

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN ISLAMIC AREA STUDIES

According to the late 13th century linguist Ibn Manẓūr, the traditional Arab saying “Seize the wind (*rīḥ*)” means that “a tremendous opportunity has arrived by the grace of God.” I first used this phrase in a paper entitled “What is the aim of Islamic Area Studies?” that appears in Vol. 1 of *Islamic Area Studies Series*,¹ the initial publication of the proceedings from the Islamic Area Studies Project, which continued from 1997 to 2002 in Japan. Since that time the project enjoyed favorable winds in its sails in the form of cooperation and effort lent to us by the project’s participants, but even more wind was provided by those who have praised our network-oriented approach to joint research and strongly encouraged its continuation. The present article is a report on our sailing adventure so far, beginning with a brief explanation what “Islamic area studies” essentially entails.

1. WHAT IS ISLAMIC AREA STUDIES

Globalization and Leadership

Beginning with the series of terrorist attacks launched in the United

States on 11 September 2001, our 21st century world has been shaken by such events as the American-British aerial bombardment of Afghanistan, which led to the temporary downfall of the Taliban regime and the American-British invasion of Iraq, which led to the downfall of the Saddam Hussein regime. Existing in the backdrop to such incidents and the protracted regional and ideological wars which they have brought about are the two phenomena of 1) the globalization of Islam and 2) the role of Islam as a regional vanguard. Asking why this situation has come about is an important research theme in the field of Islamic Area Studies.

However, no matter what the reasons, today we find Muslim entrepreneurs and working people residing all over the world, exerting important impact on society in America, Europe, Korea, and Japan. Islam is no longer a phenomenon limited to and influencing one specific region of the world.

What the globalization of Islam, in general, and its Muslim members, in particular, has done is to bring people of different religions and ethnic origins into contact with one another on a regional basis; at times, resulting in efforts to coexist symbiotically, at others, causing regional and ethnic clashes between differing world views and livelihoods, environmental destruction due to poverty and population explosion. Examples include the war of aggression in Bosnia (1992–95), the problems surrounding Muslim immigrants working in Europe, Korea, and Japan, the rise and fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Kurdish question in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, and the conflict between Muslims and Hindus in India; and no matter which example one chooses to examine, at the root of each is Islamic values and Muslim movements.

In the historical context, as the result of internal failures at nation-state-building from the 19th century to the present day in the Middle East and the long series of attempts by Western powers to intervene in the internal affairs of the region, Islam has come to stand as the social and cultural vanguard there. In both of these international and regional contexts, it has become necessary for anyone trying to reach a proper understanding of the contemporary Islamic world to obtain a clear and unbiased picture of both the principles that motivate Islam and what kind of message Muslims are trying to send to the rest of the world [Sato 2003:2].

The Borderless and Regionally Integrative Dichotomy of Islam

What the Prophet Muḥammad taught his followers was to refute the kin-

ship (blood) ties that Arabs had adopted as the traditional basis for their society, in favor of forming a community of Muslims (*Umma*), by which believers in Islam could transcend their ethnic differences. Therefore, it is a mistake to consider Islam a form of Arab religious belief, and rather recognize it as a world religion that aims at expansion beyond the framework of both ethnicity and region. As a matter of fact, a review of the history from the time of the Prophet to the present day will reveal that the Islam that was born in Mecca has steadily developed every step along the way within the framework of *Umma*.

Among the Muslim men and women who comprise *Umma*, there are many who have since childhood learned to read the *Qur'an* in Arabic, have prayed facing to Mecca five times each day during their entire adult lives, obey the strict rules of conduct imposed during the month of Ramaḍān, and embrace the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) as the ultimate objective of their lives. In this sense, Islam is indeed a universally homogeneous religion that strongly integrates adherents scattered over every part of the world. In comparison with other religious traditions, living one's life according to the norms of Islamic Law (*Shari'a*) binds Muslims together more in terms of religion than say their Christian or Buddhist counterparts, who often live separated by a milieu of sectarianism. On the other hand, it would be a fundamental mistake to focus on such integration and commonality as the sole characteristic feature of Muslims around the world.

Although Islam is a religion that emphasizes one supreme deity and the unification of "church and state" (i.e., *tawhīd*), and for that reason has a history of deep political involvement in the societies it has permeated, one cannot deny the longstanding conflict between the Sunna and Shi'a factions over succession to the Caliphate after the death of the Prophet, and schism that occurred within the Shi'a over the question of who among the descendents of 'Ali should be considered as the supreme leader (*imām*).

In addition, a longer look at the conditions under which Islamic law has been implemented and practiced will reveal more diversity than integration. For example, it was only from the ninth century on that Islamic Law was systemized based on not only the *Qur'an* (word of God) and *ḥadīth* (tradition, being an account of what the Prophet said and did), but also local social customs (*'āda*; *'urf*). Moreover, the Shi'a, together with the Shāfi'i, Ḥanafī, Ḥanbalī, and Mālikī schools of the Sunna all have their separate and unique legal traditions, into which the Muslim rank and file is divided. It is for this reason that persons had to be tried in the courts according to which of these traditions they belonged, in turn giving rise

to diversified state legal institutions for dealing with Muslims. In other words, although Islam presents what could be called “a united front” vis-à-vis the outside world, this cannot be said for its own internal cosmos [Sato 2004:56–59].

While Islam is a religion that attempts to determine political affairs going on around it, at the same time it is a religion determining every aspect of the everyday life it touches. For example, at the prayer service held at noon every Friday at the main mosque of every town, at the end of the *khutba*, a sermon which precedes it, the names of local political leaders are chanted. That is to say, once a week the residents of each region would be reminded of who their leaders were, and excluding the names from the sermon constituted a public declaration of rebellion.

Many Muslims avoid eating pork and drinking liquor, and in the evenings during the fasting of Ramaḍān, enjoy confectionaries indigenous to their locales. Mosque architecture has been deeply influenced by local custom in construction method, design, and decoration, as exemplified by the contrasting minaret and dome styles. Even the ban on intoxicating drinks is not universal, like in China where Muslim restaurants offer a wide variety of locally made and foreign alcoholic beverages.

In politics, law, as well as everyday life, Muslims have become tied to and influenced by non-Islamic local traditions of the “outside” world in which they reside. This is why coming to a proper understanding of Islam involves not only coming to grips with its borderless, common and integrated character, but also at the same time taking into sufficient account the way in which and extent to which Muslims have adapted to the local societies and cultures in which they have settled [Sato 2003:2–3].

The Novelty of Islamic Area Studies

Islamic Area Studies, which begins with an assessment of the present situation of the Islamic world and Islamic traits, sets out to verify its relationship to specific regional characteristics using the interdisciplinary methodology. This particular approach to the study of Islam, which at present is being pursued only in Japan, aims at accumulating an empirical, positivistic system of knowledge about Islam and Islamic culture through the historical study of the present situation and interregional comparison.

The idea for Islamic Area Studies was conceived in the early summer of 1996 when I was approached by the Japanese Ministry of Education about the possibility of implementing a new program based on innovative approaches to basic empirical research. In response, a 10-member

exploratory committee was formed at the Institute of Oriental Culture at the University of Tokyo, which after several meetings came to agreement on the overall research theme for the project: "Dynamic Approaches to Studying the Contemporary Islamic World: Information System-Building and Data Accumulation Aimed at Understanding Islam Now."

To this rather ambiguous theme, it was necessary to add a keyword that would form the nucleus of the project, which produced the idea of linking Islam to the research approach known as "area studies," which at first face would seem more "contradictory" than "dynamic," given the altogether different characters of conventional Islamic studies and area studies, the latter having come under criticism in the postwar era as a think-tank for American imperialism. On the other hand, successfully linking two areas of research characterized in the past by different, sometimes conflicting approaches, would certainly be innovative; and secondly, there is nothing in the area studies approach that makes it inherently predatory. To the contrary, its basic aim is to understand life and culture in specific regions holistically. In the case of Islamic Area Studies, the idea that in the process of the Islamization of a specific region, Islam will be in turn be indigenized.

2. PROJECTS AIMING AT ISLAMIC STUDIES IN POSTWAR JAPAN

"Urbanism in Islam"

Japan's first joint research project in Islamic studies was initiated by Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in 1967 and dealt with the topic of "Islamization." The project, which continued for ten years, was dominated by Japanese researchers, especially younger scholars.

The Urbanism in Islam project took over in 1988 under funding from the Ministry of Education and the directorship of Itagaki Yuzo of the Institute of Oriental Culture, the University of Tokyo. Until 1991, this project focused on urbanism as a characteristic feature of Islamic civilization and adopted a comparative approach in its attempt to clarify the various aspects of urban life in the Islamic world. During the three-year life of the project, two international conferences were held, producing six volumes of research published by the Middle East Culture Center [International Conference on Urbanism in Islam 1989, 1994], and an encyclopedia on the subject published by Aki shobō in 1992 [Itagaki and Goto 1992].²

Participating in the project were over 130 scholars from such diverse fields as history, geography, political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, and architecture. The international conference held in 1988 was attended by 70 foreign scholars from such places as China, Indonesia, India, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and the United States. The project was particularly successful in establishing an international network of researchers interested in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies.

“Islamic Area Studies”

The aforementioned “Dynamic Approaches to the Study of Contemporary Islam,” which began in 1997 under the direction of yours truly built on the experience of its two predecessors in setting the following three objectives.

(1) Discovery of new research methods

Considering the extent to which Islam has been globalized in the contemporary world, the geographical region to be covered by the project had to be extended from the traditional Islamic sphere of the Middle East and Central Asia to include China, South and Southeast Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, Africa, and the Americas. However, the main problem was how to link the study of Islam to the area studies approach. Although area studies were not unknown to researchers of Islam, researchers involved in area studies had been somewhat confused about how to deal with Islam in their work. What this project did, therefore, was to give scholars in both fields the opportunity to work together and build a fruitful dialogue that would hopefully lead to new ways of looking at the subject matter.

(2) Development of an information system conducive to Islamic Area Studies

Given the insufficient knowledge and use of computer technology in the field of Islamic studies, the project set about promoting the creation of source material databases for such Arabic script-based languages as Arabic, Persian, and Urdu and developing information processing techniques specially geared to the field.

(3) Training a new generation of scholars

While in terms of Japanese standards, there has been a recent increase in the number of researchers and an expansion of areas of interest in Middle Eastern and Islam studies, a comparison with the international community shows Japan insufficient in the involvement of its academic

community in the study of Islam vis-à-vis that subject's importance in the humanities and social sciences today. This is why the training of younger scholars equipped with the wherewithal to participate fully in the international community is indispensable to a better understanding of Islam in Japan [Sato 2003:6–7].

In order to fulfill the above objectives organizationally, a network was formed linking six existing research centers, including the Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology (coordinating center), Graduate School of Engineering, and Institute of Oriental Culture of the University of Tokyo, Sophia University's Institute of Asian Cultures, the National Museum of Ethnology's Area Studies Planning and Exchange Center, and the Toyo Bunko (Oriental Library). Over the five years during which the project was active, many research meetings, reading sessions, workshops, and international conferences were held, producing an eight-volume series in Japanese and two English language series (Islamic Area Studies Series, 5 vols., Kegan Paul International, 2000–2004; New Horizons in Islamic Studies, 5 vols., Routledge, 2003–2006), all containing the essential research accumulated during the project. The two English language series and the project's English language website literally put the field of Islamic Area Studies on the international academic map.

As to what was accomplished towards the project's three major objectives, the development of new research methods remains in the exploratory stages. As a means to consolidating the conventional research conducted to date on a discipline-by-discipline basis, two approaches were suggested: interregional comparison and the historical study of contemporary issues. Due in part to the fact that many of the project participants were historians by profession, the second approach was more enthusiastically explored than the first. Moreover, the comparative approach is far more time consuming than the historical approach, since it requires portraying the real image of a given region in terms of Islam.

In contrast, the project was successful in discovering a unique method for creating Arabic script databases at the Toyo Bunko, resulting in the ability to display Arabic, Persian, and Urdu language sources online and share them with others. This new technology is now being used to set up a joint use network of all interested institutes in Japan, before making it available to scholars throughout the world.

The project took every opportunity to involve younger scholars in its research gatherings, fieldwork abroad, and international exchange programs. In addition, younger scholars from such locations as Korea, Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia, and France were invited to Japan for one to two year terms to participate in joint research geared to breaking new ground

in understanding contemporary Islam [Sato 2003:11–12].

NIHU's Contribution

Four years after the original “Islamic Area Studies” project ended in 2002, just as the publication of the project’s research series was completed, voices of concern were raised about putting an end to such a successful network-based joint research effort.

It was the National Institute for the Humanities (NIHU), an inter-university organization, that came to the rescue with its own Islamic Area Studies Program, operated by a network of institutions centered around the Waseda University Institute of Islamic Area Studies (see Figure 1).

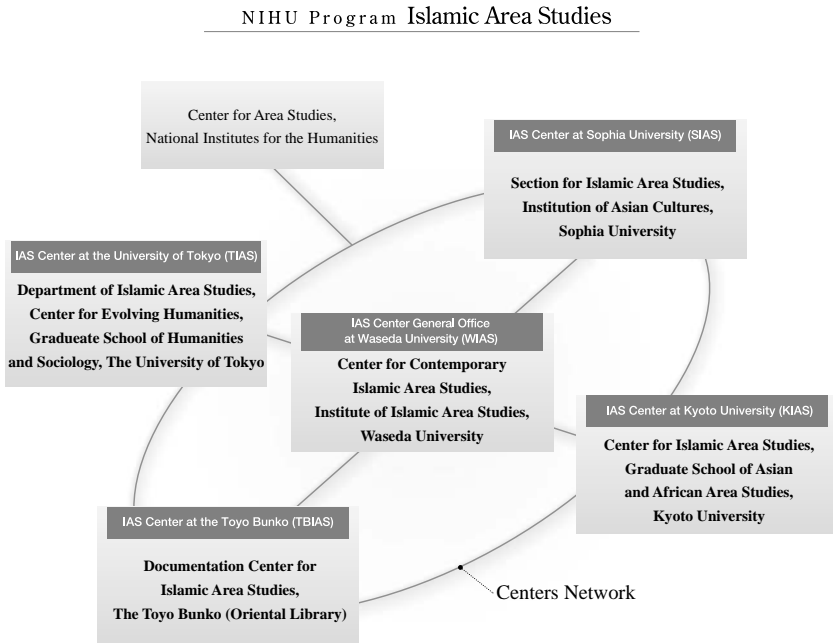


Figure 1 Initial NIHU Islamic Studies Program Organizational Chart

The Program’s three common goals are:

- 1) To create a system of inductive knowledge about the contemporary Islamic world through a) international joint research including scholars from regions under study and b) the analysis of the interre-

- lationship between Islam and specific regions from the viewpoints of both “outside observers” and “native scholars.”
- 2) To collect and catalogue the written source materials that are to form the basis of the joint research to be conducted, set up an information search system similar to that developed previously for Arabic script-based languages and compile the sources into database form for availability on an international scale.
 - 3) To strongly encourage younger scholars both in and out of Japan to participate in the Program for the purpose of fostering a new generation of Islamic studies scholars capable of conducting research on an international level.

While goals 2) and 3) were continuations from the previous project, goal 1) incorporated the new aspect of discovering new research methods in cooperation with scholars active in the regions under study.

3. NETWORK-BASED INTERNATIONAL JOINT RESEARCH

From Collegiate Nationalism to Network-Based Scholarship

The most characteristic feature of the Islamic Area Studies Program is its stark contrast to the conventional model for large research projects to date, based on the concept of Centers of Excellence (COE). COE-based projects are implemented by individual universities employing their own “national” resources in the pursuit of becoming a world leader in a particular area of research. As a former member of one COE evaluation committee, the atmosphere surrounding one of these centers can be described as nothing less than “dog-eat-dog” in that the model demands that an institution of higher learning with the capability of 100 expend the effort of 150. More often than not, under such abnormal conditions, projects fail to continue for more than five years, having expended all their energy, in spite of the axiom that the best research is achieved by more relaxed, longer term activity.

The NIHU Program had abandoned such a “nationalistic” approach to excellence in favor of international joint research articulated by a loose network of four universities and one research library, each with its own department of Islamic area studies. The plan is for the Program to support each of these departments (called Program Centers) in its own independent research and educational activities.

Research groups working at each Program Center will take advan-

tage its own special resources to help realize its own research goals.

Table 1 Research Groups and Themes According to Program Center

Center	Program Liaison	Research Subjects
Waseda Univ. Group I Group II	Sato Tsugitaka <i>Knowledge and Authority in Islam: A Study of Dynamism</i> <i>Muslim Networks in Asia</i>	Knowledge and Civilization of Islam
Univ. of Tokyo Group I Group II	Komatsu Hisao <i>Islam and Politics in Central Eurasia</i> <i>Structural Change in Middle East Politics</i>	Thought and Politics in Islamic Areas: Comparison and Relations
Sophia Univ. Group I Group II Group III	Kisaichi Masatoshi <i>Islamism, Social Movements, and Popular Movements</i> <i>Development of Islam in Southeast Asia</i> <i>Sufism and Popular Islam</i>	Societies and Cultures in the Islamic World
Kyoto Univ. Group I	Kosugi Yasushi <i>Basic Research on the International Organizations of the Islamic World</i>	International Organizations/ Institutions in the Islamic World
Toyo Bunko	Miura Toru	Constructing a System of Collecting and Studying Source Materials for Islamic Area Studies

Each Center will have about ten “main researchers” in charge of its Groups and select younger researchers to join them as “research affiliates.” At present, the Program has 61 principal researchers and 190 research associates. 14 of the 61 principals are scholars born and trained outside of Japan, which incorporates the spirit of the Program’s first goal (“outside observers” and “native scholars”) into its organizational makeup. This is the first time that foreign scholars have been invited to participate in the management and decision making of a publically funded Middle Eastern and Islamic studies project in Japan. On this note, the executive committee for first Program conference, “New Horizons in Islamic Area Studies: Islamic Scholarship Across Cultures and Continents,” held in Kuala Lumpur was headed by Hiroshima Metropolitan University Prof. Omar Farouk, a native of Malaysia.

Exploring the Possibilities of Joint Research

Each Program Center has chosen its goals, research themes, and person-

nel (see Table 1) under the Islamic Area Studies mandate of understanding contemporary Islam through the study of issues related to Islam as both a universal and regional phenomenon, and through a consideration of what has already been accomplished in the field.

Even a brief perusal of the Table will reveal that there is no group specifically assigned to study economic issues. However, the Kyoto Center has organized a sub-group in its international organization research that will concentrate on the topic of "Islamic finance." Therefore, what the Program consists of is five centers, four of which are divided into research groups studying every phase of Islamic culture and society, with the fifth acting as a collector, compiler, and supplier of source materials, databases, and technical support.

Even if a consolidated research system for Islamic Area Studies has been put in place, in order for that system to implement joint research on a large scale with visible results, there must be a means for coordinating the effort into a whole and consolidating the research done by group members who are all involved in conventional academic disciplines. The more mundane coordinating tasks, like planning, budget, and personnel are handled by a committee which meets about once every two months, while the consolidation of research is carried out at a plenary conference held annually in every March, where each of the five centers reports on its research activities. It is through these two venues that the five ships sailing their own courses in the seas of the Islamic Area Studies are made part of a fleet.

As to what is exactly meant by consolidating multi-discipline research, it is my understanding that it comprises activity of scholars with many diversified specialties working under shared research methods. This is why I have stressed the importance of "interregional comparison" and "the historical study of contemporary issues" in the process of joint research. Although there are other important methods that could be considered, the choice of the above-mentioned two approaches is the practical aspect that most of the scholars participating in the Program are capable of adopting and sharing one or the other. For example, the Waseda Center has adopted the historical approach in studying Islamic knowledge and civilization, while the University of Tokyo Center has chosen interregional comparison as a means to understanding Islamic politics and thought.

Given the above-mentioned organization, research goals, and methodology implemented under the strong leadership of the Program center liaisons, there is no reason why joint research in the areas of the humanities and social sciences cannot become a viable alternative to COE

“nationalism.”

Toward a Systematic Body of Empirical Knowledge

During the first Islamic Area Studies project, I expressed the opinion that the correct reading and interpretation of even one single document, be it hundreds of years old, should be considered an important step in the understanding of the region it refers to. One of the most important attributes for any successful joint research project is to dispense with abstract theoretical discourse from the start and concentrate on making the most of straightforward individual research. Individual, hypothesis-based research goes hand in hand with network-based joint study. This is why even the research done on old Arabic manuscripts, Persian documents, and Ottoman edicts should be considered as contributing to our understanding of contemporary regional society.

It goes without saying that the final goal of Islamic Area Studies is from start to end a better understanding of the present situation through analysis based on a positivistic examination of the facts. This aspect is what makes the field survey, collection, and compilation of the whole gamut of written source materials—documents, books, and periodicals, whether printed or handwritten—an indispensable first step. Along with religion, philosophy, politics, and economics, such aspects a literature, film, music, and painting, not to mention the necessities of everyday life—food, clothing, and shelter—need to be understood in an integrated manner.

Moreover, in addition to the almost endless list of research topics related to Islamic Area Studies, geographically we are talking about a contemporary Islamic world appreciably wider than merely the Mideast and Central Asia, today encompassing China, South and Southeast Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, Africa, and the two Americas. On the other hand, the formation of an empirical body of knowledge about this vast region can only be achieved by the accumulation of research done one step at a time within each of the many diversified disciplines concerned. This is the challenge the Project faces in becoming the research effort to discover how a group of individually unique and different regions have in one way or another come to hold Islam as a common denominator.

4. NEW DEVELOPMENTS OF ISLAMIC AREA STUDIES

The new project which started in 2008 has been officially designated

as “a Ministry of Education funded project to reinforce Joint Research Centers in the Humanities and Social Sciences.” According to the explanation given by the Ministry of Education and Science, “The purpose of the project in question is to expand within the sphere of public and private institutions of higher learning the building of bases of operations for conducting joint research within the humanities and social sciences, in order to utilize the human and material resources accumulated on the university level in the tasks of 1) promoting academic competition among institutions, while forming networks among their researchers, and 2) strengthening research systems and infrastructure through promoting the joint use of the nation’s scientific capital.”

The Program was the only regional studies proposal accepted by the Ministry of Education among the responses to its general call for applications in the fields of regional studies, political economy, clothing design, sociology, and economic policy studies. What this means in fiscal terms is a greatly fortified base of operations for the Islamic Area Studies Program, for which NIHU will cover the cost of research and personnel, the Ministry-funded university’s involved will provide space and utility costs, while the Program itself will be responsible for future improvements in research facilities, clerical affairs, and additions of younger researchers to the groups.

In terms of organization, the basic system of five centers administered by the Waseda Main Center will remain in tact; however some new features have been added, as shown graphically in Figure 2.

To begin with, the Program Centers will comply with the inclusion of private universities as national joint use facilities, according to the Ministry of Education’s explanation cited above.

Secondly, the five centers will expand their public advertisements for new research ideas, with which to form new research groups or supplement existing ones.

Finally, the Waseda Center has been converted into an independent research institute, known as the Organization for Islamic Area Studies, meaning that the university will fund its research and clerical staffs, enabling it to fully serve the Program as its administrative arm.

As to how our adventure will proceed, one thing is certain: the functioning of a more and more complex program will require an equal amount of initiative and leadership on the part of the five liaisons to keep things ship-shape. To quote the *Qur’an* (2: 227), “God bestows wisdom on those he favors.”

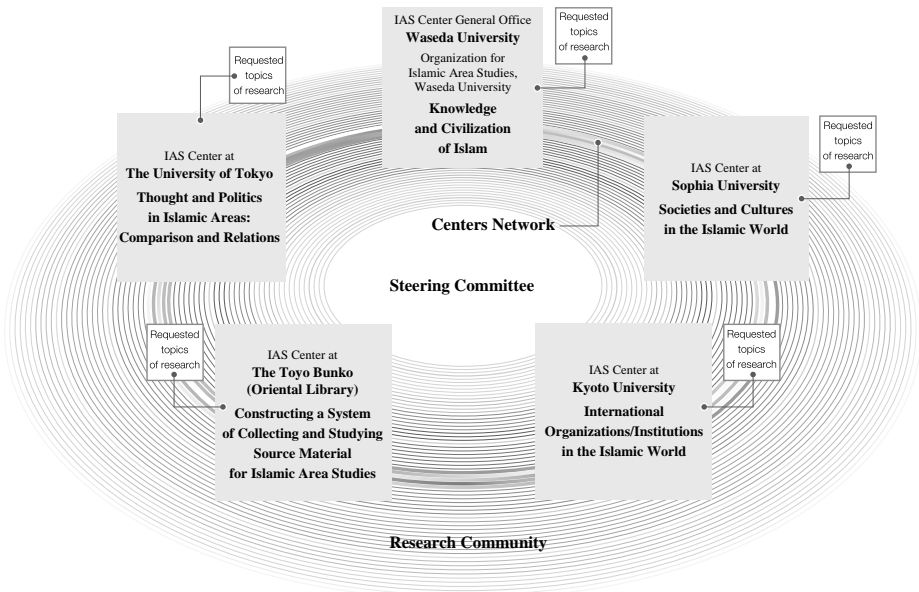


Figure 2 New Organization Chart

NOTES

- 1 *Islamic Area Studies Series (Islām chiiki kenkyū sōsho* in Japanese), 8 vols., Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 2003–05.
- 2 After the Project *Islamic Urban Studies* was published to survey the tendencies of Islamic urban studies for Arabic, Iranian, and Turkish regions [Haneda and Miura 1994].

WORKS CITED

- Haneda Masashi, and Miura Toru, eds. 1994. *Islamic urban studies: Historical review and perspectives*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International.
- International Conference on Urbanism in Islam. 1989. *The proceedings of International Conference on Urbanism in Islam (ICUIT), October 22–28, 1989, the Middle Eastern Culture Center, Tokyo, Japan*. 5 vols. Tokyo:

- Research Project “Urbanism in Islam”; the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan.
- . 1994. *The proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Urbanism in Islam (ICUIT II), November 27–29, 1989, the Middle Eastern Culture Center, Tokyo, Japan*. Tokyo: Research Project “Urbanism in Islam”; the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan.
- Itagaki Yuzo, and Goto Akira, eds. 1992. *Jiten Islām no toshisei* (Encyclopedia of Urbanism in Islam). Tokyo: Aki shobō.
- Sato Tsugitaka. 2003. Islām chiiki kenkyū wa nani o mezasuka? (What is the aim of Islamic Area Studies?). In *Islām chiiki kenkyū no kanōsei* (The scope and potential of Islamic Area Studies), ed. Sato Tsugitaka, 1–18. Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai.
- . 2004. *Islām no kokka to ōken* (State and kingship in Islam). Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.