

In Conversation With Prof. Muhammed Haron

Isra Brifkani

INTRODUCTION

Muhammed Haron is a distinguished researcher, lecturer, and author specializing in multiple disciplines, including Islamic studies, Arabic, and international relations. He holds doctoral degrees in Semitic Studies and International Relations from the Free University of Amsterdam and Rhodes University, respectively. Currently, he is the CEO and a senior researcher for the Cape Town–based Al-Jama-ah Party. He is the Director of International Relations at the International Peace College of South Africa and an Associate Researcher at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. He is a prolific author and has authored numerous books, articles, and book chapters discussing various interdisciplinary topics, including Arabic, Islamic Studies, Muslims in South Africa and Malaysia, culture, media, and other issues. He has received and been nominated for various awards and recognitions, including the Educational Opportunities Council and Mellon awards. He was previously affiliated with the University of Botswana, the University of the Western Cape, the Universities of Johannesburg and Pretoria, and Rhodes University in different capacities as a lecturer and researcher. At these institutions, he taught various courses related to Religious Studies: Religion and Development, Sociology of Religion, Religion and Politics/International Relations, Religious Pluralism, and Philosophy of Religion. His research addressed themes that cover “Muslims in Africa” with a particular interest in southern Africa’s Muslim communities. He currently edits the University of Cape Town’s *Annual Review of Islam in Africa* (ARIA) and is also the Editor-in-Chief of Duke University’s *Research Africa Reviews*.

Isra Brifkani: *Can you tell us a bit about yourself, your history, and your family?*

Muhammed Haron: I was raised in a closely knit family with ideas embedded in an Islamic ethos, with my father playing a pivotal role in the community as the local Imam. For everyone in that congregation and Claremont, South Africa, he was a model figure who demonstrated his Muslimness in a vivacious and practical manner. As a result, all of us in the Haron household (and the extended Haron family) were influenced by him. It is, however, important that I mention my mother's key role in our home; she, having been a seamstress, contributed to the house's upkeep and economy.

Though our (Muslim) community was generally against the apartheid system, many conformed to it and weren't public about airing their views. My father and members of his congregation often spoke against the apartheid via the mosque pulpit and the magazine that my father edited, and he taught about the system's vicious outcomes to those who attended madrasa or participated in adult classes (which accommodated both males and females!). He exposed those attending adult classes to North African, Southwest Asian, and South Asian Muslim thinkers. Through these adult programs, he and his congregation created a highly motivated atmosphere; this resulted in the congregation's young members respecting him immensely and always welcoming him to their homes. Furthermore, they cherished him more since he participated in the sporting codes, namely, rugby and cricket. I tagged along and joined the junior rugby and cricket teams in these circumstances.

Having been born into a Cape Muslim/Colored family, I became sensitive to the presence of racism from a young age throughout the 1960s. This was tangibly experienced towards the mid-1960s, when we—that is, our family—were forcibly moved out of our home in lower Claremont, having had to shift to an area on the fringes of the Cape Flats. My father and mother had to build a new home for the family from scratch. This process caused me and my siblings (two sisters) to hold a negative view of the apartheid state, understandably.

While these outcomes were extremely hurtful, it was more than painful when my father was apprehended and held incommunicado by the apartheid state's notorious security branch for 123 days; this event significantly impacted me (and others) who witnessed it. Moreover, when he was murdered whilst in detention, I was not only psychologically devastated and emotionally shattered, but I was mentally hardened against anything and everything associated with this despicable system, one that not only deliberately oppressed millions and that killed several martyred freedom

fighters including my father but that willfully treated every person who was not White in an undignified manner. In these circumstances, I grew up, lived, and schooled. Though my high school life continued rather “normally” adjusting to the years after my father’s murder, the focus shifted to student politics at schools.

IB: *What has growing up and living in apartheid South Africa taught you with regard to the purpose of education in any society?*

MH: Apartheid South Africa constructed an unequal environment in all spheres. Our communities were set apart geographically along racial lines; we were forced apart educationally and discriminated against politically and economically. Though Whites were in the minority, they were the owners of vast arable land; they were the ones who ruled politically, and they were those who controlled the economy. All other racial communities were required to unquestionably abide by and conform to this bigoted, cold-hearted, politically engineered scheme.

The apartheid authorities thus calculatingly constructed an educational environment that propped up its prejudiced plans. Among the strategies was to train teachers to think and act passively by conforming to the apartheid teachers’ colleges curriculum. By implication, it meant that all stakeholders (including the learners and parents) had to abide by the schools’ prospectus, one that purposely perpetuated a philosophy of socio-ethnic and cultural discrimination. These were via a constructed system that underscored inequality across the board and in all sectors.

Since all the educational institutions (from preschool establishments to universities) were intentionally set up to serve the interest of each specific racial group, each of them was coerced to act in accordance with apartheid policies. For this reason, I, along with thousands of other school/university-going oppressed learners/students in the 1960s, was forced to attend Colored educational structures; the same applied to the Indians, Africans, and, of course, the Whites. Throughout this period (circa the 1950s–1980s), the apartheid authorities did not allow any mixed educational structures to exist.

Taking into account the setting, the purpose of the apartheid system was to uphold prejudicial practices and attitudes that deeply divided our society; sociologically and psychologically, all of us were affected, and most, if not all, of us at school and university were pressurized to think along racial lines. Because of that, our generation still suffers from apartheid’s impact. However, one should hastily add that with the presence of anti-apartheid organizations within and outside the educational

surroundings, we were conscientious to not hold on to apartheid ideas but constantly critique them. A cohort of teachers taught learners/students to counter these discriminatory practices in schools and other areas where they were prevalent.

So, at many schools, there were—fortunately!—educators that provided a different view of apartheid; their pivotal input helped to shape our minds. Even when I and others had to apply for a permit to attend, for example, the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), that is, an Indian university, that offered academic programs not offered at the University of Western Cape (UWC, that is, the Colored university) or the University of Cape Town (UCT), that is, the predominantly White university, I realized that pursuing studies outside one's ethnic/racial group would help to open one's eyes to apartheid's despicable policies; the authorities, of course, thought that they could keep us all in check through their restrictive educational policies, but little did they realize that it opened up other opportunities such as networking with anti-apartheid student groups (such as the South African Students Organization [1969–1977]). Despite having enforced certain policies, anti-apartheid student bodies, including the Muslim Students Association of South Africa [est. 1974] worked cleverly around these.

IB: *What or who influenced your decision to pursue a career in education?*

MH: When thinking back, I guess it was the following that contributed to where I eventually ended up: Having grown up in a fairly stable Muslim-oriented household with my father as its head during apartheid South Africa, I, along with everyone, experienced the system's adverse effects. These challenging surroundings naturally caused me to adopt a negative attitude toward the apartheid's inequitable practices.

As my high school years drew to a close, I mulled over what career path to choose; this remained a difficult one. At one stage, I considered becoming a social worker and a teacher; at another, I thought of pursuing medicine as another possible path. Despite thinking about all of these options, I remained uncertain. One option was proposed: to join my elder sister abroad and do my A levels before attempting to enter medical school. But this idea was abandoned while thinking about it and when I factored in my mother's situation as a widow. Another viable choice that came to mind was to study locally instead so that I could remain by my mother and sister's side; the idea was an acceptable one. Nevertheless, I had to answer the question: where to study? Since UWC was for Coloreds, it was on my academic menu; but until then, I was still uncertain about what career to follow.

Amidst toying with these options, I should state that among those who influenced me and set me on this academic causeway were a few of my father's friends, especially teachers. When I entered the final two years at school after my father's death, I was coached by some of my father's friends (who were teachers) at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Apart from my father having remained a model when he was around, some of his friends made sure to take his ideas further; they assisted in educating the young generation, of which I was a part; they used the mosque facilities and madrasa as significant educational conduits.

I can thus safely argue that they assisted in shaping my and others' thinking and outlook. At that time (circa 1968–1973), I was tutored and mentored, along with a few other youths who participated in the mosque's extra-mural activities, by my father's active and informed friends/teachers. Let me refer to one example of such a teacher: he was Mr. Ebrahim Davids; he was well schooled and highly influenced by my father. He was very well informed about Islam's basic tenets, and he could fuse these quite ably with the lived conditions in which we were raised.

I and my generation of friends were fortunate that individuals like Ebrahim Davids were around, for they not only educated us religiously but they did so politically. This was an educational experience, if I may generalize, that many youths—except those who were members of the Cape Muslim Youth Movement in Cape Town's Bo-Kaap and its surrounding areas—elsewhere in Greater Cape Town did not have.

But let me mention the other person who was instrumental in causing me always to have a critical mind and whose ideas were thought-provoking whenever I was in his company. He planted critical thoughts within me and made sure that I and others could see the bigger picture as Muslims within the toxic apartheid environment; he was a former Livingstone High School teacher and a former self-educated printer and publisher: Dr. Abu Bakr Fakier. He made sure that we read and discussed some of his cyclostyled articles.

Fakier, however, encouraged us to critically browse through the writings of notable Orientalists such as Professor Hamilton Gibbs and others whose works he had seriously studied and examined; after he read their works, he would point out their brilliance in dissecting specific issues but, at the same, highlight their weak arguments. Since he was an eager School of Oriental and African Studies post-graduate studies student, he always advised us to go that route whenever possible. So, when I completed my BA, I joined UNISA and UCT; at the latter, I registered for my BA

Honors in Religious Studies, and at the former, my BA Honors in Semitics; and after having successfully finished these degrees, I went on to pursue my MA in Religious Studies at UCT. Let me emphasize and state that Fakier was a significant influencer in my academic career.

IB: *Your works reveal a transdisciplinary approach. Please share a snapshot of your journey in academia and what inspired you to pursue various disciplines.*

MH: Turning to my works, I agree that they reveal that I leaned towards adopting a transdisciplinary approach; this may be attributed to my overall interaction with the various interrelated topics, themes that I encountered in the social sciences when I joined UCT's Department of Religious Studies. My curiosity increased as I came across different research areas ranging from bibliographical, biographical, and historical studies to media studies and international relations.

Since the possibilities were vast, if not endless, I zoomed in on the growing Muslim communities that were, by and large, understudied in southern Africa. So, the need to reflect on these became quite acute to unpack; for example, their histories and identities within rapidly changing socio-political and cultural environments were neglected, and these had to be recorded and analyzed.

During these periods, scholars such as Emeritus Professor David Chidester (UCT: Religious Studies) and Emeritus Professor Peter Vale (Rhodes University: International Relations) contributed to my insights into the role of theory in understanding religion and international relations. When I began undertaking serious research, the works/texts I produced needed theoretical grounding and may not be viewed as path-breaking studies; they were rather descriptive projects that laid the foundation for further detailed research.

I recall that when I started to compile my bibliographies (that is, the essays and books) to be used as tools for further research, I consciously did that so that emerging researchers or even established scholars need not "reinvent the wheel" but use them as their standard reference texts/essays. The purpose for publishing them targeted the scholars and researchers; they were to be viewed as significant research companions that would assist them in seeing the glaring gaps in the area. In addition, they were perhaps considered reliable reference texts that would cause them to revisit and expand the researched topic, and, more importantly, use analytical tools to assist scholars and researchers in obtaining a better sense of the topic being explored.

When one returns to the undergrad program at UDW, it is evident that the respected professor did not draw on the available theoretical tools, ones that were functional and operative in the Humanities and the Social Sciences; he seems to have been quite contented with the historical approach and with what he had prepared and shared with those of us who registered for his fresh Islamic Studies program. I doubt whether he realized the extent to which he deprived us of a more insightful appreciation and a better interpretation of an expanding field.

As students and emerging researchers, we were restricted in understanding Islamic Studies as a discipline by viewing it through historical lenses. While the approach was appreciated at the time, I became acutely aware that as I continued my studies (elsewhere), it needed to be more flexible; it was open to other approaches and theories. No mention was made of their relevance when pursuing research, and both theories and methods were not given much stress. Since this was a new UDW program, the professor was experimenting with what he offered.

Later in my studies, I was exposed to different understandings of religion; more importantly, I learned about various methods as I engaged with major and minor themes in religion. The spin-off of this was positive; it caused me to explore numerous theoretical approaches. Since I was interested in diverse fields, these approaches ignited an academic desire to consider various areas.

So, in my wide-ranging research interests and the interconnections among the themes and disciplines, I was stimulated to draw from these various approaches and theories; the ideas were to demonstrate and prove my findings. In this manner, if I may make this claim, I opened research pathways for others to pursue and examine further. Let me end this question by saying that on two occasions my bibliographical studies stimulated other researchers to compile related ones; they even requested to co-compile bibliographical essays; for me, these were examples that underscored that my research bore fruit and added value to the bibliographical studies sector.

IB: *You have authored numerous books and manuscripts covering diverse topics and issues, including African Islam, Arabic studies, health and development in Africa, and the role of media. What do you consider to be your most significant works and why?*

MH: Indeed, I have worked on several projects over the years, and to date, I continue along this research pathway. The posed question is not easy to answer, and this is for two simple reasons: (a) as a scholar, I have had and continue to show an interest in several fields. Since that is the case, I was

never able to focus on one area of specialization satisfactorily; and I thus spread my tentacles across disciplines with the hope of making a scholarly mark; and (b) having covered a few areas, I enjoyed crossing the disciplinary boundaries since—for me—they are interrelated and do shed light in a direct and even in an oblique way.

Going back to the 1980s when I was teaching Arabic at UWC, I and my colleague with whom I penned the three books related to Arabic teaching felt the need for a suitable series, ones that covered the basics of (First Steps in) Arabic Grammar in a simple manner. However, a few books were circulating on the subject, and we believed they did not fill the needs, so we thus worked on this series. Two were published and reprinted more than once; they also went through second editions. Despite the proliferation of related publications, the series remains successful from a purely linguistic dimension. I can confidently state that we made a breakthrough with the two volumes not only in South Africa but elsewhere too.

In the previous section, reference was made to my bibliographical publications; both were pivotal publications as key reference works in two distinct areas. Bibliographically, they do not just contain a simple catalog of entries, but they have been accompanied by annotations that make them unique and useful within the bibliographical arena. While the one that zoomed in on South Africa's Muslim community received an honorary mention at African Studies Association in the USA, the other that concentrated on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission received an ASIAB award for the best bibliography in South Africa in 2009.

It was thus highly pleasing to me when I received this acknowledgment by a notable USA organization for one and an award for the other by a South African organization; in fact, these recognitions were welcome since I did not formally study specific courses related to this well-established field.

Amidst my passion for Arabic and bibliographical studies, I also had a keen interest in exploring themes and topics in international relations (IR). At the first international conference that I attended in LA, California, in 1988, I presented a paper that focused on South Africa with Middle Eastern (that is, North African and Southwest Asian) countries at the Middle East Studies Association of North America. Attending this conference I gained tangible evidence that I desired not only to know but to explore the type of relationships that were conveniently forged between apartheid South Africa and selected states in the Muslim heartlands. Up until then (circa the late 1980s–early 1990s), there was no serious publication that highlighted apartheid South Africa's relations with Middle Eastern nation-states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia; and, in addition to this, there were

no studies or reports regarding its relations with Southeast Asian countries. A few gave attention to South Asian states, especially India, but these were superficial studies.

For this reason, I decided to shift the attention to Malaysia, a country that was one of the Asian tigers in the 1990s and one with which South Africa slowly strengthened ties. In the process, I wrote essays and edited work on South Africa–Malaysia relations before completing a book project based on my doctoral research at Rhodes University during the mid-2000s. Years thereafter, I was approached by the Indonesian embassy to co-edit two books on Indonesia–South Africa ties; these were completed in 2019 and 2021, respectively.

On the whole, these IR publications (within the South African academic environment) placed me in a unique position as one of the few IR specialists that managed to complete studies on two neglected Southeast Asian countries, namely, Malaysia and Indonesia.

IB: *What do you see as the greatest challenges to education in Muslim societies and contexts?*

MH: Though one is not familiar with every Muslim community across the African continent nor all of those societies in the Muslim heartlands, all of them faced and continue to encounter challenges; some of these are common across all compared to others that are distinct from one another. When one assesses the contemporary 21st century period, it is evident that we all reside in an ever-changing environment and live in a post-modern Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) context. In this context, all of us are aware of Artificial Intelligence's (AI) role in knowledge production and other areas.

As one scans each Muslim community in different parts of the African continent, factoring in both the 4IR context and AI as an instrument of change, one becomes aware of the challenges that skilled human resources encounter. In addition, one also observes the lack of resources at institutions of higher learning that (are supposed to) satisfactorily serve these communities and the acute absence of concrete development plans that act as springboards as these communities face the future; this is despite the African Union's ambitious 2063 Agenda.

If one evaluates the institutions of higher learning in parts of Africa and compares them to those in the Asian and Western European universities, then one notes the extent to which they fall short of the academic standards; one too observes that they lag far behind these in various sectors (e.g., lack of equipment in labs for scientific research). In fact, one is of the opinion that their governments and national philanthropists should pursue

a proactive role by increasing these institutions' subsidies and by investing handsomely so that they may transform the African nations' conditions; alongside this input, they should give due attention to their national assets/institutions in order to put their institutions on a competitive level with others around the globe. Alas, from what one could detect, this is not to be.

As Africa inches its way to 2063, one poses the question to what degree have the continent's governments and academic institutions charted out joint development plans to achieve those goals listed on the 2063 Agenda? Currently, African nations (some with sizeable Muslim communities) are in debt; instead of using their available resources to transform themselves, the planners opt to approach the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) for soft loans; they think that these would solve their problems and they do not realize that doing this causes them to be dependent rather than independent and this plunges them into further debt, thus resulting in their academic institutions being short-changed and suffering academically, financially, and otherwise.

The challenges that societies in the Muslim heartlands and Africa's Muslim communities face are enormous; it is an uphill battle. However, despite the nature of these challenges that include other factors such as climate change, it is possible to overcome these if the governments demonstrate their political will to change and to work in the interest of their societies and diverse socio-ethnic and racial communities.

That said, one states that they should be able to overcome if, inter alia,

(a) the governments set aside exact budgets to transform the higher education landscapes tangibly; via this, they can cause their institutions to compete with others globally, and they may also be able to expand their footprints through partnerships. In this regard, the Gulf States such as UAE and Qatar, and Southeast Asian states such as Singapore and Malaysia have shown the way;

(b) the higher education institutions catalog realistic and doable objectives within their short/intermediate/long time frames; these should be done with achievable visions and mission statements. The latter two must be worded in such a way that the institutions strive hard—even if there is a change of academic executive guard—to reach them within their realistic timelines; one may take a leaf from South African and even some Nigerian universities that are academically productive;

(c) the staff at these institutions view their posts as other than “glorified” ones; they should see them as ones that dedicate their services to their respective communities and, in turn, their nations. In other words, despite their meager salary packages and resources, they should pursue their teaching and research with personal passion; in this manner, they should be able to prove that they can achieve goals with limited resources; and

(d) the research projects that are undertaken should help the governments to plan appropriately for the future; for example, they should undertake a population census that would result—as best as possible—in offering accurate statistics; with these in hand, the government statisticians and academics should be able to chart out a reasonable futuristic plan that the generations to come can not only benefit from but build upon as they encounter future developments.

IB: *What is the role of higher education in addressing some of these challenges?*

MH: The higher education (HE) sector is vital in a nation's transformation; the HE institutions' presence and collective contribution should not be understated or underestimated. As mentioned in the previous section, one is of the view that if funds are invested in these institutions, then general and particular goals can easily be achieved.

The HE area should be permitted to be academically flexible within the broad educational arena. All efforts should be made with the support of the universities' unions and interested stakeholders not to force them to be restrictive but to be open to all sorts of research projects. However, before doing that, their academic researchers should help identify a list of primary research projects and a catalog of secondary ones. If the proposed project's objectives have been meaningfully charted out and all aspects cataloged and outlined, then the university administration should channel funds to cover the necessary costs associated with the identified primary project; and, in this manner, the minor and major goals would be achieved within the set timelines; and the same would apply to the secondary lists.

Governments should give their flagship academic institutions leeway to pursue diverse research projects. Such projects would yield the necessary results, which would work in the nation's interest. What should happen is that the universities' academic staff should make a concerted effort to apply their minds collectively on each of the projects so that the environment in which they operate remains visibly vibrant and perpetually productive; and so that positive transformation is witnessed within short timeframes. These should not only be for the short term but, more so, for the long-term and the distant future.

IB: *It is also evident from your work that you adopt a strong activist role. Can you tell us more about how you conceive your role as an academic activist?*

MH: Somehow, I never viewed myself as an academic activist. But since this question was asked and now that I have given it some thought, perhaps there is a glimpse of that in my research; something that I thought was not evident nor revealing. Be that as it may, coming from a conscious

anti-apartheid Muslim community, I was and still am concerned about our community's identity within a predominantly secular society. During the early stages of my career, there was a paucity of scholars/researchers that produced studies on South Africa's Muslims; the statistics showed that there were not more than five Muslims who managed to undertake research.

I have had and continue to have an interest in our community's identity and contributions toward the South African nation. I have been and continue to be passionate about the research projects that I have undertaken; many of these were pursued without requesting funding from structures such as the National Research Foundation, for a few reasons. One of the reasons for not requesting monies from established philanthropic foundations/institutions was that these funds would tie one down, forcing one to observe the funding institution's rules and regulations.

Since I formally left academia, I did not abandon any of my research projects; some of those that I have on my list, I continued with them. Though I have completed two, the others remain in the queue. Meanwhile, a few that were not originally on my research agenda became part of my current research schedule; being a seasoned, established researcher, conducting meaningful research remains a part of my life, and I guess I would not want to leave or shake it off for now, since there is much that must still be explored, researched, and published.

IB: *Can you share with us any of your current and future projects?*

MH: I have been working on different levels: the first is a bibliographical compilation of books, essays, theses, and online sites that cover Shaykh Yusuf's life and ideas. The second is similar to the first, except that attention is given to Muslim Personal Law in South Africa; in other words, this is an annotated bibliographical compilation that includes books, essays, and theses. The third is a book-length bibliographical compilation on southern African Muslim communities; unlike my 1997 study that only concentrated on South Africa's Muslims, this study wishes to include members of the Southern African Development Community where Muslim communities reside.

The fourth text concentrates on the South African Muslim community. It may be considered an expansion of an extended essay that reflected upon and examined different aspects of the community's identity. Moreover, since I have written a sizeable number of essays, it intends to draw upon and weave in ideas from these publications. The purpose is not to regurgitate

earlier essays' contents but to provide fresh insights into understanding and appreciating this community within a secular South African setting. The fifth project in the making is the biography of my father; even though I completed a thesis on him during the mid-1980s and wrote numerous short and long essays on him, the book-length biography hopes to weave in many new materials that appeared subsequent to my dated study. It thus places him within a socio-historical political context and then unpacks his life within a secular apartheid environment.

The sixth book project plans to return to IR with chapters reflecting on South Africa's relations with nation-states in the Muslim heartlands. At present, it remains on my research agenda and in the research queue. The seventh book I am working on is a critical reflection on the Cape Muslim manuscripts, an area that remains understudied and neglected. Materials (manuscripts and secondary sources) for this have been compiled. The eighth book project returns to Abu Layth As-Samarqandi, whose works I examined and studied at the turn of the 1990s. I published at least three related essays but intended to expand on these, factoring in his tafsir and other related publications/manuscripts. The ninth project, a book I am co-editing and busy with is the IRCICA-AwqafSA-UWC Congress papers; in September 2022, these three institutions held their Congress in Cape Town, and I was the Congress Director. Because of the key position I played throughout and before the event, I was given the task of editing the proceedings and roped in another southern African scholar to assist in the process.

My research agenda is quite loaded, and if Allah wills, I hope to complete all of these before I eventually close my eyes and return to our Lord. So, I pray that I remain healthy; and I beseech that the Almighty gives me the academic stamina to continue to produce each of the mentioned planned publications so that subsequent generations may be inspired and benefit from them, and I hope that those who read them or use them as research material will expand and build on them.

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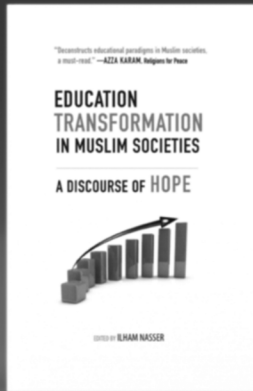
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ILHAM NASSER, Ed.

Ilham Nasser is Director of Empirical Research in Human Development, part of the International Institute of Islamic Thought's Advancing Education in Muslim Societies initiative. She has spent over 25 years in research addressing children's development, teacher education, and professional development and is the author of peer-reviewed books, journal articles, and book chapters.

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