Editorial:

Conducting Research on Muslims

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The influx of migrants from mainly Muslim-majority countries to the West, combined with the rise of radical Islamist groups violently challenging the existing political order in the Middle East and North Africa, present both challenges and opportunities for researchers. In this regard, there are various studies on Islam and Muslims from different perspectives and using differing methodologies (Kuru 2019; Cesari 2018: Gurses and Ozturk 2020; Ozturk 2018; Henne 2016; Mandaville 2003).

The aim of this special section is to identify and examine methodological opportunities for conducting research on Muslims, while also noting challenges and uncertainties. The focus is on methodological and ethical challenges encountered while conducting both qualitative and quantitative research in increasingly unstable socio-political environments. The section examines how researchers address such challenges, and brings together scholars whose research involves studying aspects of Muslim politics from various disciplinary backgrounds. The objective is to identify ethical and practical challenges involved in studying Islam, share insights and experiences of researchers from the Middle East and North Africa, and develop improved techniques to collect good quality data from Muslim groups and societies. The overall aim is arrive at a better understanding of the ethics, politics, and responsibilities involved in studying Islam and Muslims in our age: one characterized by a defiant and resurgent faith.

In the first contribution, Ahmet Erdi Ozturk and Deina Abdelkader examine challenges faced by social scientists researching Islam and Muslim populations. They focus on conducting ethnographic research and identify fundamental challenges. Their study argues that there are two main problems: ontologically, and in regard to the general context and characteristics of a specific time period – that is, the early 21st century – that social scientists need to take into account when researching Islam and Muslims. Problems in this respect are linked to the nature of the time period, which pertain to issues of politics, security and accessibility as well as ontological problems relating to gender, inclusion or exclusion, language and culture.

The second contribution, by Jeffrey Haynes, briefly surveys his research on The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC) and Muslims. Haynes found in the course of his research into UNAOC, that Muslims he interviewed believed that the *modus operandi* and aims of the UNAOC would divide not unite the very constituencies – that is, the West and Muslims – that the organization was created to assist.

The third article, by Peter Henne, notes that there are significant ethical and pragmatic issues that researchers encounter in quantitative security studies involving Muslims. From an ethical perspective,

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many such studies appear to denigrate and negatively stereotype Muslims. The latter are regarded as a problem to be solved, while such research often also seeks to justify the expansion of US power globally. Henne also points out that it is often difficult to collect useful data on security issues in many Muslim countries. On the one hand, it is not appropriate to abandon positivist analysis, as well-done quantitative studies may be the best tools available to counter Muslims' negative stereotypes. On the other hand, the researcher should not ignore important security topics involving Muslim states merely because the available data are not as robust as we would like. Henne presents a two-pronged approach which seeks to address these issues without ignoring crucial aspects of international relations. He asserts that scholars should follow best methodological practices to avoid problematic ethical issues, while being open to adopt new standards and novel tools to accommodate having to use deficient data.

In the fourth contribution, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor argues that research on Muslim in Britain and in the West more generally is often made more complex by the existence of particular social hierarchies and popular discourse that often identifies Muslims as the 'different other'. Working within a feminist-pragmatist epistemological framework, Cheruvallil-Contractor collects methodological reflections from a decade of associated research. She highlights the need for research paradigms that are grounded in partnership and positionality, and which maintain intellectual rigour while also being ethically accountable to the people who are the subjects of our research.

The final article is by Jonas Otterberck. He argues that to understand where to find the study object 'Islam' and to address it appropriately, researchers in Islamic studies must be both theoretically and methodologically aware of the importance and implications of power practices. Discussing enunciations associated with Islam, problems of reification, the importance of power, the cognitive power of naming, and the semiotic resources mobilised by enunciations, Otterberck proposes ways to operationalise encompassing theories articulated by Talal Asad and Michel Foucault. His article has a particular focus on the importance of understanding semiotic resources, while also providing an account of the personal journey of the author while trying to relate constructively to his research field over the last 30 years.

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