Debating Sharia Law, Digitally

A simple google search for the word “sharia” illustrates the magnitude of the gap Harvard Law School (HLS) professor Intisar A. Rabb wants to fill. Up top, there’s a 2,000-word overview from the Council on Foreign Relations, along with the usual Wikipedia link. But even on that first page of results, there’s also a far less neutral take from a Christian missionary website, and an alarmist article on sharia law in Dearborn, Michigan, that on further investigation turns out to come from the satirical news site National Report.

More than a billion people globally live in countries that use legal systems grounded in part or in whole in sharia—defined quite broadly as the “divine word of God”—and its interpretation by Muslim jurists, or fiqh. Yet it can be hard for both scholars and those outside academia, including policymakers and journalists, to easily access reliable information about these legal traditions. As co-director of the Law School’s Islamic Legal Studies Program (ILSP), Rabb has set out to change that. Her answer is SHARIASource, a website that aims to serve as the go-to resource on Islamic legal issues by gathering basic information, primary and secondary sources, and scholarly debates on topics spanning dozens of countries and more than 1,400 years of history. Though explicitly designed for easy public consumption, the site’s foundation will be in academic discussions, with a strong emphasis on connecting scholars from different disciplines to new sources and to each other. As a result, SHARIASource is part of a twenty-first-century digitization revolution that will change not only how knowledge is collected, but also how it is created.

The idea for the project grew from an online resource for journalists that Rabb worked on as a fellow at HLS’s Berkman Center for Internet & Society from 2011 to 2013. Expanding this vision was one of her major priorities when she joined the HLS faculty in January 2014 as the ILSP’s first permanent faculty director in nearly a decade (professor of law Kristen A. Stilt joined her as co-director in September). The rejuvenated ILSP is part of a wave of increased interest in international law across the American legal academy. (During the past decade, for example, a curricular reform at HLS introduced a requirement in comparative or international law for all first-year students.) But inviting students and fellow scholars into conversations about Islamic legal traditions has been difficult, Rabb says: many people are unfamiliar with Islamic nations and their histories in general, and there is no reliable, easily digestible reference source for Islamic law. She points to her own long career path—a J.D. at Yale, a Ph.D. at Princeton, and research conducted in Egypt, Syria, and Iran. “It shouldn’t be that you have to have the specialized training to go into the archives just to say anything about Islamic law,” she says. “And it also shouldn’t be that we just don’t talk about Islamic law in law schools because we don’t have that training.”

The development of SHARIASource, whose beta version is set to launch later this year, fits what Rabb sees as the guiding mission of ILSP: promoting research, and providing resources for, the study of Islamic law. The site’s chief mandate is scholarly, says ILSP deputy director Rashid S. Alvi, a former corporate lawyer who joined the program in January 2014 to organize the launch of SHARIASource. “In the long run, academic approaches to a subject are the ones that are given the greatest crediblity,” he reflects. Though the site will, by virtue of credibility and accessibility, serve as a resource for journalists and others outside the academy, Rabb and Alvi agreed that they didn’t want “something that just put a Band-Aid on bad articles on Islamic law,” Alvi says. “I wanted to put something together that over 20 years, 50 years, 100 years would pull together the best scholarship and thinking.”

The models for the project are two sites that have become central to conversations about American law for insiders as well as observers. The first is Westlaw, an online legal research platform that includes exhaustive databases of case law, statutes, public records, and more. Making SHARIASource a similarly comprehensive database for Islamic law will provide critical access for those unable to travel to the few libraries with extensive holdings on the subject. (Discussions are under way, in fact, about what books in Harvard’s collection could be scanned and uploaded to the site. For more on the changing digital landscape of libraries, see “Gutenberg 2.0,” May-June 2010, page 36.) Rabb sees even more of a model in SCOTUSblog, which offers commentary on the work of the U.S. Supreme Court. SHARIASource, she hopes, will similarly serve as a forum for interpretation and a space for scholars to make sense of the connections they find among its sources.

“The big catch,” Rabb acknowledges, is that, unlike the Supreme Court, Islamic law “is not one institution in one country.” She and Alvi have “Google-like aspirations” for the site’s content—a big project, “but that’s also part of the excitement of it.”

During the past year, ILSP has consulted with experts at the Berkman Center and the MIT Media Lab while building the SHARIASource site. The most concrete hurdle standing in the way of a launch is ensuring that a public, open-access site tasked with hosting sources from around the world respects copyright boundaries. Berkman’s Cyberlaw Clinic has already conducted an intellectual-property analysis for the United States; the ILSP team is working with experts at Berkman as well as collaborators abroad on guidelines to analyze other countries’ systems.

The other serious challenge is creating systems to populate the site with sources and commentary—an essential part of fulfilling Rabb’s vision of an ever-growing marketplace of ideas. Though just a few hundred resources have been uploaded to the portal thus far, the beta site’s extensive...
form for researchers to engage with their peers. Contributors will also be responsible for thoughtfully adding tags on subjects and themes to the database's ever-growing network of sources from around the world in order to help fellow researchers make connections among different eras, regions, and areas of expertise. A tenth-century manuscript, presented as an original scan on one side of the screen and an English translation on the other, will live comfortably alongside the latest decisions on blasphemy laws in Pakistan. For the first time, scholars will be able to make connections between sources of different types, eras, and geographies easily, says ILSP visiting fellow Meagan Froemming, who holds a master's from Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies along with a law degree from New York University. As Alvi puts it, the first reactions of most professors who hear about the project have been: "Why wasn't this around when I was writing my latest book?"

In another step to populate the site, Rabb is running the Digital Islamic Law Lab this spring, a class of 12 students who will each research four articles for SHARIASource. The students' experiences speak to the potential value of the online resource. Though few began the course as experts in Islamic law, they've made connections between the theoretical areas that interest them and the case studies they've found. One student, Rabb says, applied her background in contemporary U.S. intellectual-property law to what she found in the nineteenth-century Ottoman law code. Bringing examples of Islamic law into larger debates in the legal academy is part of the site's explicit goal, Rabb says. (Froemming, for example, sees the site's potential to connect her work on Afghan finance law to that of other researchers who are interested in the theories of law and development.) The platform aims to make Islamic law more accessible and, in turn, Rabb says, help promote "the study of Islamic law as law, rather than purely as religion."

Above all, SHARIASource—like its model, SCOTUSblog—is explicitly designed as a user-friendly place for policymakers, the journalists who cover them, and ordinary readers trying to make sense of what they find in the news each day. Right now, Rabb says, journalists may "do a Google search and find thousands of hits on any given topic of Islamic law, but have no idea what's credible, what's not." Rabb hopes that SHARIASource—vested with the authority of a university, and with entries from legal scholars explaining what's happening "in plain English"—will become a real, reliable search engine for such questions.

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University News Briefs

Climate-change Currents

The Climate Change Solutions Fund—an announced in April 2014 by President Drew Faust, and intended to channel $20 million into innovative research (see harvardmag.com/climate-15)—has made its first seven grants, totaling $800,000, for projects ranging from work on food waste (at the Law School) and coping with extreme heat events (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health) to work on energy and climate policy in China and India.

In mid March, Faust focused on climate issues during a capital-campaign "Your Harvard" event in Beijing; among the faculty members who appeared was professor of architectural technology Ali Malkawi, director of the Center for Green Buildings and Cities (described more fully at harvardmag.com/cities-15). Faust also spoke at Tsinghua University, where she highlighted academic partnerships, research, and training, drawing on examples from Harvard-Tsinghua collaborations on air pollution, the atmosphere, and global warming (see harvardmag.com/climates-15).

On campus, Harvard's environment center has organized a series of climate-change events for the week of April 6-10, and the University convened an expert panel discussion on April 13 (see harvardmag.com/divest-15); both were scheduled to occur after this issue went to press. Separately, students campaigning for divestment of Harvard's investment in fossil fuels staged a sit-in at Massachusetts Hall in mid February, and alumni supporters promised a more comprehensive action there for "Harvard Heat Week," scheduled for April 12-17. Among the support-

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