

## HISTORICAL STUDIES

## Islamic Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study

By Sabine Schmidtke • Published 2017

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Andrea Kane

Professor Sabine Schmidtke at the launch of *The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition: A Digital Portal* held at the German Residence in New York City on April 11, 2017

**T**his interview with *Sabine Schmidtke*, Professor in the School of *Historical Studies*, was conducted by Haytham Samir and Ahmad Shaker and originally published in Arabic as “al-Dirāsāt al-islāmiyya fi Princeton,” Markaz Namā’ li-l-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt, May 18, 2017,

[www.nama-center.com/m/ActivitieDatials.aspx?ID=40833](http://www.nama-center.com/m/ActivitieDatials.aspx?ID=40833).

Recently, Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi (in an article “Ṣan‘ā’ I and the Origins of the Qur’ān,” *Der Islam: Journal of the History and Culture of the Middle East* 87 (2012), pp. 1-129) divided representatives of modern scholarship of the Qur’ān into four classes: traditionalists, neo-traditionalists, revisionists, and skeptics. What is your standpoint on this classification? And where do you locate Princeton on the map of modern *Islamic studies*?

Thank you both for the opportunity to talk about Islamic studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, and about my own work, which is primarily concerned with the intellectual history of the Islamic world during the Middle Ages/late Middle Ages/early modern period, i.e., roughly between the ninth through the eighteenth centuries. While most of the literary material I am concerned with (mostly in manuscript form) originated with Muslim thinkers, the literary products of Jewish and Christian authors (typically written in Arabic) are intimately linked to the wider surroundings. Disregarding denominational borders is increasingly becoming the norm in the scholarly investigation of the intellectual history of the Muslim world as it is a well-established fact by now that the intellectual history of Muslims, Jews, and Christians was closely entangled over many centuries in the Middle East.

Sadeghi's and Goudarzi's distinction between "traditionalists", "neo-traditionalists", "revisionists" and "skeptics" is certainly a helpful one to classify the main trends among scholars focusing on the fields of Qur'ānic studies and early Islamic history. As for myself, these classifications are irrelevant for what I am engaged with since I am not working on the history of early Islam and the Qur'ān. Whereas scholars of the Qur'ān and the early history of Islam are faced with a dearth of primary, contemporary sources—forcing them to interpret the invariably later (Muslim) sources in one way or another as has been aptly described by the terminology introduced by Sadeghi and Goudarzi—scholars working on later periods, especially the early modern period, are faced with a large amount of relevant primary sources that often poses the reverse problem of handling large quantities of (mostly manuscript) sources, provided it is possible to get hold of them. Many manuscript collections in remote places of the Islamic world (and beyond) are still largely inaccessible (e.g., Indian libraries) or their holdings have only insufficiently been catalogued.

There is nothing like a Princeton School when it comes to Islamic studies. Rather, the scholars working here, either at Princeton University, or, in my case, at the Institute for Advanced Study, represent a large and diverse spectrum within the field of [Near Eastern studies](#), ranging from scholars specializing in the early and classical periods of Islam to those working on the early modern and modern Middle East, each one with an entirely different focus (e.g., intellectual history, social and economic history, or political history).

As for the Institute for Advanced Study where I am working (the IAS is completely independent from Princeton University), it has quite a long tradition by now in Islamic and Near Eastern studies, and the focus of study has changed significantly over the years. The first appointment in the field at the Institute was [Oleg Grabar](#) (1929–2011), who served as Professor of Islamic and Near Eastern studies from 1990 until his retirement in 1998—he was a specialist in Islamic art. After Grabar came [Patricia Crone](#) (1945–2015), Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Near Eastern studies from 1997–2014, who specialized in Qur'ānic studies, early Islamic history, and Iranian studies. I was appointed as [Patricia Crone's](#) successor in 2014 and the focus of my scholarly work is, as I explained before, the intellectual history of the Islamic World. I have worked intensively on aspects of Muslim kalām, including its reception by Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages, on Islamic philosophy, and other aspects of Muslim intellectual history, including Shii Islam (both Zaydi and Twelver Shii). At present, I am engaged in a large-scale project to assemble the entire [Zaydi manuscript tradition](#), which is widely dispersed and for the most part poorly documented, in a single repository and thus to provide comprehensive and systematic open access to its literary tradition for scholars worldwide, regardless of whether they are based in Europe or in North America, in Yemen or elsewhere in the Middle East. The project, a joint initiative by the Institute for Advanced Study in partnership with the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, will bring about a "digital repatriation"—it will return these manuscripts to Yemenis, Zaydis, and Muslims throughout the world who cannot access them because they are either destroyed or housed in closed access Euro-American archives.

The Institute for Advanced Study is a research institution. While we do not train students, neither undergraduate nor graduate students, we regularly host "Members" for a term or a year, i.e., scholars who are otherwise affiliated with other academic institutions but spend some time at the Institute to pursue their research. Since 1990, the Institute has hosted about 150 international scholars in the field of Islamic and Near Eastern studies, among them many scholars from the Islamic world (Oman, Lebanon, Iran, etc.). (For a list of past Members at the IAS, see [www.hs.ias.edu/islamic\\_past\\_members](http://www.hs.ias.edu/islamic_past_members).) The selection process is

highly competitive and the Members in each field come with their own research projects, which need to be linked to the immediate research interests of the relevant professor representing the field. Over the past twenty-five years, the Institute has supported a large variety of research in Near Eastern studies, including fields such as Ottoman and Iranian studies, Eastern Christianity, pre-Islamic Middle East, etc.

*Muslim scholars are accustomed to depicting Western scholarship in Islamic studies as “Orientalist.” You believe in the validity of this depiction today? Also, some scholars use the term “post-Orientalism” instead of “Orientalism” in describing recent scholarship in Islamic studies to avoid the term’s negative connotations. Do you think any of these terms describe scholarship nowadays? Haytham Mujahem described you as an “Orientalist” in an article published in the Al-Hayat newspaper—what do you think about that?*

Depictions such as “Orientalist” or “post-Orientalist” are not very useful in my eyes, and I find that the discussion around such terms often distracts our attention from issues that are far more important. I define myself as a historian of ideas, with a focus on the intellectual history of the Muslim (or Islamicate, to use Hodgson’s cumbersome but nonetheless useful term) world as a religiocultural entity that includes not only Muslim thought but also Jewish and Christian thought in the region. Given the close interactions between the representatives of the different denominations who all used Arabic as their cultural language, it would seem inappropriate to me to focus only on one denomination, while disregarding any other even when the borders between the religious groups were largely blurred when it came to the “rational sciences.” Moreover, although I have sympathies for colleagues who struggle between their personal religious convictions and their scholarly approach to their object of study, and although I am sensitive to the religious dimension of the objects of my study and what they possibly mean for the believer, I don’t find that my personal religious convictions are relevant in any way for my scholarly work. In fact, the methodological toolkits I regularly employ and the overall approach in my work to my object of study would be very much the same if I were to study aspects of the Christian intellectual history of Europe during the Middle Ages.

*You have visited the Middle East many times and many universities there as well. Generally speaking, what are the main differences between Islamic studies in the Islamic world and in Western academia?*

Rather than looking into differences between Islamic studies in the Islamic world and in Western academia, I would like to point out the many commonalities that by far exceed the differences. The beauty of Islamic studies is that this is a very international field with a large degree of collaboration among scholars beyond political and denominational borders. The primary objects of our scholarly efforts, the manuscripts, are dispersed all over the world—the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe and Russia, as well as Western Europe and North America—and so are the scholars, Muslims and non-Muslims, believers and agnostics, and yet we all share a deep and honest appreciation and sense of responsibility for our cultural heritage. It is this common sense of appreciation and responsibility that turns us into collaborators in a joint effort to preserve and study the intellectual heritage of the past. There are, of course, significant differences in how scholars approach their objects of study from a methodological point of view, but it would be inappropriate in my view to reduce those differences to those of the “Islamic world” and “Western academia.” Muslim scholars have a century-old refined tradition of scholarly approaches aptly described by Franz Rosenthal in his 1947 publication *The Technique and Approach of Muslim Scholarship*, and there are many examples of internationally leading scholars of Islamic studies who have hailed from and worked in different parts of the Islamic world over the course of the twentieth century and up until today—eminent scholars such as Iḥsān ‘Abbās, Muḥammad Taqī Dānīshpazhūh, or Fu’ād Sayyid by way of example. At the same time, scholars trained in the Western academia display a large variety of approaches to their objects of study, and many among them are collaborating closely with colleagues based in Middle Eastern countries.

*How in your opinion will the cooperation between the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and Islamic universities help Islamic studies? Some scholars claim that Muslims are limited to theological rather than descriptive studies. Do you agree?*

When you study the list of former Members at the Institute for Advanced Study in the field of Islamic studies, you will discern the

impressive number of scholars hailing from countries in the Islamic world. So, in a way, the exchange between the Institute in Princeton and representatives of “Islamic universities” is already a living reality. And it is this individual-based approach that the IAS will pursue in the future. In addition to this, I am engaged in numerous collaborative projects with colleagues and academic institutions in the Islamic world and am very eager to strengthen such cooperation over the coming years. One indication of this intensive exchange and cooperation is the numerous translations of my work into Arabic, Persian, and Turkish and my engagement in various editorial projects (especially book series) in different parts of the Islamic world.

As I mentioned before, I don't think that the religious beliefs of any scholar in question should impact—or limit—his/her scholarly performance. In view of this, there is no reason to assume that Muslims would be limited in any way in their abilities to produce excellent scholarship.

*Patricia Crone's focus was directed toward historical approaches to Islam while you are more interested in cultural approaches and in Muslim-Christian relations especially when it comes to the Bible in Arabic. How have the differences in interests and specialization between you and your predecessor Professor Crone affected Islamic studies at the Institute?*

As I mentioned earlier, my own work has a completely different focus from the work of my predecessors, [Oleg Grabar](#) and Patricia Crone. And of course this affects the fields of research that will be prominently studied at IAS over the coming years and decades. However, this has no implications on the selection of Members—the selection is by merit only and each year the best applicants are chosen. For the field of Islamic studies, this means that the IAS will continue to host a large variety of scholarly interests, as was also the case during Oleg's and Patricia's time at the Institute.

*The study of the Bible in Arabic has recently been described as “terra incognita” in view of the international research project initiated by you and other colleagues. Why do you think it remained so for all of these years while other translations have always been important sources for biblical studies?*

The Biblia Arabica project is indeed pure joy, for me at least. One of the challenges until recently was that Arabic translations of the Bible were studied by scholars of Eastern Christianity, Judaic studies, and Islamic studies, with nearly no communication between the representatives of these three groups. Since the project was launched in 2011, this has changed dramatically. The group engaged in the study of the Arabic Bible is a highly international one (scholars come from Egypt, Spain, Germany, the United States, Canada, Belgium, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Lebanon, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, The Netherlands, Morocco, and Israel), and most of us come from different academic fields—Islamic studies, Biblical studies, studies of Eastern Christianity, and Judaic studies—and the exchange among us is an intense one which has already proved extremely fruitful. Apart from the theme issue (Intellectual History of the Islamicate World, volume 2), we have established a book series “Biblia Arabica: Text and Studies,” which is published by Brill Publishers, Leiden (<http://www.brill.com/products/series/biblia-arabica>) and serves as a platform to further overcome the differences between the relevant academic disciplines.

*What are the oldest Arabic manuscripts of the Bible? And what can they tell us about Christianity in pre- and post-Islamic Arabia?*

Whether there were Jewish and Christian Arabic versions of the Bible in pre-Islamic Arabia, and whether these circulated in strictly oral form, or were jotted down as aide-mémoires, or constituted fuller textualized versions, is debated among scholars. Be that as it may—the oldest Arabic Bible translations have come down to us from the eighth century onwards in the process of the Arabicization of Christians and Jews for whom scriptural translation was the initial vehicle in adapting their communal identity to a new world at a time of profound political and cultural change. One of the earliest *dated* manuscripts of the Bible is MS Sinai Arabic 4, completed in 963 C.E., and containing a translation of the Pentateuch, i.e., long after the rise of Islam.

*How problematic is this field of study and how do you expect to deal with this? How will the Biblia Arabica project help these studies? If you want to encourage and motivate researchers to study the Bible in Arabic, what would you tell them?*

The challenges of the field of study involving the Bible in Arabic include the enormous quantity of unexplored manuscript materials that are scattered all over the world. However, this challenge is also the main reason why I would consider this field of study to be such a prominent one. There is an enormous amount of work still to be done and anyone with an explorative mind will find this field extremely attractive.

*Sabine Schmidtke, Professor in the School of Historical Studies since 2014, has played a central role in the exploration of heretofore unedited and unknown theological and philosophical writings. Schmidtke has applied rigorous study to the edition and critical analysis of manuscripts in Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and Persian, and her work extends from Arabic-speaking countries to Israel, Iran, Russia, and Turkey.*

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*By Sabine Schmidtke*

#### IDEAS



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