Singapore | 30 April 2019

Islamic Universities and Their Impact on Singapore Graduates

Norshahril Saat and Fauzan Arif Roslee*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Typically, Singaporean students reading Islamic studies choose to study at one of the universities in the Middle East. The Al-Azhar University (in Egypt), the Islamic University of Madinah (in Saudi Arabia), and universities in Jordan are among the more popular choices.

- The formation of Islamic universities in Malaysia since the 1980s has given these students alternatives. The International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), is the second most popular destination for madrasah students after Al-Azhar.

- This Perspective examines the pros and cons of studying in these universities. It hopes to inform the planning for the Singapore Islamic College (SIC), if it is even necessary to have one in the first place.

- Concerns regarding Islamic education should go beyond the fields of security and terrorism and the threat of “Arabisation”. Rather, the primary focus should be how Islamic education can facilitate graduates’ immersion into Singapore’s secular and multi-racial setting.

* Norshahril Saat is Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. He is the Principal Investigator for a project entitled “Singapore’s Islamic Studies Graduates: Their Role and Impact in a Plural Society” funded by Ministry of Education’s (SSRTG). Fauzan Arif Roslee is Research Officer with the Institute.
INTRODUCTION

In January 2019, the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs issued a Restriction Order (RO) under the Internal Security Act (ISA) on Murad Said, an Islamic religious teacher. His student Razali Abas was also issued with the same edict. Both were found propagating segregationist ideologies. Murad had once been recognized under the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS)—an accreditation scheme administered by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis)—but was removed after making insensitive remarks about other faith communities on social media. The fact that Murad was a graduate of the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM) only heightened concerns about Islamic studies graduates from the Middle East; whether religious education in that region is ideal, progressive or compatible with Singapore’s context.

To be sure, concerns about the quality of religious education in the Middle East should not overshadow the overall reform agenda of Islamic studies graduates and madrasah students from Singapore. The majority of the students going to Middle East universities are neither radicalized, nor have they become more in tune with Arabic culture and lifestyle. The problem is not about them studying in the Middle East, but how these graduates remain in line with Singapore’s secular and multicultural tenets. More important is how effective their narrow academic training facilitates their absorption into the mainstream economy.

The following compares the modes of education offered by the universities in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia. It makes two points. First, there is no one mode of learning in Middle Eastern universities. For example, the ideology and modes of transmission at the Al-Azhar University differs significantly from the University of Madina (IUM), and universities in Jordan. Second, what is taught in the universities does not necessarily shape the type of graduates produced. The concern should instead be about how local madrasahs prepare the students before they embark on their education abroad rather than what is disseminated in foreign countries.

ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Currently, there are around 500 Singaporean students studying in the Middle East. Most of them are enrolled in four main universities offering Islamic studies: the Al-Azhar University (Al-Azhar) in Egypt, the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM) in Saudi Arabia, and the University of Jordan (UJ) and Yarmouk University (YU), both in Jordan. More than half of them are enrolled at the Al-Azhar University, followed by Yarmouk, UJ, and IUM respectively. Egypt remains to be the most popular destination among Singaporean students because of its long history as a centre of Islamic learning, while Jordan has been gaining popularity in recent years. A few Singaporean students have also chosen to pursue Islamic studies at other institutions in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, Turkey, Qatar, and Morocco.

The Al-Azhar University, a thousand-year old institution with a longstanding tradition of Islamic scholarship, helms the public’s recognition as the seat of the Sunni school of thought. Furthermore, the University has always been viewed as the champion of “moderate” Islam, especially since 9/11. It has also been referred to as the “Oxford of the Islamic world”. On top of Al-Azhar’s longstanding history, one should not overlook the fact that the University is located in the cosmopolitan city of Cairo, which for centuries had
been the centre of great civilizations. Beyond the Al-Azhar’s syllabus, students have the option of joining traditional study circles or *halaqa* where they congregate around a sheikh to read classical literature on the various branches of Islamic studies. The *halaqa* which are typically held in various mosques in Cairo, supplements the university’s curricula. They offer students a familial master-student relationship, reminiscent of the concept of tutelage in traditional Islamic scholarship.\(^3\) The University is popular among Singapore students because some prominent figures from the Malay-Muslim community have graduated from there. One of them is the former Mufti of Singapore, Syed Isa Semait, who was among the first few Singaporeans to pursue a degree in Al-Azhar in the early 1960s. He returned to Singapore in 1969 before becoming the Mufti in 1972.\(^4\)

The general concern about studying in Al-Azhar is its mode of learning. Until recently, classes were not compulsory, and as a result attendance for some students had been poor. Moreover, lectures tend to be conducted in colloquial Arabic rather than standard Arabic (the language of the Quran and how madrasah students are taught). Students also grapple with poor facilities. For instance, administrative matters are still carried out manually, and the University’s library resources are limited.\(^5\) Despite being the oldest university in the world, its library facilities are inaccessible, and students normally buy their own books rather than borrow them from the library. Al-Azhar is also backward in terms of how it assesses students. There are almost no written assignments, and students are assessed through the annual final exams solely. Some of these exams are conducted orally—such as in studies of the Quran and issues in Islamic jurisprudence—and test students’ ability to memorize rather than their ability to think critically.

When the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM) opened its doors in 1961, and offered full-board scholarship to each of its students, the University became attractive to Singaporean students. Class attendance is compulsory for IUM. Beyond the classroom, students also attend *halaqa* sessions at the Prophet’s Mosques. However, it would be interesting to note that the type of *halaqa* that students attend depends on the student’s Islamic orientation. For instance, although students can choose to attend *halaqa* based on numerous schools of jurisprudence, Singaporeans in Al-Azhar, who predominantly subscribe to the Shafie school of jurisprudence, tend to attend *halaqa* held by sheikhs who affirm that orientation. Similarly, Singaporeans in IUM, a university that also subscribes to the country’s Hanbali school of jurisprudence, would attend *halaqa* held by sheikhs of the same orientation. The *halaqa* that students can choose to attend is also limited to sheikhs that have been accredited by the authorities to instruct a *halaqa* in the mosque.

Students enrolled into the IUM are generally funded by lucrative scholarships offered by the Saudi Arabia government. They are provided with free lodging and meals on top of their monthly allowance for personal expenses. Students are also issued with return flight tickets to and from Saudi Arabia each year. These students cannot do part-time work, and if caught, will be sent back to their home country. A few former students at IUM recounted that they are expected to adhere strictly to the official creed in Saudi Arabia, and cannot uphold other from those officially sanctioned by the Saudi Arabia religious establishment. In light of this, the IUM has not been able to attract as many students as Al-Azhar. The majority of Singapore Muslims adopt the Shafie school of jurisprudence (in Sunni Islam) where traditional Sufism is not uncommonly practiced and recognized. Typically, they are open to rituals passed down from generation to generation in the Malay world, such as the *kenduri* (communal feasting), *ziarah* (visiting graves of pious Muslims), and *maulid* (celebration of
Prophet’s birthday). These are rituals which the Saudi religious establishment frown upon. This, however, should not be a cause for concern because such differences have existed within the Islamic world for centuries. A majority of students returning from the university have accommodated well into the mainstream, and are cognizant of the nuances in religio-cultural practices within the Malay/Muslim community. This dispels the perception that IUM graduates are susceptible to extreme and radical ideas. The case of the religious teacher mentioned above is an isolated case.

The positive aspect of the IUM is that it allows students to make a switch from Singapore national schools to religious studies. Some students had studied in Singapore national schools before making this switch, and have been clear that they would want to pursue a religious vocation upon graduation. While not from Singapore madrasahs, they have been able to pick up Arabic, albeit with some perseverance. The flipside to this is that these students may not fully grasp alternative views taught in Singapore’s madrasahs which is in line with the culture of Singaporean Muslims. However, these students who make the switch are clear in their objectives: that they want to become religious teachers and have no pretensions about being able to master both worldly and other-worldly knowledge.

Universities in Jordan, however, provide options for Singapore students. While many Malaysians have been studying in Jordan since the 1990s, the first Singaporean to graduate with a degree in Islamic studies from the University of Jordan did so in the early 2000s. Before then, the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education did not recognize certificates issued by Singapore’s madrasahs, which effectively prevented students from applying to universities in the Kingdom. Incidentally, Jordan became an alternative educational destination after the Arab Spring in 2011, which saw Singaporean students evacuated from institutions of learning in Egypt and Yemen. The appeal of Jordan universities can be attributed to its cosmopolitan outlook, structured university system and relatively advanced facilities. These are in contrast to Al-Azhar’s lack of systematic administration and the University of Madinah’s low acceptance rates as well as a strictly male-only campus.

While Jordan has at least five different universities offering Islamic studies, almost all Singaporeans are known to be enrolled in only two of these, namely the University of Jordan (UJ) in Amman and Yarmouk University (YU) in Irbid. Collectively, there are currently about one hundred and fifty Singaporean students studying in both universities, with YU seeing a higher concentration of Singaporean students than in UJ. In recent years, the appeal of these two Jordanian universities has increased among Singaporean students as more viable alternatives to Al-Azhar and IUM.

In terms of the curricula, Jordanian universities tend to be more open to diverse opinions from a broad range of schools of thought within the Islamic tradition. This can be attributed to the Kingdom’s pioneering efforts in promoting The Amman Message in 2004, which recognizes different sects in Sunnism and Shiism as being within the fold of the Islamic faith. Besides, students are assessed through writing assignments and final exams every semester, according to standards expected of a modern university.

Beyond the University, however, students in Jordan have less opportunities to attend halāqa as there are not as many sheikhs presiding over those sessions as in mosques around Cairo and Madinah. Also, whether the moderate discourse discussed at the state level has trickled down into the campuses remains doubtful. Current Singaporean undergraduates in Jordan
we spoke to are not fully aware of the Amman Message. Also, it is too early to assess the quality of religious graduates coming out from the university, especially in terms of the mastery of classical religious traditions. Some Jordanian graduates, particularly those from Singapore’s neighbouring countries, have demonstrated conservative inclinations such as Salafi-Wahhabism, Muslim Brotherhood ideas, and exclusivist Sufism. Being too open and not grounded in tradition also allow students to be influenced by foreign ideas which may have negative effects on Singaporeans. For instance, a Singaporean graduate from a Jordan university shared that he had once frequented – upon invitation from other international students – *halaqa* sessions organized by the Al-Ahbash movement. Initially, he was not aware of the ideological leanings of the movement until he realized its dogmatic approach. The movement, which was founded by Shaykh Abdullah Al-Harari Al-Habashi who hailed from Ethiopia (and hence “Al-Ahbash” or the Ethiopians), has been described as a “radical neo-traditionalist ideology” that has a tendency of excommunicating its critics.6

**ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Currently, there are more than 300 Singaporeans pursuing Islamic studies in five universities in Malaysia, namely the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Islamic Science University Malaysia (USIM), University of Malaya (UM), Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

Established in 1983, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is the most popular among Singaporeans. About 200 students from Singapore are studying there. This appeal can be attributed to several factors, such as the existence of an incomparably active international student body. This diversity is also mirrored in the university’s faculty members, especially in the various Islamic studies departments, thus building IIUM’s credibility to attract students who would otherwise have traveled to the Middle East.

On top of that, IIUM’s use of English and Arabic languages is also the pulling factor for Singaporean students. Other Malaysian universities retain the Malay language as the medium of academic instruction. Lectures and classes are compulsory for IIUM students, just as in any other university across Malaysia. By and large, universities in Malaysia operate according to the standards that are expected of a modern university. Thus written assignments, class discussions, as well as mid-term and final examinations are the normal routine of every undergraduate in Malaysia. However, different universities or Islamic studies departments were first established with different ideals in mind.

For instance, IIUM was built based on an educational philosophy termed as “Islamization of Knowledge”, the university designs its modules to suit the framework that human knowledge – be it the natural sciences or the humanities – should be directly or otherwise linked to the principles of Islam so as “to lead towards the recognition of Allah”.7 Sharing a similar ideal, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) was also established to reflect a philosophy that “integrates religious, social, and physical sciences together”.8

However, the educational philosophies of assimilating Islamic studies with modern-day knowledge has been criticized by scholars as being utopian.9 The outcome of the project remains at the ideational level, except for Islamic finance, which is now supported by the Malaysian government. Students are taught to Islamise modern sciences and Western
economic models. In some extreme cases, students are taught to be wary of secularism and Western knowledge. Moreover, students have to be mindful of the growing conservative trends in Malaysia and of the politicization of Islam beyond the traditional difference between the political parties UMNO and PAS, to more ideological contestations between Wahabbi-Salafis, Shias, Muslim Brotherhood and many more.

What is stark is that Singaporeans are not familiar with universities in Indonesia. There are several state Islamic universities (UIN)—notably in Jakarta and Yogyakarta—that have produced outstanding graduates recognized internationally. These universities have undergone reforms over the years and have developed their curriculum to suit Indonesia’s local context. Unfortunately, the perception that Indonesian universities promote liberalism (in a negative sense) is stopping Singapore students from exploring universities there. This means a missed opportunity to learn from prominent scholars such as Quraish Shihab (Quranic exegesis), Azyumardi Azra (ulama history and network), and Shafii Ma’rif (Islamic thought and democracy), Amin Abdullah (Philosophy), Abdul Munir Mulkan (reconstructionist theology) and Zakiyuddin Baidhawy (education). UIN too has integrated the study of Islam with modern knowledge, but unlike the Malaysian universities, they do not rank one above the other.

TRAJECTORIES AMONG SINGAPORE’S ISLAMIC STUDIES GRADUATES

The interest in higher Islamic education seem to be burgeoning in recent years. This is evidenced, firstly, by the increase in the number of madrasah graduates, which averages one hundred graduates from four madrasahs: Al-Ma’arif, Alsagoff, Aljunied, and Wak Tanjong. Many of these graduates, especially from the latter three madrasahs choose to pursue Islamic studies in universities abroad. This is due to the nature of the madrasah curriculum which puts extra emphasis on Islamic studies.

However, the establishment of twinning programmes between local Islamic institutions and Islamic universities abroad have also allowed higher Islamic education to be even more accessible than before. While this has facilitated the attainment of a university degree in Islamic studies without any need for traveling abroad, this has also led to a growth of asatizah supply, adding pressure to graduates from the traditional Islamic learning universities. The plan to build the Singapore Islamic College (SIC), as a viable alternative for students in pursuit of an Islamic Studies degree, does not necessarily tackle the issue of oversupply of graduates over employment opportunities.

From a survey among current undergraduate students reading Islamic studies from the various universities mentioned above (n=101), most (75.2%) agree that the madrasah education system has prepared them adequately for university education. However, the worrying trend is that less than 50% (45.5%) of the respondents wanted to pursue a vocation as asatizah. While this is expected because of the influx in the number of asatizah (a question of excess supply over demand), there is a small job market with uncompetitive salary rates. If this trend persists, it could put into question the objective of madrasah education. Would students not interested to become asatizahs be better placed in national schools, since madrasahs are extensively funded by the community? Hopefully, the Singapore Islamic College (SIC)—if it is necessary to have one in the first place—will fill the necessary gaps in what is offered by existing Islamic universities. If the community feels there is a need to
have one, then considerations should be given to groups who wish to study religion but have not studied in any one of the local full-time madrasahs. Ultimately, if the objective of a madrasah education is to produce asatizahs, then existing models of sending students to Al-Azhar or Jordan universities should suffice.

1 Hariz Baharudin, “Former religious teacher and student placed on Restriction Order under ISA” *The Straits Times*, 16 January 2019.


7 http://www.iium.edu.my/page/about-iium

8 https://www.usim.edu.my/visitors/

9 Shaharuddin Maaruf, “Religion and Utopian Thinking among the Muslims of Southeast Asia,” 29 Seminar Paper series, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore.

10 For instance, Al-Zuhri Institute of Higher Learning offers degrees in Islamic Studies in partnership with Indonesia’s Universitas Ibn Khaldun Bogor (UIKA) while Jamiyah Education
Centre’s offers similar degree program in partnership with Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UIN Sumut), also from Indonesia.