



RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY  
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

Commentary Series:

# Theorising Governance Beyond the West: The Islamic Public Value Project

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## **Synopsis**

*This commentary provides an overview sharing of the Islamic Public Value Project housed at University College London, United Kingdom. Dr Salah Chafik was invited by RPCS to share on the project as part of the programme's Governance Pillar, which aims to study and develop a new understanding between religion and secularism, identify models of successful citizenship and contribution, and formulate a robust and credible framework of successful living drawn from Islamic traditions, history and experiences.*

## **Context**

The field of governance, both in policy and in administration, encompasses various sciences and traditions in order to address the demands and challenges of what the founding figure of modern Western political theory, Johannes Althusius (d.1638), called symbiotics, or the art of living together (1995, xv). There is a growing emphasis in both policy debates and academic literature on the importance of governance institutions and actors in creating public value – achieving broad and widely accepted societal goals (Mazzucato & Ryan-Collins 2019; O'Flynn 2021).

Modern international governance standards, however, are largely defined by, or even equated to, the dominant Western paradigm at the exclusion of all other religious and cultural traditions (Drechsler 2013); arguably none more so than Islam since the era of colonial powers actively dismantling local forms of governance and organisation rooted in the moral and ethical foundations of the sharia (Hallaq 2012). Indeed, predating the aforementioned work of Althusius and extending to the present are centuries of a rich legacy of scholarship and practice of governance in genres ranging from social ethics (*futuwwa*) and practical philosophy (*hikma al-'amaliyya*), to political jurisprudence (*siyāsa al-shar'iyya*), public interest or the common good (*maslaha*), and bureaucratically-informed and Sufi-inspired Mirrors for Princes (*siyasatname*, *nasihatname*).

## **The Project**

It is precisely from this context that the Islamic Public Value (IPV) project emerged, i.e. seeking to diversify the unidirectional global-Western understanding of governance standards and paradigms. The initiative is an academic grant (2022-25) based out of

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University College London and funded by the John Templeton Foundation that explores centuries-old autonomous indigenous institutions still operating across the Islamic world or in societies in which Muslims are the minority.

What is specific about these institutions, and what makes our research truly unique, is that they are not NGOs – a common-enough model that is only a few decades old – but rather institutions that range from (semi-)integrated structures with central administration to autonomous stand-ins for the state, i.e. governing in the shadows (Peters 2019). They therefore dovetail with the more community-based approach to state service provision that is often at the core of the reinvention of the state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mazzucato, Kattel et al. 2021). The project's approach is to look at institutional successes and their foundation, representing a recent, high-attention research programme in governance studies that offsets the conventional critique of dysfunctional services by consciously emphasising “what works” (Compton et al. 2022) – an approach particularly legitimate in the context of the uphill battle in studying Islamic governance institutions.

More specifically, the project is focused on unravelling the perspectives of these otherwise underrepresented and underexplored institutions that craft, coordinate and deliver public services for and with their constituents for a better life, and crucially, based on their localised Islamic tradition. In doing so, we sought to answer a few fundamental questions: What is an Islamic society or successful Muslim minority and what does it mean for it to flourish? Where and when do Islamic governance and administration play a role? How is public value defined and understood in a non-Western, Islamic context? How can non-Muslims benefit from Islamic governance institutions?

Answering these questions has a significant dual effect: It helps us to reflect on global (re: Western) “best-practice” governance, recognise its framing power and notice its directionality. But even more importantly for the IPV project, it concretely shows and showcases working Islamic models of cooperation and public value creation that 1) are objectively robust, i.e. survived colonisation and globalisation and 2) could not only serve as models to learn from, but also, at the very least, contribute positively to the rich fabric of integrated living-togetherness (even in the West) in both state and society (Chafik & Drechsler 2022).

The following sections briefly delve into the project's three core research streams:

- **Research Stream 1: Contemporary Governance**

Synopsis: design and implement empirical case studies and, in close conjunction, a theoretical framework of contemporary Islamic governance and administration to broaden and diversify academic, policy and public discourse.

To understand the current limits of practice and understanding in governance, one must go back in time to the end of the Cold War, which marked the beginning of a new era in world history. Namely, one in which the Western (re: American) economic and political paradigm stood unchallenged at the global level (Walt 2006). From the governance and administration perspective, a dominant paradigm without an alternative rendered the Western paradigm the only good paradigm to be considered, and by extension, the only modern paradigm, resulting in an implicit and formulaic understanding (Drechsler 2013):

Western = global = good = modern

One of the most problematic consequences of this approach is that in assuming ubiquitous and perpetual Western superiority, one is expected to jettison any social values, cultural traditions and institutions that are non-Western. Otherwise, or so the formula would imply, one is simply stubbornly holding onto values, traditions and institutions that are provincial, bad and outdated.

Religiosity and theological differences aside, concerning Islam in majority Muslim countries, it is regarded as unambiguously important. The tension is therefore palpable: there exist revered institutions and lived traditions in Muslim societies that are deemed obsolete and not worth serious consideration in the final equation.

The IPV project seeks to challenge this approach. This is an opportune time to do so because the dominance of the Western, 'Anglospheric' governance and administration paradigm is increasingly in question – three primary reasons being, firstly, the questionable track record of exporting this paradigm; secondly, the rapid economic and political shifts occurring on the international stage; and thirdly, the growing calls to simultaneously decolonise various fields and recognise indigenous legacies (Althaus 2020; Pollitt 2015). A particularly salient example is that of Afghanistan, where the forced implantation of Western institutions at the expense of local (informal) ones alienated the local population and led to further instability (Levi-Sanchez 2016).

Hence, instead of continuing the wholesale transfer of Western models of governance to the rest of the world, it is high time for scholars, policymakers and civic institutions to

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broaden the discourse to other legitimate approaches – hopefully bolstering locally-informed successes and in doing so, avoiding further human, economic and environmental disaster.

As such, this research stream considers and ideally will answer a few **guiding research questions**: What are the values, practices and objectives that define the service provision activities of a particular institution? How does the institution define and create public value? Does a particular institution constitute a body of governance and administration knowledge and practices that is valuable to scholars and practitioners in the broader sense (for instance, including non-Muslims)?

- **Research Stream 2: Faith**

Synopsis: Evaluate the (Islamic) theological status of contemporary Indigenous Cooperative Governance Institutions and their governance and administration.

Why would a faith angle of governance institutions warrant a separate stream of research and inquiry within the IPV project? Many of the proposed institutions have been successfully operating and evolving to meet the needs of their constituents and societies for over a thousand years – centuries, at the very least. However, the present reality in much of our world is that any non-state organisation involved with governance and administration that can be classified as Islamic, risks being (falsely) associated with political Islamism (which has its origins in the 1960s), or even Islamic terrorism (of which the oldest standing group has been in existence for barely thirty years; see Burke 2004).

This research stream therefore aims to fulfil the pressing need of making substantial efforts (and progress) in understanding the nature of genuine Islamic institutions that have predated these other phenomena (i.e. are indigenous) and accumulated incomparably more experience, practices, knowledge and, consequently – we would argue – constitute a more authentic representation of Islamic governance and public value.

More generally, a key point this research stream seeks to address in order to broaden the current discourse is that unlike the Western paradigm of governance which separates religion (re: church) from state, this cannot be assumed of the Islamic paradigm. The mere existence of Islamic governance institutions calls out the non-connectedness of religion and governance as a choice (and a wrong one at that), not something that is a given (Drechsler & Chafik 2021). Indeed, a fundamental value of these institutions originates from the concept of embeddedness – the notion that economic and political

forces are present within, and are subservient to, a set of social norms, traditions and customs (Polanyi 1944).

The culturally embedded Islamic setting in which these institutions operate means that even normal, quotidian actions (let alone public service delivery) are given significance when understood from an Islamic vantage point (Urinboyev 2014). In particular, cooperation and mutual help are regarded as fundamental requirements for qualifying as a good Muslim – because the belief is that partaking in constructive social relations is a way of serving and pleasing God (Kalantari 1998). As such, taking these institutions as they would allow fruitful investigation and insight into how their understanding and embodiment of Islam help to define, create and maintain public value in their respective societies.

The **guiding research questions** are: Is there a coherent link to and embodiment of Islamic principles) within the institutions, i.e. how are they Islamic? How do these institutions understand and integrate the Holy Qur'an, Prophetic teachings and subsequent Islamic scholarly legacy into their values, practices and thought? Which, if any, *tariqa* (Sufi path) does the institution belong to and how does it manifest (albeit with contextual variance)?

- **Research Stream 3: History**

Synopsis: Investigate historical, especially pre- and non-colonial, case studies of Islamic governance to inform and enrich present-day approaches and solutions.

Despite being a comparatively smaller research stream, being able to explore the historical angle of Islamic governance institutions is substantively important. This is because to assume the unidirectional ascendancy of the Western paradigm of governance not only requires overlooking today's extant institutions as legitimate alternatives but also demands that one relegates historical institutions to contemporary irrelevance. However, the demand of **relegating religion to history in public affairs** may be Western, **but it is not Islamic** (Feldman 2012).

Indeed, exploring the values, practices and objectives of historical Islamic governance institutions, from the early inception period of Islam onwards, is potentially beneficial in three ways. Firstly, to supplement the first research stream in the sense of understanding how the legacies of historical institutions have shaped and continue to shape modern Islamic public value. Secondly, revisiting alternative arrangements of governance from the

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past may have lessons and insights that inform and enrich present-day solutions with regards to the pressing problems of modernity (e.g. climate, inequality). Thirdly, some of those governance institutions actually addressed, and operated in, contexts of modernity and ceased to exist only in living memory – the Ottoman Empire is one example; the Muslim princely states of India that were abolished only in 1947, another. Their problem-solving and community-building potential should not be considered any less just because of their targeted destruction.

### **Conclusion**

These research streams all combine to further the overarching mission of the project: to empirically ground the foundational thought and objectives of Islamic governance, which will ultimately provide a sacred, non-Western perspective on public value and how to address the major challenges facing humanity. The ambition is to not only call into question the approach of contextless wholesale export of the global-Western model to the rest of the world, but also to encourage further research on and steer policy towards other indigenous and faith-based governance and administrative models as well as their contributions.



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## **About Author**

*Dr Salah Chafik is the Senior Research Fellow at the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP) and serves as the Co-Investigator and Project Manager for the Islamic Public Value project (2022-2025), funded by the John Templeton Foundation. His research is inspired by the age-old question and notion of 'living and doing good' or السعادة القصوى (eudaimonia). He studies the pursuit and understanding of public value creation beyond a global Western paradigm, focusing on purpose-driven indigenous institutions rooted in Islam.*

*Dr Salah's research interests center on how these institutions deliver public services, address community challenges, and shape the business and wider socio-economic environment of their communities. His approach to research is interdisciplinary, combining non-Western public administration, organizational theory, commons, economic sociology and history, technology governance, and ethnographic fieldwork.*

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*The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.*

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