

In Conversation With Dr. Hisham Altalib about the Legacy of Professor AbdulHamid A. AbuSulayman

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INTRODUCTION

This interview article is a slight departure in form from those in previous issues of *JEMS*. Thus far we have used this section as a space to explore the thought and work of academic educationalists who work on research about, or in, the Muslim world, with a view to broadening intellectual debates on matters of interest to our readership. In this issue we interview Dr. Hisham Altalib, a cofounder of IIIT—the organization that inspired this journal—and a mentee-friend of the late Prof. AbdulHamid AbuSulayman, who is memorialized in this issue. Both these personalities were pivotal in the institutionalization of new Islamic research and education initiatives over the last 50 years, and the interview gives us an insight into the influence of the late AbdulHamid AbuSulayman, in particular.

Dr. Hisham Altalib (b. 1940) is the current president of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). He graduated in 1962 with a B.Sc. in electrical engineering from Liverpool University, UK, and after serving in Iraq in the petroleum industry, he pursued graduate studies in electrical engineering at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, where he obtained his M.A. (1972) and Ph.D. (1974). Throughout his student career, he was active in Islamic work, first in the UK and then in North America. He has continued his advocacy for Islam and Muslims as an activist and author to this day. He established the Leadership Training Department of the Muslim Students Association of the United States and Canada (MSA) and became its first full-time director, serving from 1975 to 1977. He held several leadership positions in Islamic organizations, such as Secretary-General of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations

(IIFSO), in 1976. He was a founding member and a director of the SAAR Foundation, from 1983 to 1995, and he was also a founding member of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in 1981. Dr. Altalib has conducted many leadership training camps and seminars in the United States and abroad. His published works include *Training Guide for Islamic Workers*; *Inviting to Islam: Ethics of Engagement*; and *Parent-Child Relations: A Guide for Raising Children* (coauthored with AbdulHamid AbuSulayman and Omar Altalib; 2013). He is a father and grandfather.

Dr. AbdulHamid AbuSulayman (1936–2021) was a scholar, activist, educationalist, and institution builder. His varied career spanned 60 years, and he will be remembered as a leading intellectual and creative thinker in the Muslim world. He obtained a B.A. in Commerce from the University of Cairo (1959), an M.A. in Political Science from the University of Cairo (1963), and a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Pennsylvania (1973). He held various positions throughout his career, including founding member and President of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) in the United States and Canada (1972); Secretary-General, World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (1973–1982); Chairperson, Department of Political Science at King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (1982–1984); and Rector, International Islamic University (IIU), Malaysia (1988–1999). He was instrumental in organizing many international academic conferences and seminars. He was concerned with the alarming condition of Muslims in the modern world and heavily invested in reform on a number of levels. His many books include *The Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Islamic Methodology and Thought*; *Crisis in the Muslim Mind*; *Revitalizing Higher Education in the Muslim World*; *The Qur’anic Worldview: A Springboard for Cultural Reform*; and *Parent-Child Relations: A Guide for Raising Children* (coauthored with Hisham Altalib and Omar Altalib). He is survived by his wife, five children, and many grandchildren.

Alyaa Ebbiary: *You have had a varied career and worked in very different fields. How would you describe yourself and what you do? As an academic, scholar, writer, activist, educationalist, trainer, or otherwise?*

Hisham Altalib: I am an electrical engineer who also became an activist, trainer, writer, businessman, and educationalist. I became active in “Islamic work” (faith-inspired activism and community organizing) when I was growing up in Iraq. This continued into my undergraduate and graduate studies. With my contemporaries Jamal Barzinji and Ahmad Totonji,¹ we

formed the Muslim Students Society (MSS) of the UK and Northern Ireland; and then after I moved to the United States in 1968 to pursue graduate studies, I became involved in the Muslim Students Association (MSA) of the US and Canada. This gave us a platform to interact with student and youth organizations across the world, such as the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations (IIFSO) and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). Eventually, as our lives and priorities changed, we realized that other organizations were necessary to fill this gap. This led to a more formal institutionalization of the Islamic intellectual changes we wanted to see, which led to the establishment of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) and the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). Each stage of my life and career has brought new interests and priorities, and I have learned to specialize and adapt in different fields.

AE: *Now a little about your background. You are an Iraqi, Arab, Muslim writer and activist who grew up in the period after independence from the British and during considerable turmoil in your country of origin. What was it like coming of age in this very changeable political context? How did your time in Iraq shape your future interests and goals?*

HA: I was very fortunate to have profoundly good influences in my life from my childhood years. My parents were central to my early ethical formation. The most effective influence in my early life was meeting Ustadh Abdul Hafith Sulayman, my teacher in seventh grade in Iraq. He taught Arabic and religion and he is the one who anchored me in *al Sirat al Mustaqeem* (“the Straight Path”) for the rest of my life. After excelling in my high school studies, I was awarded a scholarship to study in Britain starting with one year of orientation in Baghdad at the Preparatory College for Scholarship Students. This was a politically charged period with people of various ideologies constantly clashing. My contemporary Jamal Barzinji and I requested a prayer room in the college; we came into contact with like-minded fellows for whom faith was also a priority. In Baghdad, I met several role models who demonstrated the inadequacy of the man-made “isms” out there and guided me to hold fast to Islam, especially when I would go to the United Kingdom at the age of 17. Through small sessions as well as camps, we learned the significance of balancing religious (*deen*) and worldly (*dunya*) affairs. These interactions were crucial in our awareness of ourselves as Muslims and all the work we would do once we reached the UK. I would say we already had a strong sense of identity and a calling before we left our country of origin.

AE: *You originally trained as an electrical engineer, and your master's and Ph.D. were also in this field. What led you away from engineering and more toward writing in the humanities and religious issues? Do you see this shift in other Muslim intellectuals of your generation? Please share a little about your intellectual journey and what have been your key interests?*

HA: You could say I converted from electrical engineering to human engineering. At different times in my career, different bodies of knowledge have been urgent and necessary, and I have adapted to this according to need. I am very interested in helping Muslims develop leadership skills and enabling them to become confident in their faith and identity. One way to achieve this is through institutionalizing the Muslim presence, and I have been involved in forming many organizations to this end. I also believe that parenting is a core issue that Muslims must pay attention to in order to raise God-conscious children who can grow up to take the helm of the American Muslim community as well as the Muslim world.

The formation of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) in 1972 and the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in 1981 were crucial milestones in my intellectual journey. We established IIIT to continue the tradition of Islamic scholarship in the context of contemporary times through original, creative research and academic discourse. In addition to focusing on Islamic thought renewal and reform, the Institute was committed to human development and leadership training. As such, in 1991, IIIT and IIFSO jointly published my book *Training Guide for Islamic Workers*, which sought to educate Muslims in effective personal and group leadership skills. We also realized that families have a powerful effect on society and that the sociopolitical-cultural evolution of modern public life was changing faster than families could adjust. Therefore, in 2013, I coauthored *Parent-Child Relations: A Guide for Raising Children* with Prof. AbdulHamid AbuSulayman and Dr. Omar Altalib. We are currently working on an updated edition of that book as well as a new book on parenting that underscores the vitality of cultivating a happy home as an incubator to produce potential future leaders of society. Unfortunately, AbdulHamid passed away before the books' publication.

Through the intensive engagement with the three giants, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman, Taha Jabir al Alwani, and Ismail Faruqi, I became convinced that the onset of a civilization begins from social and human sciences and not from physical sciences and technology—these will later follow to be the fruits of social and human philosophy. You can employ any

engineer or contractor to build mosques and churches, but you do not trust a disbeliever to educate your child. Hence, my priority of concentration was shifted to serve the three giants to establish the academic institutions.

AE: *One of the articles in this issue is a commemoration of the late Prof. Abdul-Hamid AbuSulayman, the Saudi-born thinker, scholar, and activist. You have mentioned he had a significant impact on you, and upon your thought. Can you elaborate upon this?*

HA: In my early activist years, coming from Iraq to Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1968, I used to think that the solution to all of our political and economic problems was to create a true Islamic order and state. I believed that if we have real committed believers with piety at the head of the government, they will solve all the problems with a flip of a switch, instantly! After meeting AbdulHamid in 1969 in the regional MSA conference in New York, I had to revise my thinking. He explained to me that despite centering and repeating Qur'an, *Sunnah*, and *fiqh* in schools in Saudi Arabia, there were still major problems. This had a profound effect on my idealism. While other activist leaders and I were studying different types of engineering, AbdulHamid's expertise was in economics, education, culture, and political science. We soon realized that although we had been educating so many people as amateurs in Islamic studies, now we had found a highly qualified specialist to educate us! The introduction of AbdulHamid into our lives marked the beginning of an era where we benefited from his intellectual and academic input in all the arenas of activism, *da'wah*, and advocacy of Islam locally in the US and internationally, later on, with the birth of IIIT in the 80s and beyond. He was a rational and critical Muslim thinker from Makkah who made an impact on everyone he met.

AE: *Both you and the late Prof. AbuSulayman have witnessed many intellectual trends and movements in the Muslim world over the last 50 years and more. How do you feel about this intellectual upheaval, or as AbuSulayman called it, the "crisis of the Muslim mind"? Sometimes these discussions can be discouraging. Are there reasons for optimism too?*

HA: Yes, everything we have achieved is an example of the fact that if we pool all our resources—financial, intellectual, human—there is so much we can do as a team. We realized that building institutions is the necessary way to go because individual work cannot achieve much. Hence, we as a cohesive team built directly or indirectly more than 30 institutions inside and outside the US. The work we did in the 60s, 70s, and 80s has

become the foundation upon which the American Muslim community has continued to build quality organizations that are working in crucial areas such as cultivating our faith-based identity, safeguarding our civil liberties, engaging in interfaith and civic advocacy, and developing Islamic Studies higher education institutions, among others. Having said that, much work remains to be done, both here and abroad. I believe there continues to be an intellectual void, an intellectual deficiency, in the Muslim world. Yet, there are also so many who are striving hard in their local context around the globe to address this. The renewed rise in scholarly activity in Islamic Studies in the Muslim world, and the standard of scholarship by Muslims emerging from Western countries, is quite heartening. In fact, AbdulHamid would remind us that the downfall of the Muslims took centuries to materialize, and we should not expect the progress to emerge over decades. We need to have patience.

AE: *You, the late Prof. AbuSulayman, and Dr. Omar Altalib cowrote a book on parenting, and Prof. AbuSulayman also wrote a booklet on marital discord. What motivated all of you to pay attention to such “micro” issues as the family, as opposed to some of the other “macro” issues that you have been concerned with?*

HA: We actually identified family as a “macro” issue, to use your phrase. Parenting is not a job to be underestimated or taken lightly. It has a huge impact on the type of children we raise, the sort of society in which we live, and ultimately the kind of civilization we leave for future generations.

As Rector of the International Islamic University, Malaysia (1988–1999), AbdulHamid realized the need to establish a new mandatory course at the university (culminating in a diploma) on Family and Parenting with a view to disseminating the rationale and moral value of good parenting to students as well as to produce enough qualified teachers to teach the course. AbdulHamid advised parents to focus first on love of Allah with their children rather than the fear of Allah. This will follow later. Further, he would tell them to teach children that Allah loves them before telling them to love Allah!

The story of the parenting book was born in 1995 when the board of IIIT appreciated the tremendous success of the *Training Guide*. At the same time, everyone recognized that leadership training cannot be delayed until adulthood; it has to start from birth. So, they entrusted me to author a book on parenting, and the three of us collaborated and published it in 2013. IIIT’s viewpoint can be summarized as follows: “Parents use good parenting skills to raise righteous citizens and potential future leaders.

These righteous citizens are imbued with principled leadership traits within a healthy and conducive home environment that promotes the successful growth of children.” Practically, it is imperative that parents know how to raise good children, since the psychological foundations of values and personality are largely developed at home in early childhood.

AE: *How has your work—and that of Prof. AbuSulayman—been concerned with issues of education in the Muslim world?*

HA: Education has been at the core of IIIT’s work from the very beginning. AbdulHamid strongly believed that the solution of our problems basically lies in the education of the nation at large. This is why he welcomed the invitation of Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim to be the Rector of IIUM [International Islamic University of Malaysia]; it enabled him to make a direct impact on the university, being a practical lab for the vision and mission of IIIT on education. He transformed IIUM from a high school level to a reputable first-class university in Malaysia, a center of excellence. He was very passionate about making the new campus Islamic architecture and surrounding environment very appealing, functional, and attractive because all of these factors reflect directly on the personality and psychology of the students. He was so dedicated to the *ummah* that his wife used to say that he was married to the university!

As founders of the Institute, myself and others recognized that the contemporary divide between secular and religious education needs to be bridged. As such, we sought to reconnect values and knowledge in an effort to reform education in the Muslim context. One of IIIT’s major efforts was the Islamization of Knowledge project, which aimed at producing university textbooks in collaboration with a number of higher education institutions worldwide. The idea was to “Islamize” contemporary academic social and human sciences, so that progress in the Muslim world was not based on a Eurocentric worldview, with colonialist and imperialist objectives, or grounded in purely materialist goals; instead, the aim was for it to be rooted in divine principles and values. Eventually, as time passed, the Institute recognized that “Integration of Knowledge” based on Quranic values, more than “Islamization,” was the need of the hour.

Recently, IIIT launched the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS) initiative, which focuses on carrying out evidence-based research with data collected from the field in schools and universities in Muslim societies and the dissemination of this research through publication and translation, teaching, policy recommendations, and strategic engagements. This journal is itself an outcome of that project.

AE: *What impact or contribution do you hope to make with your work?*

HA: I pray that my work will positively impact the intellectual output, and formation, of potential future leaders in the Muslim world and elsewhere. I also pray that the *ummah* will follow the Qur’anic injunction of being “*ummatan wasata*,” a justly balanced and moderate *ummah* (Qur’an 2:143) and shun violence and extremism all over the world. In addition, I hope that my work will benefit people now as well as future generations of Muslims the world over. As the Prophet (peace be upon him) told us, all the creation are the “dependents” of Allah, and the most beloved to Him are those who are most beneficial to His “dependents.” I pray that the books I have written and the institutions I have contributed to will be a perpetual charity (*sadaqa jariya*) for my family and me, for I could not have achieved much without their support, especially the facilitation and companionship of my wife, Dr. Ilham Altalib.

AE: *Please feel free to offer any other reflections, advice, or comments!*

HA: If I am to mention one single principle that had the most impact on my life and associates, it will be that of pure intention (*niyyah*) for the sake of Allah alone. Having pure intention enables you to be free of the need for credit or reward from anyone, allowing you to focus more objectively on any decision you make. If you work for the sake of God alone, you will be rewarded abundantly in this life and the hereafter—in this way, you do not lose anything. This is the compass that has guided me all along and enabled me to stick to *al Sirat al Mustaqeem*, the Straight Path.

Notes

1. Along with the interviewee, Dr. Hisham Altalib, his contemporaries Jamal Barzinji and Ahmad Totonji were among the cofounders of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT).