thesis contributed to the field of sociology of knowledge by analysing the case of three Muslim thinkers working in European-Anglophone academia. Islamic intellectual history, for this purpose, was considered here as a case study to explore the broader production of knowledge in the European-Anglophone intellectual field. The study made a sociological and geopolitical analysis of the translation of authority, treating the transmission of knowledge as subject to social conditions rather

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<sup>2</sup> For the discussion of parallel networks of Islamic intellectual authority see, for example, Bano, *The Revival of Islamic Rationalism*.

than a neutral phenomenon. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for evaluating contending narratives on Islam. Furthermore, given the current emergence of Islamophobic and xenophobic discourses, understanding the mechanisms through which individual voices acquire – or are denied – legitimacy can be a strategic tool of opposition to intolerant trends. Given the increasing polarisation of society, the current study underlines the importance of heterogeneous networks for facilitating dialogue and engagement with diversity.

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