



Imran Fazal

DPhil Funding Overview

THE REVIVAL · UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD · 2026

I. Who am I?

I am a fully qualified Islamic scholar, with a background in teaching Western philosophy at the University of Oxford, and a decade of experience in senior roles in the UK civil service.

That's the CV version. What it doesn't tell you is the journey I took on the way. Philosophy at Oxford kept me intellectually stimulated and occupationally gripped for over five years, first as a student then as a tutor to undergraduate students. Looking back, I think it was both the best and the worst possible preparation I could have had for traditional Islamic Studies in Damascus and Cairo.

The best, because it sharply honed my skills of conceptual analysis and testing of arguments, and in the early Islamic intellectual tradition scholarly positions were considered only as strong as the arguments put forward for them; and the leading scholars were those who rigorously tested each and every argument. That training meant that I could access this oldest layer of Islamic learning and engage with it on its own terms.

And the worst because, as I quickly learned to my genuine and initially incredulous surprise, this civilisation-sustaining methodological heritage had receded so far into the background in contemporary Islamic education that even some of the 'best' centres of Islamic learning now offer little more than rote learning and superficial analysis. "Stick to the book" came the teacher's cry when a poor student in many a class I attended would ask a question to understand what they were reading!

Of course, there are still excellent scholarly minds working within the traditional framework, and I got to know and benefit from some of them over the 12 years of full-time Islamic study that followed. But they had emerged despite the system, not because of it; and they had spent decades independently coming to grips with the early tradition, assessing arguments, and presenting their findings in the hope that their colleagues might hear and reflect.

By around 2007, whilst still studying in the Middle East, I had heard and reflected, and I set myself on the same path.

II. What do I do?

Since then, whilst completing my scholarly training, and then fulfilling the demands of a full-time job, I have been working on several comprehensive books that restore and develop the dialectical practice of early Islamic scholarship, and that I am writing as my contribution to its urgently required revival.

I have been blessed to teach some of this material to students in the Middle East and the West. Many of these are imams with their own communities, some are well-known Islamic scholars or established academics in the West. Collectively, these thought leaders are already disseminating some of the distinctive ideas and approaches in my work.

III. What problem is my work focussed on?

Islamic religious scholarship is broadly stagnant, and this problem recurs almost wherever Muslims are found, because it is structural. The raw material of Islamic education, the intellectual input which forms the mind of the Islamic Studies student, and gets outputted as sermons, pastoral support, opinion pieces, fatwas, laws, ways of organising mosques, general norms and behaviours — in short, the instructional books that end up shaping directly and indirectly the Muslim culture that we see around us — these primary building blocks are themselves now decayed and unfit for purpose.

My work has one focus: addressing this problem directly by re-engineering those building blocks. That means extensive and rigorous academic work with primary classical Arabic texts to identify, analyse and develop the best of our classical intellectual heritage and present it in a series of works that impact how Muslim scholars, and the communities and cultures they shape, think about Islam.

IV. Why the DPhil?

The DPhil at Oxford is the next phase of this work. There is a time for deep work, much of which I have done over the past 20+ years; and for direct exposure to real-world problems and honing skills of delivery and implementation, which my decade in the civil service has provided. And there is a time for getting your ideas out to a wider audience, subjecting them to a high standard of academic critique, establishing a research community around them, building a secure and aligned career to

free up your time for publishing, speaking, mentoring and, ultimately, making a positive tangible impact; this is that time for me, and the DPhil will, God willing, pave the way for this.

My DPhil application was awarded a rare set of full marks (40/40) by the academic review panel at Oxford University. The research topic will allow me to show in one focussed but significant area — the medieval Islamic discussion of when war against non-Muslims is justified — how to rediscover the lost insights of an Islamic tradition that was more plural and humanitarian than is often thought today; and in a way that is neither apologetic nor defensive, but instead is, by the philosophical, analytical and historical scholarship standards it sets, an exemplar for future work.

V. What does your support enable?

Financially, making the move away from professional work back into academic study means relinquishing a stable income. That makes external funding necessary so that I can pay the costs and devote the time needed for the DPhil. Completion of the DPhil will in turn produce outputs and, if these are successful, impacts which I would group into three main areas.

First, recentring the conversation about Islam in academia. Academic Islamic Studies in the West often reflects an outsider's perspective lacking real immersion in the texts, and I hope to change this. If I'm funded to do the DPhil, I plan to pursue a full-time academic career, publish the DPhil research as a scholarly monograph, produce a more accessible version for a general audience, and aim to establish myself as a serious scholar of Islamic law and intellectual history through a regular output of articles, books, discussions and talks on the topics that matter to Muslims today.

Second, raising the bar for our everyday conversations about Islam. In many of these we find ourselves caught between two extremes of Islamo-rejection and hate on one side, and apologetism for things we shouldn't be holding onto on the other; and both are often united in sharing the same superficial reading of Islamic teaching because they don't have access to anything else. Again, I hope to change this. Once established, I won't be an ivory tower academic: I will make it my mission to write for and empower broader audiences, to publicly represent with regularity and persuasive force, and to have a tangible impact on public policy and communications, in the way that I have practised behind closed doors in my civil service work relating to Muslim communities.

Third, and most fundamentally, delivering a body of expert scholarly writings for the 'ulama and directly teaching a new generation of scholars, with the aim of building on others' efforts to help arrest and reverse the decline in Muslim religious scholarship with all its social impacts. As with the Western academic side of things, I will focus on a regular output of work, starting with critical editions of long-neglected Arabic texts, and moving on to dedicated Arabic-language works in Islamic law, theology and hadith with three aims: reviving *ijtihad*, or critical thinking, within the Islamic sciences; rediscovering and documenting the huge breadth and often facilitating nature of

classical opinions within Islam; rebuilding a syllabus and intellectual infrastructure that once again produces scholarship that is relevant, critical and authentic.

VI. What are the costs?

Funding requirement for fees, accommodation and living costs: **c. £45–50k per year, over 3 years.**
(Figures from University of Oxford.)

The Revival — supporting Imran Fazal's DPhil at the University of Oxford · info@therevival.org.uk