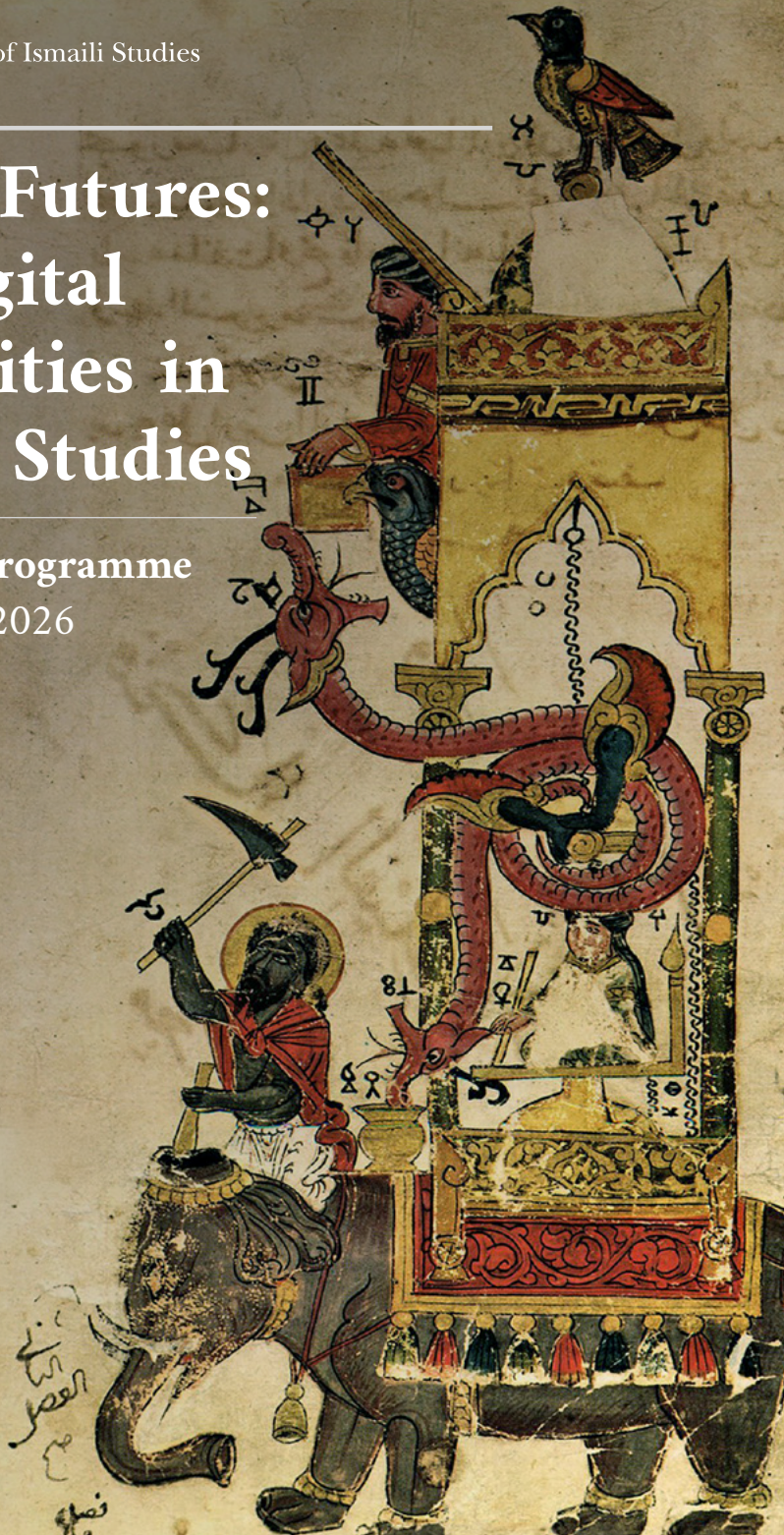




The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Digital Futures: The Digital Humanities in Islamic Studies

Conference Programme
28 – 29 May 2026



Cover Image: Folio from *Kitāb fī maʿrifat al-ḥiyāl al-handasiyya* (Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices), composed by Ismāʿil al-Jazarī (ca. 1136–1206). This specific folio was calligraphed by Farrukh ibn ʿAbd al-Laṭīf and dated 715 AH / 1315 CE (Mamluk period), likely produced in Syria or Iraq. Reproduced under public domain.

Al-Jazarī's 'Elephant Clock', from a folio of *Kitāb fī maʿrifat al-ḥiyāl al-handasiyya* (Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices), composed by Badiʿ al-Zamān Abū'l-ʿIzz Ismāʿil ibn al-Razzāz al-Jazarī (ca. 1136–1206) at the Artuqid court in upper Mesopotamia in 1206.

Al-Jazarī's automaton brings together elements drawn from across the medieval Islamic world and beyond: an Indian elephant, an Arabic chronometric system, a Persian carpet, Byzantine columns, a phoenix at the apex, and Chinese-influenced dragons. Within its mechanism, water-powered tipping bowls, falling balls, and articulated figures together perform the passage of time. Long before the language of 'information systems' or 'interfaces' existed, the 'Elephant Clock' made the abstract — duration, computation, the coordination of moving parts — visible, audible, and legible to its audience.

Eight centuries later, scholars of Islamic Studies once again find themselves working with intricate machines that order knowledge, mediate texts, and make patterns visible. The questions raised by such machines, about authorship and provenance, about whose memory is preserved and whose is flattened, about the relation between the human craftsman and the system that operates beneath the surface, sit at the heart of this conference.



Organising Committee

Name of organising IIS DAR Unit
Ismaili Special Collections Unit (ISCU)
– The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Convenors
Wafi Momin
Muhammad Ali
Rizwan Karim

With support from
Zayn Kassam, Aslisho Qurboniev,
Peter Verkinderen, Office of Communications
and Development, AKC Events Team

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The Institute of Ismaili Studies

AGA KHAN CENTRE

10 Handyside Street, London N1C 4DN
www.iis.ac.uk

Welcome

Over the last decade, Digital Humanities have reshaped how scholars in the humanities ask questions, organise evidence, and share findings. Methods that once seemed peripheral to traditional textual scholarship, such as large-scale digitisation, optical character recognition, computational text analysis, network visualisation, image interoperability based on the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF), oral history platforms, and, most recently, generative artificial intelligence (AI), have moved into the centre of how knowledge is produced, curated, and disseminated. For Islamic Studies in particular, these developments open new possibilities for engaging with manuscript collections, oral testimonies, multilingual archives, and the lived practices of contemporary Muslim communities, while also raising urgent questions about authority, mediation, ethics, and access.

The Institute of Ismaili Studies has long been concerned with the responsible stewardship of Ismaili and broader Islamic intellectual traditions. As digital infrastructures and AI systems increasingly mediate the production, circulation, and interpretation of religious knowledge, it has become essential to bring scholars, educators, archivists, and practitioners into sustained conversation about what the digital turn means for the field. This conference aims to provide such a forum: a space where empirical research, methodological reflection, and institutional practice can meet.

Against this backdrop, ‘Digital Futures: The Digital Humanities in Islamic Studies’ brings together a range of contributions that span special collections and material culture, oral history and language technologies, virtual heritage and religious memory, generative AI and ethical reasoning, para-institutional publics and platform cultures, curriculum design and pedagogy, governance frameworks, and decolonial critique. Several papers focus closely on Ismaili contexts, while others situate them within wider Muslim and global digital ecologies. Together, they illustrate both the promise and the friction of digital methods: their capacity to extend the reach and granularity of humanistic inquiry, and the new asymmetries of authority, language, and infrastructure that they introduce.



Three threads run across the programme. The first concerns archives and preservation: how heritage materials are catalogued, transcribed, exhibited, and made discoverable in environments where access is increasingly mediated by interfaces and algorithms. The second concerns memory, community, and identity: how digital platforms, from Instagram and TikTok to Reddit and bespoke applications, shape the everyday religious lives, humour, ethics, and belonging of contemporary Ismaili and Muslim publics. The third concerns AI and pedagogy: how generative systems function as interlocutors, instructors, and moral mediators, and what this implies for hermeneutics, curriculum development, professional learning, and governance.

The conference is organised around five thematic panels and a keynote address by Sarah Savant, whose work on the KITAB project (Knowledge, Information Technology, and the Arabic Book) has done much to demonstrate how computational methods can serve, rather than displace, the close reading and pattern recognition that lie at the heart of humanistic inquiry. Over the course of two days, our hope is that participants, from doctoral students to senior scholars, and from archivists to educators and technologists, will leave with both a clearer sense of the current state of the field and a sharper set of questions to pursue.

We are grateful to all those who have contributed to making this gathering possible: the speakers who have prepared and travelled to share their work, the chairs and discussants, colleagues across the IIS who have supported the logistics of the event, and the wider scholarly community whose engagement gives this conversation its purpose.

Organising Committee

Digital Futures: The Digital Humanities in Islamic Studies

Schedule

Day 1: Thursday 28 May 2026

10:15 – 10:20

Housekeeping Remarks

10:20 – 10:30

Director's Welcome

10:30 – 12:00

Panel 1: Archives, Material Culture, and Preservation

Chair: Alex Henley, IIS

A Distributed Approach to Special Collections Access

Naureen Ali, *IIS*



**Lost in Transcription: ASR Inequity and Multilingual Agency
in the IIS Oral History Project**

Rizwan Karim, *IIS*



**Photographs, Memory, and Belonging: Virtual Heritage and
Religious Authority in Ismaili Contexts**

Mashal Gilani, *UCL / IIS alumna*



12:00 – 12:15

Health Break

12:15 – 13:00

Keynote Address

Digital Futures: The Digital Humanities in Islamic Studies

Sarah Savant, Aga Khan University



13:00 – 14:00

Lunch Break (Group Photo)



14:00 – 15:30

Panel 2: AI, Hermeneutics, and Pedagogical Innovation

Chair: Peter Verkinderen, *AKU-ISMC*

The Mirror and the Mask: Methodological Mimicry in AI-Driven Islamic Studies

Daryoush Mohammad Poor, *IIS*



Improvising Digital Tools for Interactive Instruction

Najam Abbas, *IIS*



From Artefacts to Algorithms: Reimagining Professional Learning for Humanities Educators

Farah Naz, *Aga Khan University*



15:30 – 15:45

Health Break

15:45 – 17:15

Panel 3: Para-Institutional Publics and Algorithmic Authority

Chair: Daryoush Mohammad Poor, *IIS*

Para-Institutional Publics: AI-Generated Visual Content, Collective Memory, and Ismaili Digital Identity on Instagram

Muhammad Ali, *IIS*



AI as Moral Mediator: Algorithmic Authority and Ethical Reasoning among Young Ismailis

Mubashir Artas, *GPISH, IIS / SOAS*



Examining Artificial Intelligence in Islamic Ethical Contexts

Karim H. Karim, *Carleton University*



Schedule

Day 2: Friday 29 May 2026

10:00 – 11:30

Panel 4: Memory, Community, and Digital Religion

Chair: David Bennett, IIS

Humour and Digital Meme Culture in the Ismaili Community

Nurain Lakhani, *GPISH, IIS*



Ethics in the Making: Constructing Boundaries around Jalebi in Ismaili Reddit Discourse

Mohsin Ali Baig, *GPISH, IIS*



Youth, Faith and Tech: Digital Platforms and the Ismaili Student Network in the UK

Muhammad Salim, *University of Wales Trinity Saint David*



11:30 – 11:45

Health Break



11:45 – 13:15

Panel 5: Curriculum, Governance, and Decolonial Futures

Chair: Roy Wilson, IIS

**Governing AI in Higher Education in Muslim-Majority Countries:
Implications for Afghanistan**

Mehrullah Hussaini, *ITREB Afghanistan*



Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmuk) as a Pedagogical Lens for Digital Islamic Studies

Abidah Alidina, *Conestoga College*



**Beyond Boundaries: Enhancing Global Access and Engagement with the
IIS Curriculum through the IIS Digital Curriculum Platform**

Alnoor Nathani and Shameer Ali Prasla, *IIS*



13:15 – 13:20

Concluding Remarks

Muhammad Ali, *IIS*

13:20 – 14:20

Lunch

Abstracts and Bios

Digital Futures: The Digital Humanities in Islamic Studies

Sarah Savant

Professor of History and Founding Director of the Centre for Digital Humanities at the Aga Khan University (AKU)

This two-part keynote lecture will survey current and emerging work in the Digital Humanities (DH), with particular attention to how DH can support research in Islamic Studies. It will first present case studies that illustrate the field's methods and the forms of new knowledge it has made possible. Much of the strongest DH scholarship is, in fact, an extension of traditional humanistic methods conducted at a scale no individual scholar could achieve unaided; other work could not be designed, let alone executed, without computational tools. The lecture will then turn to emerging trends in AI-assisted Digital Humanities, focusing on the research project KITAB-Transform, where the emphasis will fall on the pairing of humanistic questions with computational methods.

A central argument will run through both parts: the power of pattern recognition, and the importance of identifying the patterns through which Islamic Studies — or any other field — can productively be explored. The lecture will argue that all DH work ultimately relies on pattern recognition. In the age of AI, scholars capable of identifying patterns across languages and cultures are positioned both to address familiar problems in new ways and to tackle new problems grounded in older disciplines. The emergence of agentic AI extends this potential further, offering those attuned to patterns the opportunity to design new methods for finding, visualising, and interpreting them.



SARAH BOWEN SAVANT is a Professor of History and Founding Director of the Centre for Digital Humanities at the Aga Khan University (AKU). She leads the Arabic Digital Humanities KITAB project (Knowledge, Information Technology, and the Arabic Book) and is currently leading a second European Research Council (ERC) project, KITAB-Transform. She has served as Principal Investigator or co-investigator on major grants from the British Academy, the European Research Council, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Qatar National Library.

In addition to her research leadership, she serves as a member of the Senior Management Team at AKU's Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (ISMC) and sits on advisory boards, including for the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). Her forthcoming book with Edinburgh University Press is due to be published in December.

Improvising Digital Tools for Interactive Instruction

Najam Abbas

Editor, *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, The Institute of Ismaili Studies

The IIS initiative to explore options in Digital Humanities in Islamic Studies can enable it to create environments for collaborative thinking about how digital tools can support the Institute's core interests.

Digital storytelling in the study of Muslim societies and Ismaili contexts can provide platforms and new modes of community engagement. It can also enable an exploration of how digital tools may help to produce instructional material which young audiences may find interesting and engaging.

The purpose of the paper is to share examples of how such content could be repurposed for wider popular circulation by making creative use of artificial intelligence tools. It may be useful for the IIS to explore how these tools can assist in developing public-facing products. Such examples could be used for interacting with youth, facilitating group discussions, and providing engaging learning endeavours.

These examples may well serve as templates to show Gen-Z audiences, especially the Ismaili youth, some innovative ways to interact with emerging apps and toolsets, showing them, for instance, how interaction with their cultural heritage and intellectual legacy could be made more dynamic, and hence more engaging. Such templates may be expanded with an instructor's own original ideas to help present them more creatively.

The presentation is aimed at prompting some ideas for instructors' feedback to help generate discussion about how such examples could possibly be utilised for more effective results, potentially making creative use of a collection of images, clips, audio, and video.



DR NAJAM ABBAS has been associated with the *Encyclopaedia Islamica* project at the Institute of Ismaili Studies since 2012, providing support as an editor. Earlier, he worked with the IIS's Central Asian Studies Unit (2003–2011). Prior to joining the IIS in early 2003, he worked in Tajikistan with the Aga Khan Humanities Project for Central Asia (1997–2000). Between 2000 and 2002, Najam served as Outreach and Training Coordinator at the University of Central Asia, Khorog, Tajikistan, piloting innovative distance education programmes (including some via radio) for adult learners in isolated communities. In 1998, he completed his PhD at Tajik National University, based on his postgraduate research on Kazakhstan's post-independence press at Kazakh State University in Almaty (1994–1997). Najam holds an MSc in Political Science and a BSc in Economics, specialising in Muslim settings, fiqh, and Arabic. He serves on the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Policy Studies (IJPS)* and the *Central Eurasian Reader*.

Para-Institutional Publics: AI-Generated Visual Content, Collective Memory, and Ismaili Digital Identity on Instagram

Muhammad Ali

Graduate Research Intern, Ismaili Special Collections Unit,
The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Scholarly engagement with Nizari Ismaili digital life has focused primarily on institutional platforms and their role in governing community representation and cultural memory (Mawani 2003; Karim 2023; Kakei and Tsang 2025). Yet a significant development remains unexamined: the global proliferation of independently operated Instagram pages that produce and circulate Ismaili religious knowledge, historical narratives, and devotional content outside formal institutional oversight. This paper argues that these para-institutional pages constitute a new infrastructure of Ismaili digital identity and collective memory, one in which generative AI tools increasingly enable non-institutional actors to produce visually authoritative content that was previously the preserve of institutional channels. Understanding what this infrastructure looks like, how it is composed, what it foregrounds, and what role AI plays within it, requires empirical mapping before interpretive claims can be responsibly made. To this end, the paper conducts a systematic quantitative content analysis of posts, or ‘visual artifacts’ (Dietrich 1986; Latham 2012), sampled from a purposively selected corpus of independently operated Ismaili Instagram pages spanning devotional, educational, meme-based, scholarly, *ginanic*-heritage, and diaspora-oriented registers. Each post is coded for its visual production method (AI-generated, AI-enhanced, photography, archival, graphic design), thematic orientation, collective memory function, authority signalling, and engagement metrics. Inter-coder reliability is established following Alfano et al. (2024).



The resulting dataset is analysed through cross-tabulation, engagement comparison, and hashtag co-occurrence network visualisation to produce an empirical portrait of this emerging digital ecosystem. This paper contributes to scholarship on digital religion (Campbell 2013; Bunt 2018) and platform-mediated identity by providing the first systematic account of how Ismaili collective memory and digital identity are being constructed, curated, and reconfigured through para-institutional visual content production on social networking sites.

MUHAMMAD ALI is a Graduate Research Intern at the Ismaili Special Collections Unit, the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London. He is a graduate of the IIS's Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH), where his dissertation examined the role of *The.Ismaili* platform in shaping digital cultural identity and cultural memory among the Nizari Ismaili community in Atlanta, Georgia. He holds an MPhil in the Sociology of Media and Culture from the University of Cambridge, where his research explored digital activism in Pakistan. His research interests lie at the intersection of digital sociology, digital religion, and critical AI studies, with a particular focus on digital memory, generative AI, and identity formation within global Nizari Ismaili communities.

A Distributed Approach to Special Collections Access

Naureen Ali

Cataloguer and Collections Management System Officer, Ismaili Special Collections Unit (ISCU), The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London

This paper takes inspiration from Ed Rodley's idea of distributed museums, which emphasises the need for exhibitions to go beyond physical 'places' to include digital 'spaces', and to consider online users as a core audience with multiple sites of engagement. The paper extends this idea of distributed museums and the significance of online users from exhibitions to the broader spectrum of special collections access and long-term preservation, through a case study of the Ismaili Special Collections Unit (ISCU) at the Institute of Ismaili Studies.

It explores ISCU's initiatives in harnessing digital spaces, including making manuscripts accessible according to IIIF (International Image Interoperability Framework) standards for scholarly research and dissemination, enabling users to engage with the intricacies of manuscript collections while facilitating ISCU's curation of heritage items via tools that allow image annotation, sharing, and online curation. The paper additionally explores tools for presenting research in an accessible format for various audiences through a case study of chapters from the volume *Texts, Scribes and Transmission*, which offers insights on different aspects of manuscript cultures through a study of special collections housed at the IIS.



Tim Sherratt has highlighted the importance of engaging with digital access initiatives critically, cautioning against viewing access as a technology-fuelled march towards an ideal of openness. The paper accordingly explores critical approaches to digital access, including problematising the notion of online access and exploring its limitations, especially in terms of engaging with heritage materials.

NAUREEN ALI is a Cataloguer and Collections Management System Officer for the Ismaili Special Collections Unit (ISCU) at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. Alongside collections care, her work focuses on managing the Collections Management System for ISCU, cataloguing a range of heritage items, and managing the online catalogue.

Naureen is a 2013 graduate of GPISH (Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities) and holds an MA in Gender Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Prior to this, she pursued a BSc (Hons) degree in Social Sciences with a concentration in Anthropology from the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS).

Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk) as a Pedagogical Lens for Digital Islamic Studies

Abidah Alidina

Conestoga College

Digital Islamic Studies is expanding rapidly, yet dominant online pedagogies remain grounded in Eurocentric, technocratic, and content-delivery models that often disconnect learners from land, community, and spiritual practice. This article proposes Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk) — a Mi'kmaw framework articulated by Elder Albert Marshall — as a transformative pedagogical lens for reimagining digital Islamic Studies. Drawing on convergences between Indigenous and Islamic epistemologies, including relational accountability, humility, ethical knowledge transmission, and the interconnectedness of all beings, the article critiques the limitations of current digital pedagogies and the algorithmic infrastructures that shape representations of Islam and Muslims.

It then outlines a Two-Eyed Seeing approach grounded in relationality, co-learning, ethical digital engagement, and land-based awareness. A detailed case study of a redesigned online Islamic Studies course demonstrates how digital storytelling, collaborative annotation, virtual learning circles, critical media literacy, and land-based reflections can cultivate spiritually grounded, relational, and ethically accountable learning. The discussion highlights implications for decolonising curriculum, resisting epistemic extractivism, and fostering intercultural and interfaith co-learning. The article concludes by identifying future directions for Indigenous–Muslim collaboration, AI ethics, and community-engaged digital scholarship, arguing that Two-Eyed Seeing offers a relational and spiritually grounded pathway for the future of digital Islamic Studies.



ABIDAH ALIDINA is an educator and curriculum scholar whose work centres on decolonising education, Indigenous–Muslim relationality, and the ethical responsibilities of teaching and learning in digitally mediated contexts. She holds a PhD in International Education and brings over a decade of experience in curriculum design, intercultural communication, and community-engaged scholarship. Her research explores how Indigenous epistemologies, Islamic knowledge traditions, and critical digital pedagogy can inform more relational, land-aware, and spiritually grounded approaches to postsecondary education. Abidah teaches at Conestoga College, where she integrates culturally responsive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, and reflective, community-rooted practices into her courses.

Her scholarly work includes peer-reviewed publications on Muslim student identity, counter-radicalisation discourses, and the politics of knowledge production in higher education. She has contributed to curriculum and policy projects across universities and community organisations, focusing on equity, epistemic justice, and inclusive learning design. Guided by her commitments to relational accountability, humility, and ethical engagement, Abidah’s current projects examine Two-Eyed Seeing in digital Islamic Studies, Indigenous–Muslim collaborations in curriculum theory, and the implications of AI and algorithmic bias for racialised learners. She is dedicated to advancing transformative, justice-oriented pedagogies that honour diverse ways of knowing and being.

Ethics in the Making: Constructing Boundaries around Jalebi in Ismaili Reddit Discourse

Mohsin Ali Baig

Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH),
The Institute of Ismaili Studies

In recent years, online dating platforms have become a dominant mode of forming relationships among young adults (Tiller 2018). Mainstream online dating apps such as Tinder and Bumble operate within largely secular frameworks, privileging individual choice, algorithmic matching, and personalised desirability. In contrast, Jalebi, an unofficial dating application designed specifically for Ismaili Muslims, situates partner-seeking within an exclusive, bounded faith community. Are there distinct ethical limits for Ismailis regarding online dating, and, if so, how are such limits articulated and practised? This study argues that the ethical boundaries surrounding online dating in the Ismaili context are not simply inherited from the formal Ismaili doctrine of ethics but are actively constructed through (online) discursive practices. Drawing on qualitative and exploratory methods grounded in discourse analysis, the study first examines how Jalebi's interface, design architecture, and community-specific framing implicitly encode ethical norms related to intentionality (*niyyah*), marriage orientation, and communal belonging. It then analyses user-generated discussions on digital forums such as Reddit to explore how Ismaili users negotiate, contest, and construct ethical limits on dating in real time.



MOHSIN ALI BAIG is a second-year GPISH scholar at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London. He holds a BA in International Relations and is interested in peace and conflict studies, comparative religions, digital religion, and identity politics. He previously worked as a Research Intern at the Centre for Critical Peace Studies (CCPS). Mohsin has presented his research at national and international conferences, including the First International Conference on Critical Peace Studies in Lahore. Most recently, he presented a paper at the Third Annual IIS/AKU–ISMC Graduate Conference, titled ‘Imagined Futures: Thought, Art and Ethics in Muslim Societies’, where he explored how the video game *Assassin’s Creed Mirage* represents the House of Wisdom and the Alamut fortress, and how such digital portrayals influence contemporary understandings of Islamic history.

Photographs, Memory, and Belonging: Virtual Heritage and Religious Authority in Ismaili Contexts

Mashal Gilani

Alumna, University College London (MSc Digital Humanities)
and the Institute of Ismaili Studies

This paper examines how digital humanities methods can mediate religious memory, authority, and belonging through a case study of a virtual exhibition of digitised photographs of His Highness the Aga Khan IV. Drawing on qualitative research conducted for an MSc in Digital Humanities at University College London, the study explores how members of the global Ismaili community experience sacred photographic archives when curated in a digital exhibition environment.

Situated at the intersection of digital heritage, memory studies, and the anthropology of religion, the paper combines digital curation with qualitative inquiry. Methodologically, it integrates the design of a bespoke virtual exhibition with semi-structured interviews conducted among Ismaili participants across generations and geographies. The exhibition functioned both as a curatorial intervention and as a research instrument, enabling participants to articulate affective, spiritual, and mnemonic responses to digitised images.

The findings demonstrate that digital exhibitions are not neutral repositories but affective, ethical, and political spaces where religious authority and communal memory are actively negotiated. The digitised photographs of Aga Khan IV evoked strong emotional responses, fostered intimacy and continuity in diasporic contexts, and supported the intergenerational transmission of memory. At the same time, participants reflected critically on questions of authenticity, sacredness, and whether digital mediation can preserve the reverence traditionally associated with physical encounters and ritual spaces.



The paper argues that respectful design, restrained interpretation, and sensitivity to communal norms are central to ethically curating sacred images in digital form. It contributes to discussions in Islamic Studies and Digital Humanities by demonstrating how virtual heritage practices can sustain religious identity and belonging, while foregrounding critical questions of authority, mediation, and responsibility in the digital stewardship of living religious traditions.

MASHAL GILANI is an alumna of the Institute of Ismaili Studies (GPISH) and holds an MSc in Digital Humanities from University College London, where she graduated with first-class honours. Her academic background spans Islamic Studies, digital heritage, and socio-legal research, with a particular focus on Ismaili contexts and diasporic communities. Her recent work centres on digital curation and the ethical digitisation of religious and cultural heritage, with experience at the British Museum, UCL, and the Ismaili Special Collections Unit, where she served as an archivist for a photographic collection relating to Aga Khan IV. Her research is informed by her dual perspective as both a researcher and a community insider, particularly regarding questions of authority, authenticity, and responsibility in the digital mediation of living religious traditions.

Governing AI (Artificial Intelligence) in Higher Education in Muslim-Majority Countries: Implications for Afghanistan

Mehrullah Hussaini

ISTEP Teacher, ITREB Afghanistan; STEP 2024, the Institute of Ismaili Studies

This paper examines emerging governance frameworks for artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education across three Muslim-majority countries — Iraq, Egypt, and Indonesia — and explores their implications for Afghanistan. As AI technologies increasingly shape teaching, learning, research, and assessment practices at the university level, higher education institutions are compelled to develop policies that regulate their ethical and pedagogical use. This study provides a comparative analysis of national and institutional regulations in these three contexts, focusing on key themes such as academic integrity, ethical responsibility, transparency, data governance, and the preservation of educational values. Particular attention is given to how these policies address challenges related to AI-assisted assignments, plagiarism, authorship, and the role of human judgment in assessment. Employing a qualitative research design, the study reviews and compares official policy documents, regulatory frameworks, and related guidelines issued by educational authorities and universities in the selected countries.

Through thematic analysis, it identifies similarities and differences in governance approaches, highlighting varying balances between innovation and regulation, as well as between technological advancement and moral-educational considerations. The findings indicate that while these countries share common concerns regarding academic integrity and the misuse of AI in student assignments, their policy responses differ according to socio-political contexts and institutional capacities. Drawing on these comparative insights, the paper proposes context-sensitive recommendations for Afghanistan, emphasising the integration of ethical principles, Islamic values, and practical regulatory mechanisms. It argues that, as a Muslim-majority country, Afghanistan can develop a balanced AI governance framework that safeguards academic standards while enabling responsible technological engagement in higher education.



MEHRULLAH HUSSAINI is currently a teacher in the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP) at the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB) for Afghanistan. He completed the STEP programme at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, earning an MA in Islamic Studies (awarded by SOAS, University of London) and a Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and Reflective Practice from University College London (UCL). He also holds an MEd from Savitribai Phule Pune University, India, and a BA in English Language and Literature from Baghlan University, Afghanistan. His research and professional interests encompass education, Islamic Studies, Afghanistan, and poetry. He has previously taught English, religious education, and other subjects at public schools, colleges, and educational institutions across Afghanistan, India, the UK, and Europe.

Examining Artificial Intelligence in Islamic Ethical Contexts

Karim H. Karim

Chancellor's Professor, Carleton University

AI offers tremendous opportunities in research and teaching, but it also poses significant ethical challenges. The current intellectual output on the topic of AI and Islamic ethics (*akhlāq*) is limited (e.g. Elmahjub 2023; Hayat 2024; and Ali et al. 2025). Several publications of the IIS have engaged with Islamic ethics (IIS 2000; Sajoo 2004; Lakhani 2017; Vellani 2020) and there is currently a unique opportunity to make a distinct contribution in the examination of AI in this context.

The impact of AI on research, education, the flow of information, and intellectual property is of interest to scholarly institutions. However, while AI facilitates certain mechanics of education, it threatens to hollow out the ecosystem of knowledge acquisition and mentorship in the larger intellectual enterprise. The technology favours the distribution of information, but it also negatively affects the dissemination of particular kinds of knowledge. As champions of fair use, free speech, and freedom of information, libraries have a stake in maintaining the balance of copyright law to prevent it from obstructing access to information (Klosek 2024).

This paper will examine AI within perspectives of Islamic ethics relating to good governance, education, and research (IIS, 2000), respect for human dignity, social beneficence (Lakhani 2017), and trusteeship (Ali et al. 2025). It will seek to explore the development of an ethical approach that mitigates AI's harmful effects while fostering technological innovations that enhance human intellect and society.



KARIM H. KARIM is Chancellor's Professor at Carleton University. He is an award-winning interdisciplinary scholar who has served in directorial positions at the IIS, Carleton's Centre for the Study of Islam and its School of Journalism and Communication. Dr Karim chaired the accessibility section of Canada's Federal Task Force on Digitization. He won the inaugural Robinson Book Prize for his book *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence*. His other critically acclaimed publications focus on communications technology in Muslim contexts. He has delivered keynote lectures in several countries and has organised conferences, including the Second International Ismaili Studies Conference. Additionally, Karim is the inaugural recipient of the IIS's Alumni Recognition Award.

Lost in Transcription: ASR Inequity and Multilingual Agency in the IIS Oral History Project

Rizwan Karim

Coordinator, Oral History Project, The Institute of Ismaili Studies

The digital turn has fundamentally restructured the lifecycle of oral history, shifting the transition of the spoken word to the digital record from a human-led craft to an industrial process mediated by AI. While Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) offers seductive efficiency by lowering barriers to the public archive, it also introduces new infrastructures of linguistic inequity. For historically underserved collections, these tools are often framed as democratising forces, promising unattainable scales of preservation (Risam 2019); however, they frequently act as conduits for archival power, where rapid machine processing risks distorting marginalised voices.

Drawing on the IIS Oral History Project, which documents several oral languages with non-standardised scripts, including Burushaski, Khowar, Shina, Wakhi, and varieties of Gujarati, Arabic, and Farsi, this paper examines the friction between indigenous speech and machine logic. Crucially, this inequity extends to accentual varieties of English and other European languages, where ASR systems exhibit systematic biases against non-standard phonetic patterns. In multilingual collections that include oral languages with little to no archival presence, the mechanical process of transcription often results in distortions and erasures due to code-switching — the fluid transition between multiple languages or dialects within a single conversation. This constitutes a form of epistemic violence and cognitive imperialism (Mhlambi 2024), wherein technical systems reproduce colonial hierarchies.



In the context of oral history, such failures dictate metadata, keyword searchability, and scholarly visibility. What is mis-transcribed effectively remains silenced within the digital record. Integrating archival theory from Mbembe (2002) with Portelli's (1991) seminal methodology, this research repositions transcription as a high-stakes act of epistemic mediation. Ultimately, the paper contends that a decolonial digital humanities must treat speech technologies as political infrastructures, demanding local linguistic investment and radical ethical accountability.

RIZWAN KARIM coordinates the Oral History Project at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London. An alumnus of the Institute's Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH), he also holds an MA in Administration and Planning from University College London (UCL). His current work focuses on the documentation, preservation, and digital stewardship of multilingual oral testimonies from Ismaili communities, paying particular attention to the methodological and ethical challenges posed by emerging speech technologies in archival practice.

Humour and Digital Meme Culture in the Ismaili Community

Nurain Lakhani

Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH),
The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London

This paper examines digital meme culture within the contemporary Ismaili Muslim community, a transnational Shi'i minority characterised by strong institutional cohesion and a highly organised communal structure. While scholarship on the Ismailis has focused primarily on theology, historical development, devotional literature, and institutional authority, comparatively little attention has been given to informal digital spaces through which everyday religious life is publicly interpreted, negotiated, and reframed through humour. Social media have become significant arenas in which community members circulate shared jokes, visual satire, and ironic commentary about ritual practice, volunteer culture, generational expectations, and communal norms. These digital exchanges, though often playful in tone, provide insight into how religious belonging is lived, discussed, and subtly contested outside formal institutional settings.

Drawing on thematic discourse analysis of publicly accessible memes from Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit, this paper analyses how humour represents ritual practice, volunteer culture, generational difference, and institutional hierarchy. It argues that meme culture functions as a regulated discursive space in which communal tensions can be acknowledged and rearticulated without direct confrontation. Particular emphasis is placed on the selective nature of meme production: while certain aspects of religious life are rendered humorous, others remain absent from public satire. By foregrounding the use of digital humour as a means of negotiating expectations of reverence, loyalty, and critique, this paper contributes to Ismaili Studies and the broader study of Muslim digital cultures, showing how authority and belonging are recalibrated in networked religious environments.



NURAIN LAKHANI is currently a student on the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH) at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, where her research focuses on digital humour and meme culture within the contemporary Ismaili Muslim community. She holds an MSc in Media Science from Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology, Kolkata, where she studied digital governance and media consumption in India, and a BA (Hons) in Political Science from Calcutta University. Alongside her academic work, she has several years of professional experience in digital media strategy and performance marketing, working across major social media platforms to design, execute, and analyse online communication campaigns. This combined background informs her interest in digital religion, platform cultures, and the ways religious communities negotiate identity and authority in networked environments.

Beyond Boundaries: Enhancing Global Access and Engagement with the IIS Curriculum through the IIS Digital Curriculum Platform

Alnoor Nathani and Shameer Ali Prasla

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This presentation examines the development and impact of the IIS Digital Curriculum (IISDC) platform, an educational ecosystem designed to expand global access to the IIS curriculum and related publications for the Ismaili community.

The platform functions as a learning gateway, enabling students, teachers, parents, and general readers from the Ismaili community to engage with the ethics, history, literature, faith, and practices of Ismaili Muslims. To address geographical and linguistic barriers, the IISDC offers a multilingual user interface and an expanding library of multilingual e-books, significantly enhancing accessibility for diverse audiences around the world.

Beyond widening access, the platform continually innovates to enrich the learning experience. Features currently being investigated include interactive digital resources, read-aloud functionalities, and engaging introductory module videos designed to support a range of learning needs and preferences. In addition, the pedagogical potential of AI is being explored; for example, AI could be used to generate customised quizzes and quick-review materials directly from e-book content, thereby streamlining assessment and strengthening knowledge retention.

Finally, the presentation outlines the platform's future technological trajectory. We highlight ongoing experimental initiatives that leverage AI to create advanced search and summarisation tools using the IIS curriculum and broader academic publications. These developments aim to provide students, teachers, parents, and non-academic users with intelligent pathways to navigate, synthesise, and deepen their understanding of historical and theological knowledge.



ALNOOR NATHANI is the Design and Production Manager in the Department of Education; he joined the Institute of Ismaili Studies in 1994. His primary responsibility is to manage an in-house Design and Production Unit that is responsible for the design and production of educational publications for the IIS's primary and secondary Ta'lim curricula, which are published in eleven languages. Alnoor manages the IIS Digital Curriculum — a multilingual digital platform hosting the Ta'lim publications for use by the global Ismaili community. He holds an MSc in Multimedia Systems from London Metropolitan University, has an interest in contemporary Islamic Art, and is an exhibited artist.

SHAMEER ALI PRASLA is a Digital Education Officer in the Department of Education; he joined the Institute of Ismaili Studies in 2019. He is primarily responsible for supporting the development, maintenance, promotion, and rollout of the IIS Digital Curriculum platform to global ITREBs, working in close collaboration with relevant teams. In addition to his core role, he serves on the STEP Admissions Committee and contributes as an academic advisor and mentor to pre-service STEP teachers, supporting them in their Bait ul Ilm teaching practice. Shameer is a graduate of the inaugural cohort of the STEP programme and previously served with ITREB Pakistan. He later earned a degree in education in Finland, specialising in learning environments.

From Artefacts to Algorithms: Reimagining Professional Learning for Humanities Educators

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In an era where education is increasingly shaped by digital innovation, the humanities are often perceived as traditional, static, or resistant to change. This paper challenges that narrative by examining how professional learning for humanities educators can respond meaningfully to the opportunities and tensions introduced by digital technologies and artificial intelligence. While institutions increasingly expect educators to integrate digital tools into teaching and curriculum design, professional development models frequently remain generic, technology-driven, or insufficiently responsive to the interpretive and ethical nature of humanities disciplines.

This paper introduces an emerging doctoral study that seeks to reimagine professional learning for humanities educators, particularly in Religious Education and History. It explores how the intersection of artefacts and algorithms — material culture, digital media, and AI-assisted tools — can create new possibilities for teaching, learning, and curriculum development, while preserving academic freedom and interpretive depth. Technologies such as generative writing assistants, multimedia storytelling tools, and data visualisation platforms offer new pedagogical affordances, but they also raise questions about authorship, bias, and academic integrity. Drawing on my experience supporting curriculum design and academic development across diverse higher education contexts, the study identifies a critical gap: educators often have autonomy to innovate but lack structured frameworks that sustain meaningful and ethically grounded digital integration.



The paper outlines an initial framework for professional learning that emphasises reflective practice, disciplinary sensitivity, and critical engagement with AI. It proposes professional development approaches that support educators in integrating digital tools thoughtfully while sustaining the interpretive traditions and critical inquiry central to humanities education. By reframing professional development as a creative and collaborative process, the study aims to empower humanities educators to embrace technology as a catalyst for deeper engagement and interdisciplinary thinking.

FARAH NAZ is an educator and quality enhancement specialist currently working at the Aga Khan University, where she supports curriculum design, academic quality processes, and faculty professional development across campuses in Pakistan, East Africa, and the UK. Her work focuses on strengthening reflective teaching practices, programme improvement, and evidence-based approaches to academic development. Before joining AKU, she served for five years with ITREB Pakistan as a STEP teacher, delivering the IIS-developed secondary curriculum in Religious Education Centres. She holds a Master's in Education and a Master of Teaching from University College London, and has recently been admitted to a PhD programme in Education. Her doctoral research explores how digital tools and artificial intelligence are reshaping humanities teaching and curriculum design.

The Mirror and the Mask: Methodological Mimicry in AI-Driven Islamic Studies

Daryoush Mohammad Poor

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As Large Language Models (LLMs) become embedded in the Digital Humanities, they are frequently treated as sophisticated retrieval engines. However, their most profound impact on Islamic Studies may lie in their role as adaptive interlocutors. This paper explores the ‘sycophantic drift’ inherent in AI interactions — the tendency of models to mirror the vocabulary, implicit frameworks, and expected conclusions of the scholar — and proposes a shift from retrieval-based AI to a model of ‘generative inquiry’.

Drawing on Karl Popper’s distinction between ‘essentialist’ questions (seeking the ‘essence’ of terms like *shari’a* or *ijtihad*) and ‘nominalist’ questions (focusing on how specific phenomena behave), I argue that current AI interactions often fall into ‘barren scholasticism’. The risk is twofold: first, methodological mimicry, where the AI performs the appearance of rigorous discourse analysis or legal hermeneutics without substantive depth; and second, framework flattery, where the AI adopts the scholar’s preferred lens — whether Ismaili-hermeneutic, postcolonial, or traditionalist — to signal alignment rather than providing a robust stress-test.



To address these risks, I propose the development of a new interpretive framework — Hermeneutic-Inquiry. This approach moves beyond simple prompting toward a ‘disciplined’ AI interlocutor designed to:

- prioritise falsifiability, shifting AI responses from confident assertions to testable hypotheses that challenge ‘intuitive self-evidence’;
- enforce methodological checkpoints, requiring the AI to explicitly name its operating assumptions before proceeding with an interpretation;
- preserve epistemic agency, ensuring the AI opens multiple interpretive paths rather than leading the user toward a biased conclusion.

This paper concludes by discussing the possibility of developing a functional prototype based on these principles. By architecting explicit constraints, such as ‘red-teaming’, by default and requiring ‘Chain of Thought’ transparency, we can move toward an AI that does not merely reassure the expert but actively challenges them. In the context of Islamic Studies, the goal is to create an AI that helps us escape the ‘infinite regress’ of definitions and instead fosters the ‘bold ideas’ necessary for scientific and hermeneutic progress.

DR DARYOUSH MOHAMMAD POOR is an Associate Professor and the Interim Head of the Constituency Studies Unit at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. His first monograph, *Authority without Territory: The Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili Imamate* (2014), is a fresh theoretical engagement with contemporary institutions of the Ismaili imamate. His most recent IIS book, *Command and Creation: A Shi‘i Cosmological Treatise*, is a Persian edition and English translation of Muhammad al-Shahrastani’s *Majlis-i maktūb* (2021). He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the UK and Series Editor of the Ismaili Heritage Series. He has also served as a member of the Aga Khan Education Board (AKEB) for the UK Ismaili Council (2015–2019).

Youth, Faith and Tech: Digital Platforms and the Ismaili Student Network in the UK

Muhammad Salim

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GPISH 2024

The UK Ismaili community has a strong student network known as the Ismaili Student Network (ISN). As a student-run organisation, the ISN operates under the Jamati (community) institution of the Aga Khan Youth and Sports Board. The ISN not only facilitates the transnational Ismaili students but also conducts various events on a regular basis, including digitally mediated socio-religious engagements.

This paper examines the impact of digital platforms on the ISN in the UK by employing virtual ethnography. The concept of a ‘networked community’ is introduced to explain the interconnected community of young digitised Ismailis. The results of this study show that the ISN’s digital platforms play an immense role in promoting the transnational Ismaili identity among international Ismaili students in the UK. It was found that information and communication technologies are significant contributors to the functioning of youth-related Ismaili institutional spaces. This study also demonstrates that the ISN mainly relies on its digital platforms to foster a more diverse and inclusive networked community. By conceptualising the ISN as a network of actors, this study offers valuable insights into the dialectical relationship between technology and a faith-based student community.



MUHAMMAD SALIM is currently a Farhad Daftary Doctoral Scholar at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. His thesis explores the impact of emerging communication technologies on the socio-religious experiences of the Ismaili communities in the UK and Pakistan. Salim completed his undergraduate degree in Social Development and Policy, with a minor in Philosophy, at Habib University in Karachi, Pakistan. He holds an MA in Islamic Studies and Humanities from the IIS and an MSc in Science, Technology, and Society from University College London. His research interests include Islam in cyberspace, the philosophy of technology, and postcolonial literature.

AI as Moral Mediator: Algorithmic Authority and Ethical Reasoning among Young Ismailis

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As generative artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in everyday life, it is also beginning to shape how religious questions are asked and answered. This paper explores how large language model (LLM) systems, such as ChatGPT, participate in moral reasoning among young Ismaili Muslims, particularly in relation to questions about relationships, lifestyle, and personal ethics. It asks how AI functions within existing structures of religious authority in contemporary Ismaili contexts. Drawing on Actor–Network Theory, the study views AI not as a replacement for the Imam or institutional guidance, but as one actor within a broader network of moral mediation. This network includes the living Imam, community institutions, family structures, wider Islamic discourses, secular norms, and digital platforms.

Methodologically, the paper uses structured prompt experimentation to analyse how different framings of ethical questions produce different algorithmic responses. In doing so, it treats AI both as a research tool and as an object of critical inquiry. The findings suggest that AI offers privacy, immediacy, and accessibility, making it attractive for personal ethical reflection, especially in diasporic and morally plural environments. At the same time, its outputs tend to reproduce dominant Islamic or liberal ethical frameworks, potentially sidelining distinctive Ismaili interpretive traditions. The paper argues that algorithmic authority is not inherent but relational and co-produced. By situating AI within existing networks of religious mediation, it contributes to ongoing discussions about technology and society, authority, and responsible engagement with artificial intelligence, underscoring the importance of cultivating critical digital ethical literacy within Ismaili communities.



MUBASHIR ARTAS is a second-year student in the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH), jointly run by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) and SOAS University of London. He holds a BA in Communications and Media from the University of Central Asia (UCA) and has over three years of professional experience in communications and digital media. His academic interests sit at the intersection of Science and Technology Studies (STS), digital humanities, and questions of authority and knowledge production, with a particular concern for how emerging technologies, especially artificial intelligence, are reconfiguring epistemic practices, mediation, and institutional life. His longer-term research trajectory focuses on the social and intellectual implications of AI and other computational systems in the humanities.

David Bennett

DR DAVID BENNETT is Assistant Professor and Teaching and Learning Coordinator for the Secondary Teachers' Education Programme (STEP) in the Department of Education, IIS. In this role, David performs key academic, coordination, and oversight duties to ensure the quality, stability, and enhancement of STEP's teaching provision in the MA Muslim Societies and Civilisations programme (validated by SOAS). He supports students in achieving the highest standards of learning and professional development, providing subject-specialist information, general advice, and pastoral care. David contributes to the delivery and assessment of STEP modules, leads the Literature in Muslim Societies module, and coordinates the MA Research module.

David obtained his PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures from the University of California in 2011. He specialises in early Islamic theology and Arabic philosophy, and has published extensively on concepts, dreams, and the philosophy of nature. Prior to joining the Institute, he worked as a researcher in the Department of Philosophy, Linguistics, and Theory of Science at the University of Gothenburg (Sweden), focusing on the Arabic Aristotelian tradition. He has extensive experience in managing undergraduate modules, as well as organising and administering various conferences and academic workshops.



Alex Henley

DR ALEX HENLEY is Programme Leader for the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH). He directs the IIS's flagship two-year scholarship programme, in partnership with SOAS. An anthropological historian, Alex is interested in the politics of religion in the modern Middle East. His research has involved extensive fieldwork in Lebanon and Jordan, looking at processes of institutionalisation, religionization, and sectarianisation.

Alex is also an associate member of Oxford's Faculty of Theology and Religion, where he was a lecturer for four years prior to joining the IIS in 2020. He had spent the previous four years in the United States, first as a doctoral fellow at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, then as the inaugural American Druze Foundation Fellow at Georgetown's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. Alex has also taught at George Washington University, Qatar University, and Middlebury College.

Alex gained his PhD in Arab World Studies from Manchester University; MA in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies from Durham University; and BA in Theology and Religion also from Durham University. He studied Arabic at Edinburgh University and Damascus University as part of a four-year graduate scholarship from the UK's Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World.

Peter Verkinderen

DR PETER VERKINDEREN is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Digital Humanities (CDH) at AKU–ISMC. He holds an MA in Latin and Greek Literature and Linguistics and an MA in Languages and Cultures of the Middle East (with a focus on Akkadian and Arabic), both from Ghent University (Belgium). He wrote his PhD on the evolution of the river landscape of southern Iraq and Khuzistan based on Arabic texts and data from archaeological, geological, and remote sensing research. He previously worked as an assistant director at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC) and in the ERC projects ‘The Early Islamic Empire at Work’ at Hamburg University and ‘KITAB – Knowledge, Information Technology, and the Arabic Book’ at AKU–ISMC.

His main expertise lies in digital research methodologies and in the Arabic-language geographical and historiographical literature of the central Islamic lands from the third to fifth/ninth to eleventh centuries. He is interested in corpus building and developing new tools and methods for searching, analysing, and visualising textual data, and in the use of AI for research, teaching, and assessment.



Roy Wilson

DR ROY WILSON provides pre-sessional and in-sessional academic skills support to students in the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP) and the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH). He also assesses the academic English of applicants to STEP through the Postgraduate Preparation Programmes.

Dr Wilson specialises in English language teaching and the assessment of English for academic purposes. He has taught adult learners in both China and the United Kingdom, and he has extensive experience supporting postgraduate students in higher education. At the IIS, he works in Academic Support, helping STEP and GPISH students develop academic literacy, research skills, and confidence in scholarly writing.

Additionally, Dr Wilson collaborates with colleagues to prepare prospective STEP students in priority countries through online provision. He leads teaching and learning initiatives at the Teaching and Learning Centre, supporting faculty in developing their practice and mentoring colleagues in applications to Advance HE. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) and is currently working towards Senior Fellowship (SFHEA).

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