

Bridging Eras, Searching for Peace

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In late 1996, a monumental decision altered the course of a young Kurdish student's life: the journey to Malaysia to pursue higher education. Fresh out of high school with excellent results, the opportunity to study at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) emerged as a beacon of hope amid the harsh realities of Iraq under sanctions.

Leaving the country was no small feat. Kurdistan, embroiled in rebellion against Iraq's regime, lay within a UN-imposed no-fly zone. Without government offices issuing passports, the only option was the black market where passports came at a steep price. After many struggles, a forged passport was obtained. Ironically, it was later revealed at the Iraqi embassy in Malaysia that this passport had belonged to a deceased man with eight children, expertly altered by forgers for it to appear legitimate.

With this document in hand, the journey began—crossing the border into Turkey, then traveling to Malaysia via Istanbul. Seven companions joined the expedition, and the group spent two unforgettable weeks exploring Ankara and Istanbul. The vibrant culture and breath-taking sights in Turkey served as a welcome distraction during the wait for the flight to Malaysia.

Upon arrival in Malaysia, a university representative greeted the group warmly. In those days, it was customary for IIUM to send someone to welcome new students, a tradition that has since faded. The university was still operating from its old campus, yet to move to its current Gombak location.

Stepping onto the campus, relief washed over the young traveller upon finding many Kurdish students who had arrived earlier. Their presence eased the loneliness of a teenager, far from family and adapting to a foreign land. Though Malaysia is a Muslim country, its culture is vastly different. The constant heat and humidity contrasted sharply with Kurdistan's four seasons, and the spicy cuisine

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was an initial challenge to the palate. Adjusting required patience and perseverance.

Registration began with English and Arabic courses, prerequisites for entry into the chosen field of study. Banking posed another hurdle, as no branch of Bank Muamalat existed on campus. A trip to the University of Malaya was necessary, where a senior Kurdish student pursuing a master's degree in Islamic Studies at IIUM offered invaluable assistance.

During that visit, a chance meeting with a Kurdish professor led to a warm invitation into his home. Weekends spent at his condo became a cherished escape from homesickness, with delicious Kurdish meals, the comforts of a gym and swimming pool, and views that lifted spirits. These gatherings fostered a sense of community and belonging.

The need for a genuine passport soon arose, replacing the forged one that was needed to leave Iraq. This process was fraught with delays due to the disconnection between the Kurdish region and Iraq at the time. Embassy officials were meticulous in verifying documents, and while the wait was frustrating, their caution was understandable.

One afternoon, while walking in a nearby park with a friend, the dream to become a lecturer at the University of Malaya was shared aloud. The response, a pragmatic reminder to focus first on mastering English and completing the degree, momentarily dampened the enthusiasm. The path ahead seemed long, and discouragement loomed. Yet, this dream, once spoken, planted a seed of determination that would grow stronger with time.

Despite the challenges, perseverance paid off. Language courses were completed successfully, paving the way to begin the degree program.

One classmate from Sarawak, a married man with a passion for discussing ideas and politics, became a close interlocutor. Together, they took a course on the politics of the South Pacific taught by visiting professor Paridah Abd. Samad. During one of her lectures, she introduced the class to a think tank called the International Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS Malaysia). Afterwards, the Sarawakian friend suggested a visit to the institute, mentioning its excellent library.

Located near the Malaysian Parliament and the Tugu Negara monument, the institute is housed in a charming colonial bungalow on a hillock in Lake Gardens, Kuala Lumpur. Overlooking Parliament Road and a valley, the building once served as the residence of British colonial officers and later as the home of Tan Sri Mohamed Noah Omar, Malaysia's first Dewan Rakyat (parliament) speaker. By 1985, it had become the offices of ISIS Malaysia.

At the gate, the security guard permitted entry, but the librarian informed the visiting students that membership was required to access the library. For 10 ringgits a year, they acquired membership cards. Sitting by the window, gazing at the elegant building and lush surroundings, a dream formed: becoming a researcher at this prestigious institute. Sharing this aspiration with the friend earned a curious smile, accompanied by a reminder that the institute only hired exceptionally talented Malaysian citizens. The response was simple—dreams are boundless, and with Allah, nothing is impossible.

Time passed, marked by homesickness and the isolation of rare communication with family due to infrequent phone calls. Yet, by Allah's grace, graduation came, followed by enrollment in a master's program, completed in 2005.

Throughout this journey, many remarkable individuals offered guidance, but none left a more profound impact than Professor Arif Ali Arif of IIUM. More than a teacher, he became a mentor, guide, and a shining example of knowledge coupled with noble character.

In a world where true scholars are becoming scarce, Professor Arif stood out as a rare gem. He embodied the philosophy of Ibn al-Qasim, who served Imam Malik and once said, "I served Imam Malik for 20 years—18 years learning good manners, and only 2 years acquiring knowledge. I wish I had spent all 20 years on manners." This belief was deeply woven into Professor Arif's character; he tirelessly taught that good character is the essence of true learning.

His office was a sanctuary, always open to students and colleagues seeking advice or solace. Even when he couldn't provide a solution, he shared wisdom on how to navigate challenges. He viewed every interaction as an encounter with emotions and souls, always emphasising the innate goodness in people and encouraging the cultivation of wisdom in dealing with their shortcomings.

Conversations with him, whether in person or over the phone, felt like dialogues with Imam Al-Ghazali himself. He often spoke of reading *Ihya Ulumuddin* forty times, attributing much of his character and knowledge to its teachings. His advice to always keep the six volumes of *Ihya* close remains a treasured piece of guidance.

Professor Arif's mission extended beyond imparting knowledge; he sought to revive the profound teacher-student relationships that modernity and westernisation significantly eroded. To him, teaching was about nurturing the soul and guiding the heart.

His generosity knew no bounds. Invitations to his home or to share a meal became frequent, and initially, it seemed like a special privilege. Yet, it soon became clear that his kindness extended to everyone, making each person feel like a cherished companion—reminiscent of how the Prophet ﷺ treated his companions.

A memory forever etched in the heart took place during the first year of the master's program. Self-sponsored and reliant on support from a sister in Germany, financial struggles were common. One Ramadan, she sent money, but a misspelling on the transfer prevented access to it. Correcting the issue would take months, leaving no funds during Ramadan and Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Eid al-Fitr).

As Ramadan neared its end, sitting in the IIUM masjid after Asr prayer, the weight of the situation felt overwhelming. Even affording a simple phone card to call home seemed impossible. Back then, iTalk cards cost 30RM for just 12 minutes of talk time.

Lost in thought, a warm salam interrupted the silence—Professor Arif. He needed to call his son in Iraq and asked which card would be best. Recommending iTalk, the nearest place to buy it was explained. Without hesitation, he handed over 90 ringgits, asking for three cards.

The hostel's brother Yunus, who later passed away after returning home, sold the cards. Upon returning to Professor Arif's office, the cards were handed over, but he returned them with a smile impossible to forget. "These are for you," he said. Then, he shared something that sent shivers down the spine—a dream

from the previous night. An old man had appeared, saying, “Purchase three cards for AbdulWahed to call his family.”

Speechless, it became clear that Professor Arif was a man with *karamah*, a divine blessing from Allah. It was a profound reminder of the unexpected ways Allah provides.

Professor Arif’s legacy transcends mentorship. His wisdom, generosity, and unshakable belief in the goodness of people remain guiding principles, inspiring a lifelong commitment to embodying those same qualities.

Years had passed since leaving Iraq, and returning made the passage of time painfully clear—children had grown, beloved elders had passed, and familiar faces now bore the marks of age. Guilt weighed heavily for not being present through their joys and sorrows, especially after the death of our father when only five. Tragedy struck soon after the return when grandfather was diagnosed with cancer. His swift decline was heartbreaking, but solace came in being by his side during his final moments, guiding him in reciting the Shahada (the Islamic testimony of faith). His peaceful passing brought bittersweet comfort amid the grief.

In the weeks following the funeral, family insisted on the pursuit of further education. A sister, ever selfless, offered her savings to cover the initial fees and flight back to Malaysia for a PhD. Her sacrifice was deeply moving, a reminder of Allah’s blessings through family support.

Returning to Malaysia, the PhD journey in political science began. Financial constraints made it arduous, but working as a research assistant and translator helped fund the studies. With unwavering faith and determination, the PhD was completed in four years.

Shortly afterwards, a contract lecturer position at University Utara Malaysia was offered. Two years later, the decision was made to pursue a dream of lecturing at the University of Malaya (UM). Just a month after applying, an offer for a visiting lecturer position arrived—no interview required. The resignation from UUM was submitted, and the journey back to life in Kuala Lumpur began.

On the first day at UM, paperwork, medical screenings, and a trip to the nearest branch of CIMB bank were needed. Surprisingly, the CIMB branch was near the Bank Muamalat branch where an account had been opened 13 years earlier for degree registration. Memories of dreaming about becoming a lecturer at UM resurfaced, and gratitude overwhelmed the heart—Alhamdulillah.

The journey was arduous, each struggle fortifying resolve, culminating in the realisation of a dream nurtured since childhood.

Two years were spent at UM before the need arose to return to Iraq for a year to settle personal matters. As a contract lecturer, applying for a one-year leave without salary was not possible, so resignation became inevitable—a difficult decision. During those years at UM, many esteemed professors were met, including Dr. Bahrudin Che Pa, whose passing on July 23, 2021, due to COVID-19, left a deep sadness.

After a year in Iraq, a decision to return back to Malaysia was made. Applications were sent to UM and other universities, but the job process in Malaysia is lengthy and bureaucratic, resulting in a few months of unemployment. During this period, my wife was expecting our second child. While waiting at Sungai Buloh Hospital during her delivery, a newspaper article on Malaysian politics provided a distraction.

Noticing the author's affiliation with the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), a memory surfaced of a past visit to the institute. With an Asus computer on hand, an email was sent to the chief executive, Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa, politely inquiring about research vacancies and attaching the CV. The email was quickly forgotten amid the joy of welcoming a new family member.

The following morning, an unexpected reply arrived from Tan Sri Rastam, noting that his staff would be in touch. Within two days, the Human Resources department reached out, scheduling an interview for the following week. The interview went smoothly, and three days later, an offer for a senior analyst position was extended—truly a testament to Allah's providence. Dreams paired with action, then left to Allah's will, remind us that nothing is impossible.

After five years at the institute, the time came to return to the true home (The Garden Of Knowledge and Virtue), that is, IIUM. The dream had always

been to contribute to the institution that played such a formative role. Experience gained elsewhere was intended to enrich IIUM upon returning. To work here is not merely a job, but a calling. Without this sense of purpose, work can feel burdensome, turning days into mere counts towards the weekend, which brings needless anxiety. It is prayed that IIUM continues to fulfil its mission of bringing mercy to humanity.

Dreaming and trusting in Allah are life's essentials. Dreams shape reality when pursued with dedication and unwavering faith. The Hadith of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ resonates deeply: *"Allah says, 'I am as My servant expects Me to be, and I am with him when he remembers Me....'"* This reminder reinforces trust in Allah's constant presence and support, encouraging the pursuit of dreams with steadfast belief.