

THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast
Transcript for Episode 13:
Well-being, Human Development, and Values Based Education
Guest: Dr. Ilham Nasser from IIIT and Virginia International University (VIU)
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Host: Amina Derbi

Amina: Welcome everyone, you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of AEMS, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought.

You can listen to this podcast on Stitcher, Google Play, Spotify, iTunes or Apple podcasts, CastBox and Messy.FM as well as Podcast Mirror. The observations and conclusions featured in this podcast represent the speakers’ own personal views not the organizations. The theme for this season is wellbeing.

We’re thrilled to have Dr. Ilham Nasser on the show with us today. Dr. Nasser previously joined us in the first season of our show. You can check that out in episode two, “Mapping the Terrain”.

Dr. Nasser is the Director of Pedagogy and a Senior Researcher for the AEMS research team at IIIT. She is also a former Chair of the Peace Education Special Interest Group at the American Education Research Association (AERA) and has spent over twenty-five years in teacher training and research in different educational settings in the United States, Africa, and the Middle East. Dr. Nasser was an associate professor in Early Childhood Education at George Mason University for 12 years. Her research interest includes studies and publications on the topic of global teachers’ professional development and more specifically, teacher preparation and professional development in social and political contexts and ways these influence children’s outcomes. Previously, she led the modernization of the curriculum for kindergarten in Iraq and the design and development of the first national curriculum for kindergarten in Palestine. Dr. Nasser has researched and published on education for forgiveness in the Arab World. Currently she is the Dean for the School of Education at Virginia International University.

Amina (continues): Welcome, Dr. Ilham. How are you doing today?

Dr. Nasser: I’m great, thank you, thank you.

Amina: We’re so excited to have you on the show again with us!

Dr. Nasser: Thank you, I’m happy to be here too.

Amina: Wonderful, wonderful. So, our first question for you is, last season we had you on the show to talk about the pilot of the Mapping the Terrain study. The pilot study included over 25,000 participants in 16 countries or areas. What would you say was the biggest take away from the pilot?

Dr. Nasser: Well, you know there are lots of lessons that we learned from conducting this pilot study of Mapping the Terrain. It was an attempt to learn more about ourselves as researchers, about our audience, about our measurements, research tools, and constructs. But, if I want to say the biggest two lessons that we learned from the study so far, because there is a lot more to learn, is first that IIT can lead the way in empirical research. IIT has been known to conduct theoretical research for more than 30 years and I think that we started this study last year and it's all about empirical research, collecting data, and we can show and illustrate that IIT can actually do both to enrich the knowledge generated from the theoretical as well as the empirical. Second, we learned about the interactions between values that are important for Muslims societies and skills that are important for everyone and for life and for functioning in modern societies and their importance for the human development for the growth and developmental trajectory of Muslims and others. But this will be the two main lessons we learned so far from the pilot.

Amina: Wonderful, thank you. So, some listeners, who are new, may be curious about Muslim societies, and if that can also include Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries. Can you please elaborate on that?

Dr. Nasser: Sure, we went back and forth between saying Muslim countries, Muslim regions, Muslim societies, and Muslim majority societies. I think that Muslim societies include Muslim communities, because we might have a Muslim community in a country where it's not a majority Muslim, but there is still a Muslim society within that. We wanted to stay away from labelling our countries and our participating locations, so I think we chose Muslim societies to illustrate the communities as well as societies and to include them. Now, for the North American, for example, we have Muslim communities and that is a very common use of the term. We will include North America in this round of the study, and I think it will still be within those Muslim societies we're interested in. But it will be more of a community at least people are familiar with community more than others and there are some places where there are societies, but not necessarily independent countries.

Amina: Right, right, that's very true. Well, thank you for that. So, IIT is currently initiating the annual survey, post-pilot. Which countries will be participating this time around and which groups will be answering the survey?

Dr. Nasser: So, Amina, unlike the first round of our study, the pilot, where we really went to places that IIT has access and affiliates. This time, we decided on certain criteria to include and to determine which countries to include. Our criteria included, of course, regional considerations, locations of the countries, and percentages of Muslims in the country, looking at diverse versus non-diverse societies, as well as the results of our first round and what we learned about the local context and the difficulties and challenges. Of course, budget and cost are also one of the criteria for us to determine and there are also political considerations. Even though we would love to go to certain places, the situation especially in the Middle East, for example, situation will not allow us to go to all these countries we are interested in. So, we set about five to six criteria to determine which ones we will go to and we have a list of about 18 countries. I don't think I need to name them all, but they include of course countries like Malaysia, Bangladesh, hopefully Turkey, Jordan, and many others.

Now you asked which will be the groups to participate in this round and we wanted to be really focused on youth and university students because our interest from conducting Mapping the Terrain

is to look at the conditions and current situation and attitudes and ideas of youth who are between the ages of 15=17, which would be high school or secondary education students as well as university students. I think these are the two populations that are of course important for the future of Muslim societies but also there is lack of research on those two groups in addition to their teachers and instructors. We felt that for Mapping the Terrain to be more focused and more logical in the populations we use, we wanted to look at how students differ from their teachers, how their responses might be somehow correlated with their teachers' responses and hopefully we can also reach for the first time this year, we can reach university instructors who are willing to participate in our study. We are still looking at a large scale, large sample size, probably around the same number you mentioned, the 25000, because we have 15 countries and we want to have a random sample from each one of those counties that will include those four groups I just mentioned.

Amina: That was a great explanation definitely and I think it's important that you highlighted that there was criteria for selecting the countries and it wasn't just that anyone was chosen, there was a specific thought process that went into it. In the pilot, the constructs chosen were empathy, moral reasoning, forgiveness, community mindedness, sense of belonging, religiosity, and self-efficacy. This time, the constructs chosen for the 2019 annual study include problem solving, life satisfaction, gratitude, meaning making, empathy, self-regulation/emotional regulation, sense of belonging, forgiveness, religiosity, and collective vs. individualistic orientation. Can you please define these terms for our listeners?

Dr. Nasser: Sure. When I hear you read all of these constructs, someone might think "why are those all together here and does it make sense or were they just randomly selected?" and actually no, there is a lot of logic behind using these and brining those constructs to the research. First, we rolled over the empathy, forgiveness, and sense of belonging measures and self-efficacy because we wanted to see how will these measures do in the next round because the first one was a pilot. Second, we included here some of the universal Quranic values that are being worked on by another group of IIT researchers who are looking at what are those universal values that are important for Muslims based on the teachings and the scripts and other sources. So, we took some of those values such as gratitude such as life satisfaction and meaning making for example of course in addition to forgiveness and others, but they are all values that are important for any Muslim and they are all values that are important for all people, for everyone.

Amina: Absolutely, definitely.

Dr. Nasser: And we wanted to see how can we measure those values by translating them into constructs that are measurable and looking at the right measures that are sensitive and that are applicable to Muslim youth. That's the one consideration. The second consideration is looking at our original conceptual model where we say that there is a developmental trajectory that people go through and we would like to see how we can support and empower someone to move from one state of consciousness to another using the work on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects and if you look at all of these constructs that you just named, they actually go on either the cognitive, emotional or behavioral, but they can also have implications for the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels.

Take forgiveness for example, for someone to be more forgiving, it is not enough to say, "I am forgiving because my religion says I need to do that and I can bring you all these ayat and sayings

and Prophet's teachings about that, but in practice, I don't practice forgiveness." So, we want to empower the different levels that the aql (the cognitive), the fu'ad (the emotional), and the aml (the behavioral), which are very important for Muslims and others, but they are also important in our model for transformation and for empowerment to occur. The collective vs. individualistic orientation is an interesting construct because it doesn't really relate much to the values I just talked about. It relates to this notion that we think that Muslim societies are collectivistic and we have been saying that for years, but we don't really have evidence, or we don't have any empirical research, maybe not any, but not a lot of empirical research to see where are these youth these days, are they really still within that collective orientation, with the new global developments and social media and the changes that we've seen. So, it will be an interesting one for us that we can contribute knowledge, not only on the values and the value-based approach of our research, but also on the orientation of these youth, the future generation, and what's happening on that front.

Amina: Definitely, definitely. I think the results of that will be interesting for a variety of people and it would be interesting to see if there has been a shift or if these societies we are conducting the surveys in are more individualistic than we would originally anticipate. So only, the data will be able to reveal that for us.

Dr. Nasser: Correct and I don't want to say that we will only heavily just rely on the survey, because surveys give you a picture of what's happening right now. It doesn't give you an in-depth look at what's going on with this specific group of youth, let's say in Tanzania or Kenya. But it gives you some idea about where the youth stand right now on these issues. And that's why the Mapping the Terrain is an annual exercise, because over the years, if we carry it through for two or three rounds, we will have some longitudinal data that we can call longitudinal, meaning that it gives us more of a video than a picture of what's going on in Muslim youth and their thinking, ideas, and attitudes. So, we look at this as a long-term project and not necessarily just the one-time survey that we would like to conduct, but it's an annual exercise that we will hopefully, Insha Allah, carry through for several years. And, we would like to contribute the data we generate for others to look at as well.

Amina: Definitely, I think it would be absolutely useful, not just for Muslim societies, but all societies. A lot of these constructs, such as gratitude, life satisfaction, meaning making, and empathy are definitely relevant for all peoples. And so, our final question for you is why were these constructs chosen and why is Mapping the Terrain necessary and why is this huge project important not just for Muslim societies, but for everyone? We spoke about this last season and we have kind of begun to discuss this so far in our interview, but I think it would be helpful for new listeners to know a bit more.

Dr. Nasser: So, the constructs were chosen because of their relevance to anyone and because of their relevance to values. Value-based education is a big topic and it's a big research area and we don't have enough knowledge that is sensitive, authentic, and accurate of what's happening with these types of values in Muslim societies. The last word-values study that was conducted, and it included few of the Muslim countries we are working with, was conducted in 2012. So, I think there is shortage and lots of gaps in the research on Muslims societies and we are trying here to not only learn, but also share the knowledge for the common good: for researchers who are Muslim and non-Muslim to use our results and to use our methods and to use our methods in any way that will

promote research, knowledge, and policy changes. It will be something that stakeholders can use to promote certain policies, work on curriculum for both higher education and K-12, and also generate ideas for leaders in the field of education, but we are looking at education in its broader sense: education as it relates to geopolitical conditions, society, and religion and its importance in the world and in many different societies.

So, contributing that knowledge is really what this project is all about and sharing what we learn, sharing it in a way that is positive and inclusive, while also bringing the voices of Muslim societies, researchers, and youth to the mainstream—at least the mainstream academia. There is always a problem of access to Muslim societies and also skepticism about research: we are also trying to build local capacities with our partners and collaborations that will not only enrich our experiences and help us with the research, but also enrich those experiences of our partners. That is why we have that conference, we had one in April and we will have one, Insha Allah, next year, where we share the results, but we also have the different partners from those 16-18 countries come together and share their own views of the results and hopefully use our results to promote certain policies that will benefit youth at the end and will benefit the larger society and communities.

Amina: Wonderful, well thank you so much Dr. Ilham for sharing your insights with us today, it's always a joy to speak with you and to listen to you and you just provide such great value every single time and we just really appreciate you being on the program with us again.

Dr. Nasser: Thank you Amina and my last thing I would like to say is that, for those who are listening, and they are maybe graduate students or PhD students or doctoral students, we will have our data publicly available in December from the pilot. So, they can have the opportunity to dig in and look at what interests them and what countries would be of value for their research. It's another way to share that knowledge with as many people as possible.

Amina: Definitely, and then the knowledge will continue to expand.

Dr. Nasser: Absolutely, and from knowledge really, we are looking at practice. What do we learn from this knowledge that can be implemented and what is useful for us versus what is not, which we would just need to throw away.

Amina: Exactly! Well, thank you again Dr. Nasser. We will see you. As mentioned last season, IIT is currently accepted applications for its Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Master's degree program in partnership with American University. The International Training and Education Program – Advancing Education in Muslim Societies – also known as ITEP–AEMS – is a unique opportunity to earn a master's degree in international education and training with focus on Muslim societies from a reputable university like American University. This program can be completed in one year and it is thirty credits!

For more information or if you are interested in applying, please visit www.iit.org, then you can scroll to the bottom and you'll find the announcement.

Thank you all for listening. To stay up-to-date on everything happening with the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, otherwise known as AEMS, please follow IIT on Twitter (@IITfriends) and Instagram (@iit_insta). You won't want to miss our next episode. 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. As always, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!