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	The Concept of Knowledge ('IL) in Islamic Civilization: Foundations, Evolution, and Contemporary Relevance
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Abstract:

The concept of knowledge (‘elm) occupies a central and sacred position in Islamic civilization. Unlike secular epistemologies, which often distinguish between sacred and profane domains, Islamic thought integrates all forms of knowledge within a divine ontological framework rooted in tawhid (the unity of God). This paper critically examines the Qur’an and Prophetic foundations of ‘elm, tracing its philosophical, spiritual, and social dimensions throughout Islamic intellectual history. The study explores how classical Muslim scholars, including al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, al-Farabi, and Ibn Chaldean, developed sophisticated epistemological systems that reconciled reason (‘aql) and revelation (way), science and spirituality, theory and praxis. Furthermore, the paper highlights the institutional manifestations of ‘elm in Islamic civilization, such as the emergence of madrasas, libraries, translation movements, and the Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom). The ethical imperative of knowledge, its transformative role in cultivating character (akhlāq), and its link to human responsibility (taklif) are also explored. The final section reflects on the challenges facing the Muslim world in reclaiming an integrated vision of knowledge in the contemporary era, where fragmentation, scientism, and utilitarianism threaten the holistic Islamic epistemic legacy. Through an interdisciplinary approach, combining theology, philosophy, and history, this study argues that the revival of the Qur’anic paradigm of ‘elm is essential for intellectual and civilizational renewal in the Muslim world.

Keywords: *elm, Islamic civilization, epistemology, Qur’anic worldview, knowledge ethics, Muslim intellectual history*

Introduction:

In Islamic civilization, knowledge (‘elm) is not merely a cognitive construct but a sacred trust (‘Amanah) that defines the purpose of human existence. The first revealed verse of the Qur’an “Iqra’ biismi Rabbi al-Rahman al-Rahim” (“Read in the name of your Lord who created”) (Qur’an 96:1) establishes the epistemic foundation of Islam. Here, the act of reading, learning, and knowing is inseparable from divine consciousness. Unlike secular modernity, which often compartmentalizes knowledge into technical, empirical, and secular domains, the Islamic worldview considers all true knowledge as an extension of divine wisdom (hikmah), and all sciences—whether natural, social, or metaphysical—as branches of the same tree of tawhid. Throughout the history of the Islamic world, ‘elm was not limited to religious knowledge (Tulum al-din) alone but encompassed Tulum al-‘aql (rational sciences), Tulum al-tabi‘ah (natural sciences), and Tulum al-insani (human sciences). Scholars such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina constructed comprehensive classifications of knowledge, merging Greek philosophical heritage with Qur’anic revelation, while al-Ghazali emphasized the purification of the soul and the ethical responsibility of knowledge acquisition. Knowledge was seen as a transformative force—a means to perfect the soul, serve society, and fulfill divine obligations. The institutional framework of Islamic civilization reflected this reverence for knowledge. Great libraries like those in Baghdad, Cordoba, and Cairo were repositories of global wisdom. The madrasa system institutionalized both religious and rational sciences. The translation movement during the Abbasid period transformed Islamic lands into global centers of intellectual exchange. Today, however, the Islamic world faces a crisis of knowledge: intellectual stagnation, fragmentation of disciplines, erosion of metaphysical foundations, and

the dominance of instrumentalist, utilitarian models of education. This paper seeks to recover the holistic Islamic concept of ‘elm and highlight its enduring relevance. It aims to inspire a renewed intellectual awakening grounded in tawhid, ethics, and critical inquiry — a revival necessary for navigating the challenges of the 21st century while remaining rooted in the spiritual heritage of Islam.

Qur’an and Prophetic Foundations of ‘IL:

The Qur’an presents ‘elm as a divine gift and a sign of human distinction. The very first revelation (Surah al-alas 96:1–5) commands reading and emphasizes that God taught humanity “by the Pen” (bi’l-qalam), highlighting the sacred act of acquiring and transmitting knowledge.

Numerous Qur’an verses encourage reflection (tafakkur), understanding (tafaqquh), contemplation (tadabbur), and reasoning (ta’qqul). For example, “Will they not ponder over the Qur’an?” (Q 4:82) establishes contemplation as a spiritual duty. Similarly, “Say: Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” (Q 39:9) underscores the elevated status of the learned.

The Sunna further reinforces this epistemic ethos. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: “Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim” (Ibn Makah, Sunna, Hadith 224). He differentiated between beneficial knowledge (‘elm naif)—which illuminates faith, improves character, and benefits humanity—and harmful or useless knowledge, which distracts from God or fuels arrogance. His supplication, “O Allah, I seek refuge in you from knowledge that does not benefit” (Muslim, Sahib, Hadith 2722), illustrates this ethical criterion.

The Prophet also embodied knowledge in practice. His life served as a synthesis of revelation, wisdom, and social responsibility. He encouraged literacy, urging the captives of Bard to teach Muslims to read as a means of ransom. He established suffer circles for learning in the Prophet’s Mosque, laying the foundation of an educational community. Thus, the Qur’an and Sunna present ‘elm not only as intellectual activity but as an act of worship, a spiritual responsibility, and a means to draw nearer to God.

Classical Islamic Epistemology: Philosophers and Theologians:

Muslim intellectual history produced a rich epistemological tradition that engaged revelation, reason, philosophy, and spirituality.

Al-Formby (d. 950 CE) classified knowledge into sciences of logic, mathematics, physics, metaphysics, and politics. His *Isa al-Cullum* (Enumeration of the Sciences) influenced later systems of education and stressed the harmony between philosophy and prophecy.

Ibn Sian (Avicenna, d. 1037 CE) advanced metaphysical realism, distinguishing between essence (māhiyyah) and existence (waged), and emphasized intellectual intuition (ads) as a way of perceiving truths beyond mere empiricism. His model of the “Active Intellect” explained how human knowledge links with divine illumination.

Al-Ghazi (d. 1111 CE) in *Ihyā’ Cullum al-Din* and *al-Munich min al-Jalal* reconciled rational philosophy with Sufi spirituality. He criticized unchecked rationalism but defended reason as essential for understanding revelation. His concept of certainty (yawing) integrated rational proof, faith, and spiritual unveiling.

Ibn Chaldean (d. 1406 CE) contributed a sociological dimension to epistemology. In his *Muqaddimah*, he distinguished between “revealed sciences” (Tulum naqliyyah) and “intellectual sciences” (Tulum Aliyah), and analyzed how knowledge evolves with the rise and fall of civilizations. He emphasized that knowledge production is historically conditioned and socially embedded.

Together, these thinkers reflect an Islamic epistemology that harmonizes **way (revelation), all (reason), and IL ham (intuition)**. Unlike Western secular epistemology, which often separates faith from knowledge, Islamic philosophy insisted on unity between rational inquiry and divine guidance.

Institutions of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization:

Islamic civilization institutionalized ‘elm through diverse and enduring structures that facilitated its preservation and transmission across generations and regions.

Bayt al-Hamah (House of Wisdom, Baghdad, and 9th century CE) became a center for translation, research, and scientific inquiry under the Abbasids. Works of Greek, Persian, and Indian scholars were translated into Arabic, fostering the Islamic Golden Age. Scholars such as al-Khwarizmi (mathematics), Hunan ibn Shaq (medicine), and al-Kind (philosophy) flourished under its patronage.

Madras (colleges), beginning with the Nizāmiyyah established by Niamh al-Mulch in the 11th century, formalized Islamic higher education. They offered instruction in Qur’an, hadith, jurisprudence, theology, as well as rational sciences. Their waif (endowment)-funded model ensured independence and accessibility, and this system influenced the later European university model.

Libraries and Knowledge Repositories, such as those in Cordoba, Cairo, and Timbuktu, housed thousands of manuscripts and facilitated global intellectual exchange. These collections served not only Muslims but also Jewish and Christian scholars.

Scholarly Guilds and Study Circles (ḥalaqāt) ensured personalized transmission of knowledge through sand (chains of narration), preserving intellectual authenticity. Learning was not limited to formal institutions but also occurred in mosques, homes, and public spaces.

Trans regional Networks connected Andalusia, North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, allowing for circulation of ideas, teachers, and texts. This global intellectual mobility made Islamic civilization one of the most interconnected scholarly traditions in history.

These institutions were not just educational in function but also spiritual and ethical, fostering scholars who combined intellectual rigor with moral integrity. They illustrate how Islamic civilization made ‘elm both the heart of its culture and the foundation of its civilizational flourishing.

Ethics of Knowledge and the Moral Responsibility of the Scholar:

In Islamic civilization, ‘elm has always been inseparably tied to ethics (ashlar) and proper conduct (dab). Knowledge is not pursued for its own sake, nor merely for material gain, but as a trust (Amana) and responsibility. The Qur’an condemns those who know the truth yet conceal it (Q 2:159), warning that knowledge without sincerity and humility leads to spiritual corruption.

The **Prophet Muhammad ﷺ** consistently emphasized the ethical dimension of knowledge. He taught that the best of people are those who learn the Qur’an and teach it (al-Bukhara, Sahib, Hadith 5027), and that scholars are the inheritors of prophets (al-‘ulamā’ war that al-anbiyā’). However, he also warned of scholars who misuse knowledge for worldly gain, comparing them to a donkey carrying books (Q 62:5) — possessing information but lacking wisdom and ethical transformation.

Classical scholars elaborated this framework:

Adam (Proper Conduct): Knowledge acquisition was always linked with discipline of the soul. Students were required to show respect to their teachers, colleagues, and even to the books they studied.

Inhales (Sincerity): Scholars like al-Ghazali insisted that knowledge pursued for prestige or wealth loses its divine light. **Tawāḍuʿ (Humility):** True scholarship required acknowledging the limits of one's knowledge. Ibn al-Mubarak stated, "The first step of knowledge is silence, then listening, then memorizing, then action, and then teaching." **ʿĀlim-ʿĀmil (Scholar-Practitioner):** Knowledge was meant to be embodied. A scholar who does not act upon what they know was criticized more severely than the ignorant.

Historically, this ethical dimension ensured that knowledge served **justice, equity, and social reform**. Scholars often acted as advisors to rulers, moral guides for communities, and defenders of truth against tyranny. Knowledge, therefore, was both a spiritual refinement and a public trust, safeguarding society from injustice.

Decline, Colonial Disruption, and Epistemic Fragmentation:

The decline of the holistic Islamic epistemic framework was gradual and multifaceted. By the late medieval period, political instability, sectarian conflicts, and economic challenges weakened institutions of learning. The Mongol invasion (1258) and later disruptions in Andalusia fragmented scholarly networks. Yet the most decisive rupture came during the **colonial era**.

Disruption of Institutions: Colonial administrations dismantled traditional madrasas, waqf systems, and scholarly guilds, replacing them with secular institutions designed to produce bureaucrats rather than holistic thinkers.

Curricular Fragmentation: Integrated models of education — where religious sciences, rational sciences, and ethics were taught together — were replaced with compartmentalized systems modeled after Western secular education. Sacred and rational sciences became artificially separated, and metaphysical inquiry was sidelined.

Epistemic Dependency: Muslim societies became dependent on European knowledge systems, often dismissing indigenous intellectual traditions as "backward." Orientalist scholarship reinterpreted Islamic texts through secular lenses, influencing modern reforms in ways that marginalized spiritual and ethical dimensions.

Identity Crisis: This led to a deep intellectual and cultural crisis. Some Muslims sought wholesale adoption of Western paradigms, while others retreated into literalism, rejecting engagement with modern knowledge. The balance between revelation and reason, once a hallmark of Islamic epistemology, was lost.

The result was **epistemic fragmentation**: a split between *dīn* (religious sciences) confined to seminaries, and *dunyawī* (worldly sciences) pursued in secular universities, with little dialogue between them. This rupture weakened the Muslim world's ability to respond to modern challenges in science, philosophy, and social thought.

Reclaiming the Islamic Paradigm of Knowledge in the 21st Century:

Despite these historical challenges, the Qur'an paradigm of *ʿilm* remains deeply relevant to the 21st century. Reviving it requires re-centering knowledge around **tawḥīd**, ethical responsibility, and intellectual integration. Several strategies can be envisioned:

Reintegrating Revelation and Reason: Muslim scholars must resist the dichotomy between "religious" and "secular" sciences. Qur'an guidance and rational inquiry should be seen as complementary — revelation provides metaphysical orientation while reason explores creation.

Interdisciplinary and Integration of Sciences: Modern challenges such as climate change, bioethics, artificial intelligence, and globalization demand integrated approaches. Islamic universities and research centers should encourage cross-disciplinary learning grounded in ethical and spiritual frameworks.

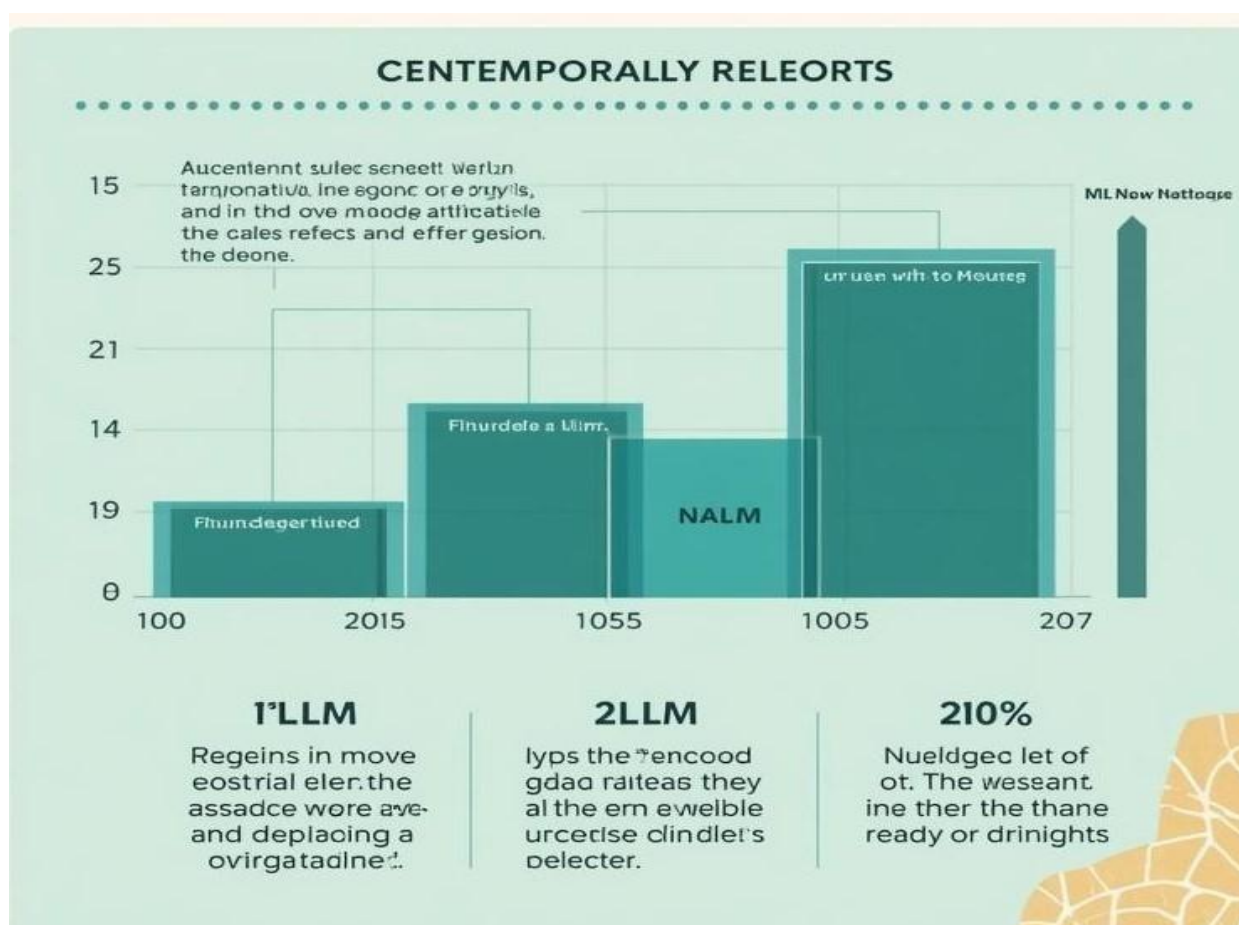
Ethics-Centered Education: Curricula must embed *dab*, *ashlar*, and social responsibility. Students should be trained not only as specialists but also as morally conscious individuals who use knowledge for societal benefit.

Harnessing Digital Platforms: In the digital age, online platforms can democratize access to knowledge. Initiatives for digitizing classical manuscripts, offering open-access Islamic scholarship, and using digital media for ethical education are crucial.

Civil Society and Community Engagement: The revival of *‘elm* cannot be confined to universities. Mosques, NGOs, and community centers must function as spaces where knowledge, ethics, and service intersect.

Global Dialogue: The Islamic paradigm of knowledge has much to contribute to global discussions on ethics in science, sustainability, and human dignity. Engaging with global academia from an Islamic epistemic position will strengthen both Muslim identity and universal contributions.

In conclusion, reclaiming *‘elm* means moving beyond nostalgia toward **critical renewal**: recovering the spirit of the Qur’an, the legacy of the scholars, and the adaptability of Islamic thought — to produce a knowledge tradition that is spiritually rooted, ethically sound, intellectually rigorous, and globally relevant.



Summary:

The concept of ‘elm in Islamic civilization represents one of the most profound contributions of Islam to world intellectual history. Rooted in the Qur’an imperative to seek knowledge in the name of God, ‘elm has always been regarded as a sacred duty and an act of worship. It is not simply the accumulation of facts, but a transformative process aimed at perfecting the soul, improving society, and fulfilling divine responsibilities. Throughout the golden ages of Islam, scholars integrated rational inquiry, metaphysical insight, and spiritual discipline. Knowledge was never seen as value-neutral. Instead, it was anchored in ethics, humility, and service. Institutions like madras and the Bayt al-Hamah flourished under the patronage of rulers and the guidance of scholars who saw knowledge as the foundation of justice, prosperity, and moral refinement. However, colonialism and modern secular ideologies disrupted this integrated worldview. Knowledge became fragmented, utilitarian, and divorced from its spiritual roots. Muslim societies began to imitate Western models without critical engagement, leading to epistemic dependency and intellectual stagnation. To address this, contemporary Muslim scholars must recover the classical Islamic paradigm film — a paradigm that harmonizes revelation and reason, faith and science, ethics and knowledge. The revival of this holistic vision is not a nostalgic return to the past but a necessary re-rooting of education in taw hid, ethics, and human dignity. Only by doing so can the Muslim world produce scholars who are both intellectually rigorous and spiritually grounded — individuals capable of addressing the complex moral, social, and scientific challenges of the 21st century.

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