

Obituary

In Memoriam:
Royal Laureate Professor Tan Sri Dr. Syed
Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1931–2026)

The passing of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas on 8 March 2026, in the month of Ramadan, marks the end of a singular intellectual career that shaped the contours of contemporary Islamic thought in profound and lasting ways. For more than half a century, he stood as one of the most original and uncompromising voices in the effort to articulate an Islamic intellectual tradition adequate to the challenges of modernity. His death will be felt deeply not only among his students and colleagues but also across a wider scholarly world that has long engaged, whether in agreement or in contention, with the terms he set.

Born in 1931 in Bogor into a family at once scholarly and aristocratic, al-Attas inherited a legacy that combined religious learning with public responsibility. His early military training, often noted but seldom examined, left a discernible imprint on his intellectual temperament: a preference for order, discipline, precision, and hierarchy that would later find systematic expression in his writings on knowledge and the self. His subsequent studies in Malaya, followed by productive stints at McGill University and School of Oriental and African Studies, exposed him to the full range of modern Western scholarship. Yet he remained throughout resistant to its

uncritical adoption, insisting instead on the necessity of grounding inquiry in the conceptual and metaphysical resources of Islam.

At the center of al-Attas's intellectual project was a diagnosis, that is, that the crisis of the modern Muslim world was not primarily political or economic, but epistemological. What he described as a loss of *adab* was, in his view, a condition in which knowledge had been severed from its proper ends, producing confusion not only in thought but in ethical and spiritual life. His formulation of the *Islamization of Knowledge* must be read against this background, not as a slogan or programmatic agenda, as it was sometimes reduced to, but as a sustained attempt to recover the internal coherence of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Al-Attas's scholarship spanned metaphysics, theology, philosophy, and the intellectual history of the Malay world, yet it was unified by a consistent set of concerns. His writings on the nature of the self, the meaning of happiness, and the purpose of education were not abstract exercises. They were interventions directed at a readership he believed had lost sight of the proper ordering of knowledge. In his studies of the Malay world, he advanced a forceful argument for the decisive role of Islam in shaping its intellectual and literary history. His readings of Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī and Nur al-Dīn al-Ranīrī, in particular, challenged entrenched scholarly assumptions and reoriented discussion toward a more textually grounded understanding of the region's past.

His influence was not confined to writing. The founding of the *International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, widely known as

ISTAC, represented the most concrete realization of his intellectual vision. Conceived as a place for advanced study, it embodied his insistence that knowledge could not be separated from questions of spirituality and ethics. The structure of its curriculum, the selection of its faculty, the location of the institute, and even the design of its physical environment bore the mark of his conviction that learning required both rigor and a cultivated sensibility. Under his direction, it became a rare space in which serious scholarship was pursued without concession to passing academic fashions.

Al-Attas wrote with unusual precision and a deliberate concern for definition. His prose demands careful reading and reflection. He showed little interest in intellectual trends or public recognition, preferring the slower work of clarification and correction instead. Much in his work remains unfinished in the best sense. His reflections on language and conceptual change, especially in the modern usage of key Islamic terms, continue to pose questions that have yet to be adequately addressed. Likewise, his broader framework for the *Islamization of Knowledge* has been taken up only partially, and often without the philosophical depth he intended.

The idea of proper intellectual discipline, which runs throughout his work, offers a point of entry into current debates on education and the purpose of the university. His account of the self and his insistence on the inseparability of intellectual and moral formation remain directly relevant to ongoing discussions in the humanities and social sciences. His studies of the Malay world continue to open lines

of inquiry into the relationship between Islam and local intellectual traditions in Southeast Asia.

Al-Attas lived with a clarity of purpose that was evident to those who encountered him, whether in his writings or in person. His influence endures in the students he trained, the debates he initiated, and the institutional forms he helped to shape. What he leaves behind is not simply a body of work, but a set of intellectual demands that will continue to challenge and orient future scholarship. In the words of al-Attas, we hope that moving forward, *Al-Shajarah* continue to:

“...contain scholarly works that conceptualize, clarify, and elaborate scientific and epistemological problems encountered by Muslims in the present age, as well as those that provide fresh and insightful Islamic response to the intellectual and cultural challenges of the modern world and of various schools of thought, religion, and ideology, and that its fruits will nurture our minds in our venture to formulate an Islamic philosophy of science. We hope also that there will be in it essays on the meaning and philosophy of Islamic art and architecture. The aims and objectives of ISTAC are not vain slogans; they rather reflect clearly our profound experience and grasp of the real problems confronting the contemporary Muslim world. So their solution also requires equal scientific and

philosophical profundity. In this endeavour to realize our aims and objectives we beseech Allah Almighty to increase us in knowledge and hope that Al-Shajarah will be instrumental in disseminating beneficial knowledge.”¹

May his soul be granted peace, and may his legacy endure among those committed to the pursuit of knowledge.

Editorial Committee

Al-Shajarah

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¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, “Foreword,” *Al-Shajarah: Journal of The International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)*, no. 1 (1996): ii.