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## Obituary: An essay on the honour of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1931-2026)

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## Introduction

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (5 September 1931 – 8 March 2026/at the night of 19 Ramadhan 1447), one of the most influential Muslim philosophers and intellectuals of the modern era, passed away at the age of 94, leaving behind a profound intellectual legacy that reshaped contemporary discussions on Islamic knowledge, education, and civilization.

For more than half a century, al-Attas stood among the rare scholars who combined classical Islamic learning with modern philosophical inquiry. His writings and institutional work influenced generations of scholars across the Muslim world, particularly through his efforts to rethink the foundations of knowledge and education in the modern age.

## Early Life and Intellectual Formation

Syed Muhammad Naquib bin Ali bin Abdullah bin Muhsin Al-Attas is a prominent contemporary Muslim thinker, born on September 5th, 1931, in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. He also belonged to the Ba'lawi family, with a lineage tracing back to Imam al-Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). His paternal grandfather was Syed Abdullah ibn Muhsin ibn Muhammad al-Attas, a revered saint whose influence extended across Indonesia and the Arab world. To this day, his grandfather's grave in Bogor continues to be visited by Muslims. The An-Nur Mosque, established in 1815, stands beside the grave.

Al-Attas's mother was Syarifah Ragan al-'Aydrus, who descended from a noble Sundanese family from Sukapura. Al-Attas was the second of three siblings. His elder brother, Syed Hussein al-Attas, was a sociologist and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya. His younger brother, Syed Zain al-

Attas, was a chemical engineer and a former lecturer at the MARA Institute of Technology (Malaysia).

He was born into a family with a history of renowned ancestors and scholars. He received a thorough education in Islamic sciences, Malay language, literature and culture. His formal primary education began at age 5 in Ngee Heng Johor Primary School, Malaysia, but during the Japanese occupation of Malaysia he went to school in Java, in Madrasah Al-'Urwatu'l-Wuthqā, studying in Arabic. After World War II, he returned to Johor in 1946 to complete his secondary education, first at Bukit Zahrah School, and then at the English College (1946-1951). Here, he lived with one of his uncle named Ungku Abdul Aziz bin Ungku Abdul Majid, the Sultan's cousin who next became sixth Ministry of Johor Modern. He was exposed to Malay literature, history, religion, and western classics in English. He lived in a cultured social atmosphere, which moulded him into an aesthetic, sensitive person. Having these characteristics, Al-Attas was known for his unique exquisite style and precise vocabulary in his Malay writings and language. After he finished secondary school in 1951, he entered the Malay Regiment as cadet officer no. 6675.

There, he was selected to follow a military education at Eaton Hall in Chester, and later he studied at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, England (1952-1955). This gave him insights into the spirit and style of British society. During this time, he was drawn to the metaphysical works of Jāmī, a Muslim Sufi, which he found in the library of the Academy; it is significant to note that, while at Sandhurst, one of his main interests was studying the metaphysics of the Sufis. He travelled extensively to many parts of Europe, especially Spain, and to North Africa, where the Islamic heritage left a profound influence on him. Al-Attas later felt the need to further his study, and voluntarily resigned his commission to serve in the Royal Malay Regiment, in order to pursue his study at the University of Malaya in Singapore (1957-1959). While studying at the University of Malaya, he wrote literary works on Rangkaian Ruba'iyat (Ruba'iyat Version) and Some Aspects of Sūfism as Understood and Practised among the Malays. He was awarded the Canada Council Fellowship for three years of study at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal.

He received the MA degree with distinction in Islamic philosophy in 1962, with his thesis Rānīrī and the Wujūdiyyah of 17th Century Aceh. Al-Attas then went for his doctoral study to the University of London in the School of Oriental and African Studies, where he worked with Professor A. J. Arberry of Cambridge and Dr. Martin Lings. His doctoral thesis (1965) was a two-volume

work on the mysticism of Hamzah Fansūrī. In 1965, Al-Attas returned to Malaysia and became the Head of the Division of Literature in the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. He was Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1968 to 1970. Then he moved to the new National University of Malaysia, as Head of the Department of Malay Language and Literature and became the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. He strongly advocated the use of Malay as the language of instruction at the university level and proposed an integrated method of studying Malay language, literature and culture, so that the role and influence of Islam and its relationship with other languages and cultures would be studied with clarity. To carry out his vision, in 1973, he opened the Institute of Malay Language, Literature, and Culture at the National University of Malaysia and became the director of the institute.

Perhaps because of his historical background, he is currently known as a man of integrated, multifaceted and creative thought. His goal in the philosophy and methodology of education is to Islamize the mind, body and soul and promote its effects on the personal and collective life of Muslims as well as others, including the spiritual and physical non-human environment.

### **Diagnosing the Crisis of Knowledge**

Al-Attas devoted much of his intellectual life to understanding what he described as the “crisis of knowledge” in the modern Muslim world. Unlike many contemporaries who focused on political reform or activism, he argued that the most fundamental problems confronting Muslim societies were intellectual and civilizational.

According to al-Attas, confusion about the nature of knowledge—its sources, purpose, and relationship to ethics—had produced deep intellectual disorientation. He believed that modern educational systems, influenced by secular Western assumptions, often separated knowledge from its metaphysical and moral foundations.

Central to his philosophy was the concept of *adab*, which he defined as the recognition of the proper order and place of things within the structure of knowledge and existence. The loss of *adab*, he argued, led to moral confusion, fragmented education, and the misuse of knowledge for purely material or political purposes.

### **Islamization of Knowledge**

Al-Attas became widely known for pioneering the concept of the “Islamization of knowledge.” Though frequently misunderstood, the idea did not mean simply inserting Islamic elements into modern disciplines. Rather, he

envisioned a deeper intellectual project: examining the philosophical assumptions underlying modern knowledge and reorganizing it within the framework of the Islamic worldview.

He argued that many academic disciplines developed within historical contexts shaped by secularism and materialism. When Muslim societies adopted these frameworks without critical examination, they also absorbed the worldview embedded within them.

For al-Attas, the solution was not the rejection of modern knowledge but its reinterpretation. Empirical sciences, he maintained, could coexist with metaphysical and ethical principles if properly situated within an Islamic intellectual framework.

### **Scholar, Institution Builder, and Cultural Thinker**

One of al-Attas's most important institutional contributions was the founding of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization in 1987. The institute was conceived as a center for reviving the Islamic intellectual tradition while engaging modern scholarship.

ISTAC sought to recreate the classical Islamic model of integrated knowledge, where philosophy, theology, literature, history, and science were studied within a unified civilizational framework. The institute's architecture, symbolism, and academic atmosphere reflected al-Attas's belief that knowledge should be embedded in culture, aesthetics, and spirituality.

Beyond philosophy and education, al-Attas also made important contributions to the study of Islam in Southeast Asia. He challenged earlier theories that explained the spread of Islam in the region mainly through trade, emphasizing instead the crucial role of scholars, Sufi teachers, and intellectual networks. His work also demonstrated how Islamic concepts reshaped the Malay language and cultural vocabulary.

### **Final Years and Passing**

Al-Attas passed away on 8 March 2026 in Kuala Lumpur. Funeral prayers were held at Masjid al-Taqwa in Taman Tun Dr Ismail before he was laid to rest at the Bukit Kiara Muslim Cemetery. The prayers were attended by family members, scholars, and national leaders, including Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

In October 2024, he had been honored with the title of Royal Professor—the highest academic distinction in Malaysia—by Sultan Ibrahim, recognizing his immense contributions to Islamic scholarship and national intellectual life.

## **Legacy**

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas leaves behind an enduring intellectual legacy. His work challenged scholars to reconsider the philosophical foundations of knowledge, education, and civilization in the modern world.

In an era often dominated by ideological slogans and superficial debates, al-Attas represented a tradition of careful scholarship, civilizational reflection, and intellectual responsibility. The questions he raised about knowledge, education, and the future of Muslim civilization will continue to influence scholars and institutions for generations to come.

He is the author of 26 books and monographs written in English and Malay, many of which have been translated into Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Malayalam, Indonesian, French, German, Russian, Bosnian, Japanese, Hindi, Korean and Albanian. Also he has published more than 400 articles. His works consist of various aspects of Islamic thought and civilization, particularly on Sufism, cosmology, metaphysics, philosophy and Malay language and literature.

*Islam and the Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993) was the book which is a development of ideas contained in the many paragraphs of another book in Malay entitled: *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, which he wrote and completed during the first few months of 1974. Due to many circumstances which demanded his attention at home and abroad, however, the *Risalah* has not yet been sent to the press. In this book, the chapter III was composed and completed during the month of Ramadhan of 1395 (1975), and delivered as a lecture under the same title to the International Islamic Conference held in April 1976 at the Royal Commonwealth Society, London, in conjunction with the World of Islam Festival celebrated there that year.

The other chapter of this book were begun in March 1977 and completed in April of the same year, during his appointment as visiting scholar and professor of Islamic at the Department of Religion, Temple University, Philadelphia, U.S.A., in the winter and spring of 1976-1977. The chapter V of this book was presented as a paper entitled: "Preliminary Thoughts on the Nature of Knowledge and the Definition and Aims of Education", addressed to the First World Conference on Muslim Education held at Mecca in April 1977.

His idea had been appropriated without his acknowledgement and propagated since 1982 by ambitious scholars, activist, academic operators and journalist in vulgarized forms to the present day. Muslim must be warned that plagiarists

and pretenders as well as ignorant imitators affect great mischief by debasing values, imposing upon the ignorant, and encouraging the rise of mediocrity. They appropriate original ideas for hasty implementation and make false claims for themselves. These phenomena, as al-Attas explained, was an effect of the "Loss of Adab", which provides the breeding ground for the emergence of extremist who make ignorance their capital.

Raniri and the Wujudiyah of 17th Century Aceh (A Critical study of Nuru'l-Din al-Raniri's refutation of Hamzah Fansuri's mystical philosophy, based on Raniri's Hujjatu'l-Siddiq li daf'i'l-Zindiq and Tibyan fi Ma'rifati'l-Adyan and other Malay sources.) A theses submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, August 1962. During his study, he meet famous academician such as: Dr. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Dr. Muhammad Rasjidi, Dr. Fazlu-r-Rahman, Dr. Toshihiko Izutsu, In this theses, he begin to explain some historical facts about the Sufism in Melayu and Indonesia. Before that, he elucidate the connection between Malay-Sumatra archipelago and Asian and European community. At last, he clarify the history of beginning of Malay's islamization which done through the teach of Sufism, not only through trading activity as mentioned by Snouck Hurgronje.

We also found that Al-Attas philosophy of education as a model for working towards the perfection of the educational system in Brunei Darussalam. His model of thought in education is to be studied because his idea has been proven to be successfully implemented by the formation of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) which was founded on 27th February, 1987 located in Kuala Lumpur. He is the founder and former director of this institute that was officially launched by the Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed on 4th October, 1991. The institute is now under the division of the International Islamic University of Malaysia.

Here is the list of his monumental works:

1. (1959) Rangkaian Ruba'iyat, Dewan Pustaka dan Bahasa (DBP), Kuala Lumpur.
2. (1963) Some Aspect of Sufism as Understood and Practised Among the Malays, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute.
3. (1966) Raniri and the Wujudiyah of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Aceh, Monograph of the Royal Asiatic Society, Malaysian Branch, no. 111, Singapura.
4. (1968) The Origin of Malay Sha'ir, DPB, Kuala Lumpur.
5. (1969) Preliminary Statement on General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, DPB, Kuala Lumpur.

6. (1971) Concluding Postscript to the Origin of Malay Sya'ir, DPB, Kuala Lumpur.
7. (1972) The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri, University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur.
8. (1972) The Correct Date of the Terengganu Inscription, Kuala Lumpur Museum Department.
9. (1972) Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu, Penerbit University Kebangsaan Malaysia, apart of this works were translated to Russian and French and had fully translated in Indonesia.
10. (1973) Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin. This works later published in 2001
11. (1975) Comments on the Re-Examination of Al-Raniri's Hujjatu'l Siddiq: A Refutation, Kuala Lumpur Museum Department.
12. (1976) Islam: the Concept of Religion and Foundation of Ethics and Morality, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), Kuala Lumpur, had been translated to Korean, Japanese, and Turkish.
13. (1976) Islam: Faham Agama dan Asas Akhlak, ABIM, Kuala Lumpur, as Malay version of above book.
14. (1978) Islam and Secularism, ABIM, Kuala Lumpur, had been translated to Indian, Malay, Urdu, Persian, Indonesian, Turkish, Arabic, and Russian.
15. (1979) (Ed.) Aims dan Objective of Islamic Education: Islamic Edition Series, Hodder and Stoughton & Universitas King Abdul Aziz, London, had been translated to Turkish.
16. (1980) The Concept of Education in Islam. ABIM, Kuala Lumpur, had been translated to Indonesian, Persian, and Arabic.
17. (1985) Islam, Secularism, and the Philosophy of the Future, Mansell, London dan New York.
18. (1986) A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nur al-Din al-Raniri, Kementrian Kebudayaan, Kuala Lumpur.
19. (1988)  
The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the `Aqa'id of al-Nasafi. Departemen Penerbitan Universitas Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.
20. (1989) Islam and the Philosophy of Science, ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, had been translated to Indonesian, Bosnian, Persian, and Turkish.
21. (1990) The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul, ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, had been translated to Persian.
22. (1990) The Intuition of Existence, ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, had been translated to Persian.

23. (1990) *On Quiddity and Essence*, ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, had been translated to Persian.
24. (1992) *The Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality*.
25. (1993) *The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam* (translated into German by Christoph Marcinkowski as *Die Bedeutung und das Erleben von Glückseligkeit im Islam*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998).
26. (1994) *The Degrees of Existence*, ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, had been translated to Persian.
27. (1995) *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*, ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, had been translated to Persian.
28. (2007) *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu dan Pandangan Alam*, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.
29. (2008) *The ICLIF Leadership Competency Model (LCM) an Islamic Alternative* (bersama Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud), ICLIF, Kuala Lumpur.
30. (2011) *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin*, ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur.
31. (2011) *Historical Fact and Fiction*, Center for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science and Civilization (CASIS), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.
32. (2015) *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Surah al-Nisa (4): 58 and Surah al-Mu'minun (23): 12-14*, IBFIM, Kuala Lumpur.
33. (2023) *Islam: The Covenants Fulfilled*, Ta'dib International, Malaysia