In Conversation with Dr. Tesneem Alkiek

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INTRODUCTION

Tesneem obtained her undergraduate degree in Early Christianity and Islamic Studies from the University of Michigan. She went on to complete her Ph.D. in Islamic Studies at Georgetown University with a focus on Islamic law. Tesneem currently serves as the Director of Editorial Strategy at Yaqeen Institute. She is also a Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Rutgers University-Camden.

Isra Brifkani: *Please tell us about yourself, your academic background, and your role at Yaqeen Institute. What initially drew you to work with Yaqeen Institute, and what aspects of its mission resonate most with you?*

Tesneem Alkiek: I have always been curious about religion, and Islam in particular. Although I began my undergraduate studies intending to pursue a career in medicine, I was quickly drawn to the academic study of Christianity and decided to major in Near Eastern Studies. During my studies, I noticed the tension that some of my Christian classmates experienced when engaging with historical-critical methods. That made me wonder how a similarly rigorous academic approach would affect my understanding of Islam. This led me to take courses on Islam, and unsurprisingly, I encountered many of the same tensions. I saw Muslim classmates wrestling with doubts as they tried to reconcile their faith with the critical frameworks presented in the classroom. Realizing this prompted me to shift course. I decided to forgo medicine and instead pursue graduate studies in Islamic Studies, with the specific intention of engaging these questions directly. I wanted to study the tradition both critically and faithfully.

About two years into my Ph.D. program, I came across Dr. Omar Suleiman's announcement about the launch of the Yaqeen Institute. The mission immediately resonated with me. Here was an organization that sought to address the intellectual challenges Muslims face today, while remaining grounded in the Islamic tradition. I became involved early on

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and have remained committed ever since. My role at Yaqeen has evolved over the years, but my purpose has stayed the same: to approach Islam holistically and rigorously, to ask difficult questions, and to seek meaningful answers rooted in the timeless principles of our faith.

IB: *How does Yaqeen identify its key research areas?*

TA: Yaqeen takes a long-term, strategic approach to identifying its research areas, revisiting them annually as part of a broader organizational planning process. This is guided by our GOST framework (Goals, Objectives, Strategies, and Tactics), which helps ensure that our content remains aligned with our mission and responsive to the needs of our audience. Each year, when we review our overarching goals, we identify the most relevant target audiences, which shift in response to trends, needs, or priorities. Once the audience is defined, we develop a content strategy by drawing on both qualitative insights and quantitative data to identify gaps, challenges, and key areas of interest. This allows us to produce research that is not only academically rigorous but also timely and practical for the groups we aim to serve.

IB: *What are some of the key research areas that Yaqeen Institute is currently focusing on, and what makes these areas particularly relevant today?*

TA: In recent years, several recurring themes have emerged as key areas of focus for Yaqeen's research. Topics such as family and gender, Islamophobia, and sectarianism continue to surface as major points of concern and tension within the Muslim community. As part of our content planning process, we rely on annual surveys and other data sources to gain a deeper understanding of these issues. This allows us to assess both the challenges our current audience is facing and the areas where there is potential for education and spiritual growth. Looking ahead, we plan to release several targeted calls for papers to deepen our research in these areas, while continuing to welcome submissions that align with our broader mission. This dual approach enables us to remain responsive to pressing issues while also fostering a comprehensive, long-term scholarly vision.

IB: *Please describe for our readers some of the approaches that Yaqeen Institute utilizes to ensure a diversity of perspectives, including those of Muslim women, are included and represented within its research.*

TA: From the outset, Yaqeen has been intentional about engaging a diversity of perspectives in both the development and review of its research. Visitors to our website are often surprised (sometimes even confused) to

find scholars from a wide range of backgrounds, orientations, and affiliations represented side by side. We consider that a strength. We are proud to work with men and women who bring a variety of scholarly traditions and institutional affiliations.

We have made it a priority to actively recruit scholars, writers, and reviewers who offer distinct viewpoints and areas of expertise. This ensures that our work is not only rigorous but reflective of the rich diversity within the Muslim community. We also regularly gather feedback through surveys, focus groups, and data analysis to gain insight into whose voices might still be missing and where we can improve. This enables us to enhance the intellectual depth of our work by drawing on a diverse range of insights, all committed to the same mission.

IB: *What are some of the evaluation methods that Yaqeen Institute utilizes to assess the effectiveness and impact of its work?*

TA: We use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the effectiveness and impact of our work. Alongside standard metrics like reach, downloads, and engagement, we prioritize understanding how our content is being applied in real-world contexts (e.g., classrooms, family conversations) and the impact it has on individuals and communities.

One of our most innovative tools is the Compass quiz, which is built on Yaqeen's BASIC framework (Belief, Actions, Spiritual Connection/Behavior, Institution, and Contribution). This framework represents a comprehensive model for understanding Muslim religiosity, extending beyond simple checklists of practices. The Compass quiz is the first tool of its kind, designed to assess an individual's standing across five interconnected dimensions of faith.

What makes Compass especially powerful is not just the depth of insight it provides into the religious lives of users, but how we use that data to serve people better. Based on a person's quiz results, we can recommend content that aligns with their specific needs. This creates a tailored user experience, powered by algorithms that match content to individual profiles in a constructive way.

On a broader level, Compass data helps us identify recurring challenges and trends across our audience. This allows us to refine our content strategy and create resources that are both evidence-based and spiritually relevant. In short, it is a tool that not only measures impact but actively enhances it by making our content more personalized and responsive to the diverse needs of the Muslim community.

IB: *With the rise of different modes and modalities of learning, what pedagogical strategies does Yaqeen employ to make knowledge engaging and relevant for different age groups and educational backgrounds?*

TA: One of the core principles guiding our content strategy at Yaqeen is meeting people where they are by offering content they need in the formats they prefer. We recognize that individuals engage with information in different ways, depending on their age, background, and learning style. That is why we take a multi-modal approach to content creation, producing everything from in-depth research papers and classroom-ready curricula to videos, infographics, blog posts, and more. Each product is tailored with a specific audience in mind, making Islamic knowledge accessible and engaging for its intended users.

This year, we introduced new formats based on audience feedback, including a student and family guide to accompany our Ramadan video series. We know many people watch these episodes together, whether as families or in classrooms, so our curriculum team created interactive reflection questions to help viewers process and discuss the material more deeply. Our video content, in general, is crafted to be visually engaging and narrative-driven, using storytelling and clear visuals to make complex ideas relatable and memorable. At the same time, we continue to invest in curriculum development, offering structured lesson plans and teaching tools for middle and high school classrooms. These resources are designed to help educators foster critical thinking, meaningful dialogue, and spiritual growth.

Looking ahead, we will also be launching a dedicated sub-platform for a more niche academic audience. This space will focus on publishing in-depth research papers, long-form essays, and scholarly commentaries designed to advance discourse within academic and intellectual circles, while remaining grounded in the Islamic tradition. Across all these formats, our guiding principle is to make knowledge both meaningful and relevant. Whether someone is a high school student, a college professor, or a parent seeking trustworthy resources, our goal is to provide content that resonates with their context and supports their journey of faith and learning.

IB: *What are some challenges facing Muslim communities today that Yaqeen is actively working to address through research and educational initiatives?*

TA: Muslim communities today experience a wide range of challenges, so we are constantly working to identify which issues are most urgent and

where we can have the greatest impact. Through a combination of content strategy, community engagement, and data analysis, we aim to prioritize topics that are both timely and consequential.

One major challenge we have been focusing on, for example, is sectarianism. During the past few years, it has become apparent how damaging internal divisions can be. The lack of unity within our communities has come at a high cost, whether in the form of disjointed responses to crises like Gaza, tensions within our mosques, weakened political engagement, or even strain within our own homes.

Yaqeen is committed to addressing this issue head-on through a range of initiatives: original research papers, reflections and commentaries, public lectures, and data-driven studies on the impacts of disunity. Beyond content, we are actively working with a broad spectrum of individuals and organizations, fostering collaboration across ideological and institutional lines, and bridging divides in how we build and disseminate knowledge.

IB: *What is Yaqeen Institute's overarching vision for future Muslims and intellectual discourse within Muslim societies?*

TA: Yaqeen's overarching vision is to cultivate a future where Muslims are confident in their faith and equipped to engage thoughtfully with the world around them, both spiritually and intellectually. For our general audience, our goal is to reach as many people as possible with content that helps dispel doubts and nurture conviction. We recognize that faith is often sustained through accessible, everyday touchpoints, such as a brief reminder or video. These pieces may seem simple, but they can have a lasting impact on someone's relationship with their faith.

For our academic audience and thought leaders, we aim to build a vibrant intellectual space where Muslims can produce research that is both groundbreaking and rooted in the Islamic tradition. We aim to be the premier platform for work that thoughtfully addresses the most pressing questions of our time, faithfully, critically, and creatively. Our vision is to make this research exciting and rigorous, while also engaging enough to resonate with readers outside the academy. Above all, we aim to establish a benchmark for Islamic literature in English that is not only insightful but also beautifully written. We want readers to walk away thinking, *"That was deeply informative—and I genuinely enjoyed reading it too."*

IB: *Looking back on your journey with Yaqeen so far, what accomplishments or moments stand out as especially meaningful for you?*

TA: One of the most meaningful aspects of working with Yaqeen has been witnessing the growth of the organization, not just in size, but in clarity and structure. Over the years, we have become much more organized and intentional in how we operate. It has been advantageous to see how our annual planning process has evolved. What used to be a loose roadmap has evolved into a sophisticated, strategic effort that reflects deep thought, collaboration, and a long-term vision. That growth did not happen overnight. What also makes me proud is that we have never been complacent. There has never been a moment when we have said, "We have made it." Instead, there has always been a collective drive to improve, to reach more people, and push ourselves to produce work that is both impactful and faithful to our mission. Being part of a team that consistently seeks excellence has been incredibly fulfilling.

IB: *Lastly, what message and advice would you like to share with the next generation of researchers and educators who are working towards advancing education in Muslim societies?*

TA: One of Yaqeen's greatest strengths has been bringing together people with varying educational backgrounds, life experiences, and expertise. It has shaped the way we approach our work, and it has certainly shaped me personally. Many of my own perspectives on key issues have evolved through conversations with others during the ideation and content development process. At times, working with so many different voices can feel like a constraint. It slows things down and forces tough conversations. However, in reality, that friction is often where the most meaningful growth happens. The final product is always stronger, more thoughtful, and more impactful because of the range of perspectives that went into it. What I have learned from this process is the importance of actively seeking out voices different from your own. Embrace constructive feedback, even when it is difficult to hear. Sometimes, even antagonistic criticism can carry insights worth reflecting on. That's how we grow, and that is how we share knowledge that speaks to our diverse communities.