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Intellectual Discourse
Vol. 33, No. 3, 2025

Contents

<i>Note from the Editor</i>	767
 <i>Research Articles</i>	
Metaphysical and Phenomenological Doubt in the Search for Truth: A Comparative Study of al-Ghazālī and Edmund Husserl <i>Müfit Selim Saruhan</i>	773
Inclusive Education for All: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina <i>Almasa Mulalić</i> <i>Ratnawati Mohd Asraf</i> <i>Safija Bušatlić,</i>	789
Globalisation and Religion: A Study of Thai Muslims' Experiences on Gender Diversity in Thai Muslim Society through an Islamic Perspective <i>Jiraroj Mamadkul</i>	809
Mohd. Kamal Hassan's Perspectives on Family Relationships: Strategies for Strengthening Malaysian Muslim Families <i>Fatimah Karim</i> <i>Sayyed Mohamed Muhsin</i> <i>Nur Elyliana Abdul Hadi</i>	835
Community-Centric Governance: Unveiling the Challenges and Strategies in West Aceh Villages <i>Afrizal Tjoetra</i> <i>Aizat Khairi</i> <i>Nellis Mardhiah</i> <i>Nodi Marefanda</i>	865

- Bringing Religion Back to the Forefront: An Opinion-Oriented Study from IR Scholars in Malaysia's Research Universities 891
Siti Zuliha Razali
Nadhras Abd. Kadir
Razlini Mohd Ramli
- Coalition Rule by Pakatan Harapan, 2018-2020: Key Consociational Lessons 917
Muhammad Azzubair Awwam Mustafa
Kartini Aboo Talib @ Khalid
Nazri Muslim
- “Should I Pay a Living Wage?” A Systematic Review on Employers’ Decision from an Organisational Justice Perspective 939
Nurul Izzati Asyikin Zulkify
Ruhaya Hussin
Maisarah Mohd. Taib
- Prophetic Model of Islamic Spiritual Care from Muslim Professional Practitioners’ Perspectives: A Systematic Review within the Ṭibb Nabawī Genre 967
Zunaidah binti Mohd Marzuki
Nurulhaniz binti Ahmad Fuad
- Designing and Evaluating a Culturally Grounded Digital Parenting Initiative in Malaysia 993
Shafizan Mohamed
Nazariah Shar'ie Janon
Mohd Helmi Yusoh
Norsaremah Salleh
Nur Shakira Mohd Nasir
Wan Norshira Wan Mohd Ghazali

Perception about Islam, Attitude, Subjective Norms,
and Behavioural Intention in Using Artificial
Intelligence among University Students 1017
Aini Maznina A. Manaf
Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen

Parental Perceptions of Islamic YouTube Animation:
The Case of ‘Abdul Bari’ in Pakistan. 1043
Saima Waheed
Mohd Khairie Ahmad
Zafar Iqbal Bhatti

Development of a Model for Advertising Professionalism
from the *Maqasid Al-Shari’ah* Perspective 1071
Aida Mokhtar
Faiswal Kasirye
Mohd. Fuad Md. Sawari
Amilah Awang Abd. Rahman @ Jusoh
Ahasanul Haque

Book Reviews

Gozde Hussian (2024). *Islamic Doctrines and
Political Liberalism: Muslim’s Sincere Support.* 1101
Palgrave MacMillan. pp. 253, ISBN 978-3-031-72266-0
Reviewer: Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky,

Asad, Muhammad & Asad, Pola-Hamida (2024). 1105
The Unpublished Letters of Muhammad Asad.
Kuala Lumpur, Islamic Renaissance Front &
Islamic Book Trust. pp. 252, ISBN: 978-967-26388-4-1.
Reviewer: Ahmad Farouk Musa.

Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِيَّ	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِيَّ	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اَيَّ	ay
اِي	ī		اُو	uww, ū (in final position)
			اَيَّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

Asad, Muhammad & Asad, Pola-Hamida (2024). *The Unpublished Letters of Muhammad Asad*. Kuala Lumpur, Islamic Renaissance Front & Islamic Book Trust. pp. 252, ISBN: 978-967-26388-4-1.

Reviewer: Ahmad Farouk Musa. Senior Lecturer, Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine & Health Sciences, Monash University Malaysia. Founder & Director, Islamic Renaissance Front, Kuala Lumpur. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2303-7813. Email: farouk@monash.edu

This book stands out as a unique compilation of personal letters exchanged between renowned scholar Muhammad Asad and his wife Pola-Hamida with their friends. Originally published in three separate volumes in the Pakistani journal *Islamic Sciences*, it is now available in book form. Muhammad Asad remains an enigma to many in both the East and the West. Two of his most celebrated works are *Road to Mecca*—which chronicles his personal journey into Islam and his extensive travels across the Arabian Peninsula, blending introspective reflections on faith and identity with his spiritual transformation and conversion—and *The Message of the Qur’ān*, his English translation and commentary of the Qur’ān, celebrated for its clarity, literary quality and its thoughtful interpretation of the Qur’ānic message, making it accessible to modern inquisitive minds.

Yet, this book ventures beyond the literary and intellectual dimensions of Muhammad Asad. It unveils a more intimate portrait of the man himself—a raw and unfiltered depiction of his joy and frustration, his exasperations and pain, his moments of despair and glimmers of hope. It is divided into three sections. The first features twenty-six letters addressed to friends, which offer valuable insight into Asad’s intellectual and personal evolution. As noted by Muhammad Arshad, the compiler of these letters, Asad had written little in English prior to his arrival in the Indian subcontinent in 1932; most of his earlier works were in German (Asad, Muhammad & Asad, Pola-Hamida 2024: p. 4). These letters, however, reveal crucial aspects of Asad’s intellectual journey. Although Asad likely learnt conversational Arabic during his second trip to Arabia (1924-1926), he also lived with the Bedouins in the desert to gain “an instinctive feel of the language” (Asad, 2011, p. xix). According to Asad, only the Bedouins of the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Central and Eastern

Arabia, have preserved the pure, unadulterated Arabic that remained close to the idiom of the Prophet's time, retaining all its intrinsic characteristics (Asad, 2011, p. xix). This profound immersion in the language would later shape Asad's magnum opus, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, which he described as the 'first attempt' at a truly idiomatic explanatory rendition of the Qur'ānic message into a European language (Asad, 2011, p. xix).

It is true that Asad makes no mention of his teachers, not even in his letters to his friends. Yet, before embarking on his monumental translation of the Qur'ān, he had undertaken a serious study of *Sahih al-Bukhāri* in Madinah. In the preface to the first edition of '*Sahih al-Bukhāri: The Early Years of Islam*' published in 1938, he noted that this volume would be followed by thirty-five more installments of the *Sahih* (Asad, Muhammad 2013: p. viii). Tragically, none of these have survived—though completed—because they were destroyed during the chaos and inter-religious holocaust that engulfed the Indian subcontinent after the Partition (Asad, 2013, p. ix). Reflecting on this loss in '*Sahih al-Bukhāri: The Early Years of Islam*', he wrote: 'With my own eyes, I saw a few scattered leaves of those manuscripts floating down the river Ravi in the midst of torn Arabic books—the remnants of my library—and all manner of debris; and with those poor, floating pieces of paper, vanished beyond recall more than ten years of intensive labour' (Asad, 2013, p. ix).

It is important to highlight his study and translation of *Sahih al-Bukhāri* when addressing the criticism of his detractors—including JAKIM (the Department of Islamic Affairs of Malaysia), who have accused him of lacking a proper understanding of the *sunnah* in his translation of the Qur'ān (Malaysiakini 2025, Free Malaysia Today 2025). In the Preface to the second edition (1981), Asad reflects on this period with renewed insight and gratitude: "[It] gradually dawned upon me that my work on the *Sahih al-Bukhāri* was not totally lost. On the contrary, I realised with growing conviction that the ten years spent on analysing, translating, and clarifying the *Sahih* were a God-willed preparation for a work which for a very long time had represented an enticing dream to me: a new rendering into English of the message of the Holy Qur'ān and a commentary based on the principle that the doors of *ijtihad* have never been and never could be closed to man's searching intellect."

Similar sentiments were expressed in the closing remarks of his Preface of ‘The Message of the Qur’ān’ where the author stated: “[I] make no claim to having reproduced anything of this indescribable rhythm and rhetoric of the Qur’ān. No one who has truly experienced its majestic beauty could ever be presumptuous enough to make such a claim or even to embark upon such an attempt. And I am truly aware that my rendering does not and could not really “do justice” to the Qur’ān and the layers upon layers of its meaning”:

If all the sea were ink for my Sustainer’s words, the sea would indeed be exhausted ere my Sustainer’s words were exhausted. (Qur’ān, 18:109) (Asad, 2011, p. xxiii).

It is, therefore, perplexing that JAKIM and KDN (The Ministry of Home Affairs) deemed the Malay translation of *The Message*, a decade-long effort by the Islamic Renaissance Front, as heretical, simply because its interpretation diverged from JAKIM’s institutional understanding even for the word “Islam.” For JAKIM, ‘Islam’ is understood as the *bureaucratical Islam* practiced and regulated in the modern Malaysian context, confined to the followers of Prophet Muhammad (Malaysiakini 2025, Free Malaysia Today 2025). In contrast, Asad conceptualises Islam in its original, Qur’ānic sense as “self-surrender to God,” and a Muslim as “one who surrenders himself to God.” As he elucidates: “[It] is obvious that the Qur’ān cannot be correctly understood if we read it merely in the light of later ideological developments, losing sight of its original purport and the meaning which it had—and was intended to have—for the people who first heard it from the lips of the Prophet himself. For instance, when his contemporaries heard the words *Islam* and *muslim*, they understood them as denoting man’s “self-surrender to God” and “one who surrenders himself to God,” without limiting these terms to any specific community or denomination” (Asad, 2011, p. xxi). Hence, a Judicial Review filed by the IRF against KDN and the Government of Malaysia is currently being heard in the High Court, which has granted leave for the case to proceed (Malaysiakini 2025, Free Malaysia Today 2025).

The second part of the book contains twenty-two unpublished letters written by Asad and his wife Pola-Hamida Asad. These letters shed a new light into his intellectual engagements and reveal lesser-

known details about his private and family life. The third primarily consists of correspondence between Muhammad Asad, Pola-Hamida Asad and their most trusted friend, Muhammad Husain Babri—whom Asad described as the best, and certainly most faithful, of all friends, a relationship that endured for more than fifty years through the many vicissitudes of his life. (Asad, Muhammad 2012: p. 81). Although much of the correspondence reflects Asad’s frustrations in defending his dignity following his marriage to Pola-Hamida—and the ensuing controversy when the Pakistani Foreign Services refused to authorise his marriage on the grounds that he already had a wife, Munirah, residing in Pakistan—Asad maintained that he had long been estranged from Munirah, with little in common except for their son, Talal, who, along with his mother, was living in London instead (Asad & Asad, Pola-Hamida, 2024, pp 28-61). The painful and unfounded allegations that he has renounced Islam also surface in these letters.

What strikes me most in this book is Asad’s fascination with the medieval scholar Ibn Hazm, whom he refers to as “my Imam al-A’zam” (the greatest Imam). This admiration is mentioned only once—in a letter to his friend Ghulam Rasul Mehr (Asad, Muhammad & Asad, Pola-Hamida 2024: p. 24)—where Asad refers to *al-Muhalla*, a voluminous book on Islamic law and jurisprudence by Ibn Hazm. This association sparked a train of thought for me. Having previously read his *Message of the Qur’ān*, where he frequently cited Zamakhshāri and Ar-Rāzi, I found his fascination with Ibn Hazm az-Zāhiri somewhat “contradictory.” However, it prompted me to revisit Asad’s works with renewed attention and to recognise the subtle but consistent influence of Ibn Hazm’s rational and textually grounded approach that he references several times in *The Message of the Qur’ān*.

While I cannot elaborate in detail here, I would like to quote the scholar Josef Linnhoff who made a remarkable observation on this issue (Linnhoff, 2021, pp 425-443). He noted that Asad shares several core principles of the Zāhiri school, particularly regarding its conception of the *shari’a* as having a delimited and carefully circumscribed scope. This perspective, he argues, provides the theoretical foundation for Asad’s vision of an Islamic State—one in which the *shari’a* lays down only the fundamental legal and moral framework, but leaves the elaboration of its details to human reason and interpretation.

It is noteworthy that Asad, despite not having read the works of the eminent thinker Ibn Hazm during his early years in India, later recognised that many of his conclusions closely aligned with Ibn Hazm's fundamental ideas (Asad, 2006, p. 2). To Asad, Ibn Hazm ranks highly among a select group of profound thinkers who endeavours to liberate the eternal Law from anything that extends beyond the self-evident ordinances of the Qur'ān and the *sunnah* of the Prophet.

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GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

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1. Original research and review articles should be 5,000-8,000 words while research notes 3,000-4,000 words, accompanied by an abstract of 100-150 words. Book review should be 1,000-1,500 words.
2. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with a 1-inch (2.5 cm) margins. Use 12-point Times New Roman font.
3. Manuscripts should adhere to the *American Psychological Association* (APA) style, latest edition.
4. The title should be as concise as possible and should appear on a separate sheet together with name(s) of the author(s), affiliation(s), and the complete postal address of the institute(s).
5. A short running title of not more than 40 characters should also be included.
6. Headings and sub-headings of different sections should be clearly indicated.
7. References should be alphabetically ordered. Some examples are given below:

Book

In-text citations:

Al-Faruqi & al-Faruqi (1986)

Reference:

Al-Faruqi, I. R., & al-Faruqi, L. L. (1986). *The cultural atlas of Islam*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Chapter in a Book

In-text:

Alias (2009)

Reference:

Alias, A. (2009). Human nature. In N. M. Noor (Ed.), *Human nature from an Islamic perspective: A guide to teaching and learning* (pp.79-117). Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.

Journal Article

In-text:

Chapra (2002)

Reference:

Chapra, M. U. (2002). Islam and the international debt problem. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 10, 214-232.

The Qur'ān

In-text:

(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

Reference:

The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

Ḥadīth

In-text:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

The Bible

In-text:

Matthew 12:31-32

Reference:

The new Oxford annotated Bible. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Transliteration of Arabic words should follow the style indicated in ROTAS Transliteration Kit as detailed on its website (http://rotas.iium.edu.my/?Table_of_Transliteration), which is a slight modification of ALA-LC (Library of Congress and the American Library Association) transliteration scheme. Transliteration of Persian, Urdu, Turkish and other scripts should follow ALA-LC scheme.

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In This Issue

Note from the Editor

Research Articles

Müfit Selim Saruhan

Metaphysical and Phenomenological Doubt in the Search for Truth: A Comparative Study of al-Ghazālī and Edmund Husserl

Almasa Mulalić, Ratnawati Mohd Asraf & Safija Bušatlić,

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