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Reaching for the Crescent

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Reaching for the Crescent

*Aspirations of Singapore Islamic
Studies Graduates and the Challenges*

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PREFACE

In the 1990s, Singapore government leaders raised questions as to whether Islamic education in the country adequately equips the Malay/Muslim community with necessary skills and knowledge to survive in the modern world. Students of religious sciences in full-time madrasahs were equated with school dropouts and deemed unprepared for the knowledge-based economy (KBE). Consequently, Malay/Muslim community leaders sought to readjust madrasah education to meet contemporary needs, and a number of the full-time religious schools underwent major revamp while the rest continue to be run the same way. Attention towards madrasah underperformance somewhat dissipated after the turn of the millennium: madrasahs promised to perform as well as national schools, agreed to work closely with the state's curriculum guidelines, and the government faced community pressure not to close them down, even though they had never threatened to do so.

Now, Malay/Muslim leaders are focusing on the downstream of Islamic education. Majority of the *asatizah* complete at least twelve years of education in one of the local madrasahs. The concern of the state is no longer about the students' achievements or the lack of them, but their attitudes, thought, and ideology. Already Islamic studies has been under global scrutiny, particularly after its graduates are found promoting radical, puritan, or conservative ideas to the masses. The state is also worried that the graduates are unable to contextualize religion based on Singapore values. However, in post-9/11, the state sees the

asatizah's worth in countering radicalism and terrorism through promoting "moderate" religious discourses, but all these would require efforts and resources to guide them. Without these guides, the asatizah will not be able to adjust and may end up displacing the local Malay identity with foreign ones depending on where they complete their religious education. We hear discussions about Malays turning to become "Arabized" as they inch closer to become more religious.

The subject of radicalism and terrorism has shaped much of the discourse on Islamic education that the bigger issues concerning Islamic studies graduates are overlooked. For instance, why do parents continue sending their children to madrasah, with the hope that they will become an asatizah and graduate with an Islamic studies degree? Every year, there will be excess demand for 400 primary one places for madrasah enrolment.

Since 2018, Malay political leaders have paid close attention to the asatizah community, with numerous schemes to understand their concerns, and meet their needs. This is a reversal of past nuances where their future would be better off in technical sectors. Towards the end of Yaacob Ibrahim's era as the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, he announced the building of an Islamic college to meet the needs of the asatizah community. While the factors that led to such programmes were never explained, one senses the doubt placed on returning students from overseas, particularly from the Middle East. Under the leadership of Masagos Zulkifli, more attention has been given to the asatizah. For example, he set up a committee to look into the future of asatizah (COFA), and started many initiatives to look into raising their pay and increase job opportunities for them. In June 2020, in line with his Hari Raya Aidilfitri message, he announced another new initiative called "Wakaf Singapura" to gather more resources from the community to meet the needs of asatizah.

This book examines the aspirations and challenges facing Islamic studies graduates after returning from their overseas studies. Moving away from the study of Islam and madrasah education from the standpoint of security, it seeks to understand how their

religious training shapes their religious milieu and how their ideas will impact society.

This book took three years in the making. It would not have been possible without the support from the Social Science Research Thematic Grant (SSRTG) of the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE). We also wish to thank our research assistants Nur Diyana Zait and Fauzan Arif Roslee for all the assistance rendered. More than 400 Islamic studies graduates and current undergraduates have participated in this study. We wish to thank them for their patience and willingness to come forward to make this study possible. We are heartened that some came forward voluntarily to share their stories and perspectives with us.

We also like to thank the following institutions: Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah, Association of Singaporean Students in IIUM (ASIIUM), University of Malaya Singapore Student Council (UMSC), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia – Singapura (USIM SG), The Singaporean Students Welfare Assembly in Cairo (Perkemas), Singapore Students' Association in Jordan (SIRAJ), Ittihad Mahasiswa Singapura Al Mamlakah Al Arabia As Saudia (IMAM SG), Andalus, Al-Zuhri, and Pergas (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association). Assistance from the following individuals was also solicited throughout the research: Nur Laila Khalid, Diyana Hamzah, Yazid Mohamad Ali, Zalman Ahmad Ali, Muhammad Redhuan Goh, Syed Muhammad Aljunied, Nurshirah Tabrani, Siti Nur Khairiah, Nur Hikmah Md Ali, Amirul Zulkilmi Zulkifli, Bazilah Abu Baker, Syafiqah Md Taufek, Nadya Muhammad Haifan, and Muhammad Irfan Mohamad Noor. We also wish to thank Taufiq Majeed (Student Career and Welfare Office), Lukman Afandi and Mahmoud Mathlub (Asatizah Recognition Scheme) for assisting us in reaching out to the asatizah community.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Ahmadiyah	An Islamic sect whose followers consider Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a nineteenth-century religious leader, to be a messianic reformer of Islam.
Andalus	A part-time Islamic school in Singapore
API	Islamic Studies Academy (University of Malaya)
ARB	Asatizah Recognition Board
ARS	Asatizah Recognition Scheme
Asatizah	Religious teachers. Also used as a singular form.
Azhari	A scholar/graduate from Al-Azhar University
BA	Bachelor of Arts
<i>Berita Harian</i>	<i>Malay Daily</i> , a Malay-language newspaper in Singapore
CASIS	Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science, and Civilisation
CE	Compulsory Education
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
COFA	Committee on Future Asatizah
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease

CPE	Continuous Professional Education
CPF	Central Provident Fund
Dars	A traditional study circle with a religious scholar discussing Islamic beliefs, ideas, and values
Edusave	An educational scheme in Singapore
Fatwa	A religious opinion issued by a qualified individual, such as a mufti, from the perspective of Islamic law
Fiqh	Islamic jurisprudence
Hadith	Tradition of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings, sayings, and actions
Haj	An annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca (Saudi Arabia)
Halaqah	A traditional gathering with a religious scholar discussing Islamic beliefs, ideas, and values
Hanafi	One of the four Sunni schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
Hanbali	One of the four Sunni schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
Hudud laws	Punishments under Islamic law according to the Quran
IAIN	Indonesian State Islamic Universities
IB	International Baccalaureate
Ibadi	A third branch of Islam, next to Sunni and Shi'ism. The rise of Ibadi Islam predates the divergence of Sunni and Shia Islam.
ICON	Islam in Context (a programme run by Muis for returning graduates)
IIIT	International Institute of Islamic Thought
IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
IMAM	Ittihad Mahasiswa Singapura Al Mamlakah Al Arabia As Saudia
Imamiyah	A Shia sect

ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISTAC	International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization
IUM	Islamic University of Madinah
Ja'fari	A Shia sect
JC	Junior College (Pre-university colleges in Singapore)
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
JMS	Joint Madrasah System
KBE	Knowledge-Based Economy
KUIS	International Islamic College of Selangor
KUSZA	Sultan Zainal Abidin Islamic College. Currently known as UniSZA.
LBKM	Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
Madrasah	An Islamic school
Maliki	One of the four Sunni schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
Maulid	Celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday
Mazhab	Schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
MEC	The Majlis Pelajaran Melayu (Malay Education Council)
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
Mufti	A person of high Islamic authority conferred with the power to provide rulings (<i>fatwas</i>) on religious matters using Islamic law.
Muis	Islamic Religious Council of Singapore
MYF	Muslim Youth Forum
Naqli	Revealed
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
PAP	People's Action Party
PAS	Islamic Party of Malaysia

PCICS	Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies
Pergas	Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association
Perkemas	The Singaporean Students Welfare Assembly in Cairo, Egypt
Pesantren	Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia
PH	Pakatan Harapan
PN	Perikatan Nasional
Pondok	Another word for Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia
PSLE	Primary School Leaving Examination
Ramadhan	A month in the Islamic calendar where abled Muslims are obligated to fast
RED	Religious Education Department
ROMM	Registry of Muslim Marriages
RRG	Religious Rehabilitation Group
SCWO	Student Career and Welfare Office
Shafie	One of the four Sunni schools of thought under Islamic jurisprudence
Sharia	Islamic law
Sharia Court	Islamic Court
Shia	A follower of Shiism. The word “Shiite” is also used to describe a follower of Shiism.
Shiism	The second largest denomination of Islam. In contrast to Sunni Muslims, the Shiah consider Prophet Muhammad’s cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, to be his successor.
SIRAJ	Singapore Students’ Association in Jordan
SLO	Student Liaison Officer
SRDS	Student Resource and Development Secretariat
Sufi	Practitioner of Sufism
Sufism	Islamic mysticism
Sunnah	The teachings, sayings, and actions of Prophet Muhammad

Sunni	The largest denomination of Islam. In contrast to the Shiah, Sunnis consider Prophet Muhammad's companion, Abu Bakr, to be his successor. The word "Sunni" is also used to describe a follower of Sunni Islam.
SUSS	Singapore University of Social Sciences
Tablighi Jamaat	A Muslim missionary movement which rectifies the way in which Islam is practised. The revivalist movement first originated in India in the 1920s.
UJ	University of Jordan
UKM	National University of Malaysia
Ulama	A religious scholar
UM	University of Malaya
Ummah	Brotherhood
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UNISSA	Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University
UniSZA	Sultan Zainal Abidin University. Formerly known as KUSZA.
USIM	Islamic Science University of Malaysia
Ustaz	A male religious teacher
Ustazah	A female religious teacher
Usuluddin	Islamic theology
UTM	Technology University of Malaysia
Wahhabi-Salafi	A follower of Wahhabi-Salafism
Wahhabi-Salafism	A puritan orientation which holds that only Quranic interpretations, Prophetic narrations, and opinions from the first three generations after the Prophet's death are considered authentic.
WISE	World Islamic Sciences and Education University
YU	Yarmouk University
Zaidi	A Shiah sect
ZU	Zarqa University

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION, SPELLING AND OTHER CONVENTIONS

This book relies on primary materials based on the writings and interviews with Islamic religious elites. Most of these writings and interviews are in Malay and English. Articles written or responses spoken in the Malay language are translated into English by the authors.

The book carries the respondents' original quotes as close as possible, but the authors will exercise discretion to edit them for better flow without undermining the essence of the interviews.

Arabic terms are retained, but how the Malays use the terms in their everyday context are taken into consideration. For example, the term *ulama* in Arabic is the plural for *alim* (religious scholar). But for the Malays, the term *ulama* is also used as singular. Similarly, the term *asatizah* (Islamic religious teachers) can refer to both singular and plural, and we will not refer to the plural as *asatizahs*.

Non-English terms will be *italicized* when first introduced, but subsequent use of the terms will not be italicized.

Direct quotes will be in double inverted commas "...", and quotes within quotes will be in single inverted commas '...'. Quotes of more than three lines will be indented.

Malay and Indonesian names are identified by their first names. For example, Mahathir Mohamad will be cited as Mahathir and not Mohamad (father's name). English and Chinese names will be cited according to their surnames, so John Lee will be "Lee"

and David Foster will be “Foster”. Arabic names will be treated in the same manner as English names, so Syed Hussein Alatas will be cited as “Alatas”. Middle names such as “bin”, “binte” “ibnu”, “the son of” or “the daughter of” will be excluded, thus “Norshahril bin Saat” will be “Norshahril Saat”.

Names will also exclude academic titles “Dr” and “Professor” and religious titles “Ustaz”, “Haji”, “Mufti”, “Sahibus Samahah” or “Kyai Haji”. So Dr Mohamad Fatris Bakaram will be addressed as Mohamad Fatris and Professor Quraish Shihab as Quraish Shihab.

All monetary figures will be converted to Singapore dollars (SGD).