

## THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT's AEMS Podcast

### Transcript for Episode 4: Turning a Vision into Reality

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Host: Amina Derbi Guest: Dr. Ahmed Alwani

**Amina:** Welcome everyone, this is Amina, and you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of AEMS-PC, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Policy Center, an education policy think tank at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought. The purpose of our podcast (Third Space Thoughts to Policy) is to hear from experts and stakeholders in the field of education policy reform including policy advisors, governmental officials, academics, teachers, and parents. If you're interested in joining the conversation so we can work towards progress together, please visit our website at [iiit.org](http://iiit.org) and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Let's dive in.

We're very lucky to have Ahmed Alwani on the show with us today. So Dr. Ahmed Alwani is the Vice President of IIIT and the Director of Curriculum Development and Founders' Legacy Project at IIIT. In addition, he is the Director of IIIT's Reform of Education project. He is also the Executive Director of Heritage Education Trust. Dr. Alwani has a PhD in Education and Human Development from Virginia Tech. He has previously worked on reform of K-12 curriculum at the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, he is continuing the work of his father, Shaikh Taha Jaber Al-Alwani, in *Ulum-al-Qur'an* and *Sunnah*.

Assalmau alaikum, Dr. Ahmed! How are you doing today?

**Dr. Alwani:** I'm doing great! How about you?

**Amina:** I'm doing wonderful. I'm so glad to have you on the show with us today.

**Dr. Alwani:** Thank you very much.

**Amina:** So our first question for you, Dr. Ahmed, is what made IIIT decide that Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS) program should be the priority of the organization right now?

**Dr. Alwani:** Well, going back about a year or so, when we were looking at repositioning IIIT at this time given all the history, and also the rich history I should say, also the circumstances that have changed tremendously in the past ten years or so. So looking at the history of the organization, and trying to build on that and expand it, we found out that most of our work in the past, not all, has been concentrated in higher education, and accordingly, most of the work that has been done, it was within the confines of education. So the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies programs, and of course it was taking place primarily in Muslim societies, so the idea of repackaging if you would, our programs and our work in the past into an initiative we came to call later as Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS) was a no-brainer for us. Simply it is expanding the past, it is rebranding, and focusing the organization on the mission it has adopted over the years and expanding it into primary education, k-12 mainly, youth programs, and parenting programs.

**Amina:** Ok, very good. Thank you for that. So, in your opinion, why is it necessary that the AEMS program have an education policy think tank?

**Dr. Alwani:** Well the education policy was an extension of, again, the work that has been done in the past, but in a way, it was mainly disseminated through educational training programs through The Fairfax Institute, which is a division of IIIT. In addition to that, we also had the publications, of course, line, and the translation line, mainly to translate books that were published by IIIT and sometimes books that are related to our work. So, it was obvious that we needed other ways and other means of dissemination simply because IIIT's mission was about social transformation and change, and it was not only as a research, intellectual institution that would disseminate this knowledge and its research by publication. So, it was obvious to us that we needed to branch out into other areas where we could have influence and we could disseminate our research output into a way that would become available to decision makers and policy makers. So, accordingly, the AEMS-PC, what would come to be AEMS Policy Center, came about and we decided that this is something that needs to be built within IIIT, as a component of IIIT, that will translate its research and its work into policy briefs and policy recommendations.

**Amina:** Well that's great, it's very pragmatic, absolutely. And so, how do you envision AEMS-PC playing a role in education policy reform in the future? You've hinted at that already, but could you please elaborate a bit more?

**Dr. Alwani:** Yeah, and obviously you know the target audience for this is primarily will be policy makers, decision makers, at the ministerial levels in certain countries where we have access at the institutional level, system level, as you know in some instances. This audience in particular, if we want to reach that audience, the idea was to again, shift gears and to instead of doing it more kind of in the traditional academic way, publishing books and articles, this time we need to package it in a different way and also reach out to an audience that we have not reached out [to] before. I think the...obviously in any process of advancing education in any society, needs to be somehow adopted by policy makers, decision makers at certain levels, whether it's institutional level again or government level, ministry level. Accordingly, this audience needs obviously different kind of maybe output from the institute. So instead of focusing and concentrating on the usual academic outlets we have done in the past we found it imperative for IIIT to reach out to this group of individuals, that we package our research and disseminate it in a different way, and accordingly, AEMS-PC was intended to kind of enrich the discourse in education policy in Muslim societies, through different means than the academic outreach programs that we have had in the past.

**Amina:** Perfect, perfect, thank you. And so, you also talked a bit about this, about how the AEMS program fits in with IIIT's original mission. So is it an extension of past intentions or a completely new direction?

**Dr. Alwani:** Well as I said, it was an extension. And AEMS starts with the premise that the purpose of education is not only utilitarian, but it's also for civic engagement and human development, at the individual and social level. This underlying assumption pretty much has shaped AEMS since its beginning as an initiative of IIIT. And this was eventually termed as third space education, to differentiate it from first space and second space in education that mainly see education in terms of, or more from the lens of kind of utilitarian approach. So historically, IIIT has always worked within the confines of academia, but the focus has always been on curriculum reform. AEMS is simply an extension of that effort with a system approach to it which includes not only the curriculum reform

but also the ecosystem of the curriculum which may include the policy and the context of education as we've talked about previously, governance and leadership, pedagogy, and the assessment and evaluation. So, the system approach to education allows us to address reform of education, utilizing many unconventional levers within Muslim societies and AEMS has also expanded the target audience of our educational reform efforts.

In the past, we almost exclusively, focused on higher education, now we expanded to k-12 as well as higher education as it was before. AEMS also introduced the concept of input formal/non-formal programs to IITT which included a whole spectrum of other audiences that we have not, although, we have touched upon in the past, we have not really targeted them as an audience of our program, as primary audience of our program. So, the additional part of AEMS' ambitions and expansive agenda is also the dissemination method of our reform of education agenda, whether it's through policy recommendations, consulting, or what we call strategic engagement, with systems of education in Muslim societies, whether its higher education level or k-12, in addition of course to our traditional dissemination methods, that's through publications, the line of publications that's been translated into more than 41 languages. So I think in terms of whether it's new or not, of course it is, as I said, it's an extension of the past, and we try to build on the past and expand it as opposed to starting from scratch, but that expansion of course took us in a direction that we didn't necessarily target before. And that would be, you know, the differentiating factor from what we have done in the past.

**Amina:** Great, and I also think---

**Dr. Alwani:** And also, you know, one other big difference is that the differentiated AEMS from other educational reforms I would say in Muslim societies that took place in the past, and also from our direction in the past, which is that AEMS is data-driven and it depends on empirical research that would inform our theoretical model and theoretical research. So, this part and parcel of the initiative where AEMS initial research project, the first project we took upon, was "Mapping the Terrain" of education in Muslim societies. So, the data collection process has already started, and that would set us apart from our past experiences because we started building an infrastructure for empirical research that did not actually happen before at IITT because we depended on theoretical research most of the time. And now we are branching out into empirical research, AEMS is mainly a data-driven initiative, informed by our theoretical model that we have developed in the past.

**Amina:** Wonderful---

**Dr. Alwani:** So, that's how I would characterize the difference between what we are doing now and what we've done in the past.

**Amina:** Yeah, that's a really good description. I think it's also good that you pointed out that when we say education policy, we don't just look at education policy in a vacuum. We also look at the context, we look at governance and leadership, and we look at educational policy at multiple levels, at an over-view higher-end level, at the national level, but also on more local or micro-policies that focus on curriculum within specific schooling and things of that nature, and also to look at the overall context of a particular country. So, we're not looking at anything just on its own, there is this overarching framework, and we look at these other details as well. So we're also trying to capture all of that in our thinking.

**Dr. Alwani:** Absolutely, that's correct.

**Amina:** And so, another question that we had, it comes actually from some feedback we've gotten back from listeners. They're sometimes surprised when they hear that IIT is not only in the US. Can you tell us a bit more about IIT's global offices and how those fit in with our headquarters in Herndon?

**Dr. Alwani:** Yeah, absolutely. So, this is another advantage that we have. IIT, since the beginning actually, had offices, mainly initially was in the Middle East, in the Arab world, and we branched out to other countries. Right now, we are present in more than twenty different countries, in different parts of the world. This is, you know, very advantageous in my opinion for IIT, and it differentiates us from other organizations possibly that are doing similar work. Throughout the Muslim world and through the network that we have developed with academics and with institutions of higher learning and school systems over the years, I think we have a huge advantage, to be able to access this network, and be able to build on the relationships that have been developed over the years, and expand our work from what's been done before into the AEMS project. And this allowed us actually to collect data in multiple countries through starting or initiating Mapping the Terrain, and start collecting data on certain constructs that we have developed and we wanted to measure. The network that we have of offices across the world helped us out tremendously in getting almost immediately boots on the ground, and be able to collect the data that are necessary for us to pursue our program of reform and advancing education in Muslim societies.

**Amina:** That's really helpful. Thanks for telling us all that. Another question some people might be wondering is, what's the big "so what"? Why are we doing this? What is our main purpose? Who are we keeping in mind when we are collecting this data?

**Dr. Alwani:** Well, of course, Mapping the Terrain is the first step, again, AEMS is a data-driven initiative, it's rooted in empirical research, and informed by it. So accordingly, the data that we intend to collect, through this, our initial project of Mapping the Terrain, will inform our recommendations and our reform agenda for educational systems across the Muslim world. So, I think the main objective or idea behind this initiative is mainly to be able to transform, or contribute actually, I don't want to be too ambitious here, to contribute to the transformation of education systems in Muslim societies. Obviously, we can identify quite a few problems and issues. If you look at the international performance of our educational systems, whether at individual country level or at the regional level, you could see that there is a gap in performance between many Muslim societies, and of course I'm generalizing here, there are a few exceptions, but in general, Muslim societies have not been performing, educational systems have not been performing up to the level of international performance and accordingly, I think we all can agree they need a lot of help and assistance. And our intention is basically to do just that, but not to focus only on the, again the first space and second space, which is performance on standardized testing and otherwise, but we also concentrate on the socio-emotional aspects of education, which we think will contribute to human development, and would contribute to better societies, and accordingly would contribute to a better civilization worldwide.

**Amina:** Absolutely, absolutely. Well thank you so much for your time today Dr. Ahmed. As always, it's a pleasure to speak with you, and I'm sure our listeners benefited tremendously from being able to listen to your insights, and we thank you for answering our questions today. Thank you!

**Dr. Alwani:** Thank you, I appreciate it.

**Amina:** So, something important to keep in mind is, our findings and recommendations are just that. They're recommendations, we don't impose our views on any sovereign nation, and of course would allow those decision makers to make that choice on their own.

Thank you all for listening. To stay up to date on everything happening with the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, please follow IIT on Twitter (@iitfriends) and on Instagram (@iit\_insta).

If you have any questions for us, or would like to join the conversation, please reach out to me. My email is [amina@iit.org](mailto:amina@iit.org).

As always, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!