

Understanding the Rarity of Conversions Within the Bā ‘Alawī Community in Singapore (1980-2020s)

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Abstract

Bā ‘Alawī Arabs have been credited for bringing Islam to the Malay world through its Ṣūfī brotherhood, the *‘Tarīqa ‘Alawīyya*. Recent studies highlighted their role in conversions to Twelver Shī’a Islam in the region, specifically in Indonesia and Malaysia. Yet, Twelver Shī’a Islam in Singapore has taken a different trajectory, with conversions mainly within the Malay community. This paper seeks to explain the dearth of Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī conversions to Twelver Shī’a Islam. It was found that although there was a large pool of Bā ‘Alawī Shī’a converts in Indonesia and Malaysia, only two Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī individuals identified as Shī’ī. This study was inspired by Pickvance’s argument for the importance of seeking causal reasons to explain differences in comparable phenomena. It was done through in depth, unstructured interviews with eight contemporary Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī and non- Bā ‘Alawī scholars and individuals involved in disseminating Islamic knowledge in Singapore. Oral history interviews of three prominent Bā ‘Alawī religious scholars living in the 1980s and 1990s together with biographies of Bā ‘Alawī religious scholars were also analysed in this research. This paper puts forth five main factors that curb Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī conversion to Shī’a Islam: a strong network of Bā ‘Alawī scholars who monopolised Singaporean Islamic institutions in the 1980s and 1990s, their involvement in the creation of a unified Islamic curriculum in Singapore madrasah, their creation of home-based Islamic educational classes, the Singapore modernisation and secularisation agenda, and a desire to preserve their cultural identity through the Bā ‘Alawī Sufī order, *‘Tarīqa Alawiyya*. This paper argues against ignoring studies that have lack of numbers as they may offer insights into a nuanced understanding of the Muslim minority experience.

Keywords: *Bā ‘Alawī*, Hadhrami lineage, intra-Muslim conversion, sectarian, Singapore

Introduction

The Bā ‘Alawī, a group that traces its lineage to Prophet Muḥammad, has been credited for the rise of Twelver Shī’ism in the Malay world.¹ Studies by Alatas, Assegaf, Zulkifli, and others

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¹ Christoph Marcinkowski, “Aspects of Shī’ism in Contemporary Southeast Asia,” *The Muslim World* 98, no. 1 (2008): 36-71; Umar Faruk Assegaf, “The Rise of Shī’ism in Contemporary Indonesia: Orientation and Affiliation,” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2012); Ismail Fajrie Alatas, “They are the Inheritors of the Prophet’: Discourses on the *Ahl al-Bayt* and Religious Authority among the Ba ‘Alawi in Modern Indonesia,” in *Shī’ism in Southeast Asia: ‘Alid Piety and Sectarian Construction*, ed. M. Feener and C. Formichi (London: Hurst, 2015), 139-64; Umar Faruk Assegaff, “Aspects of Shi’ism in Contemporary Indonesia: Alid Piety and Sectarian Constructions,” in *Shī’ism in Southeast Asia: ‘Alid Piety and Sectarian Construction*, ed. M. Feener and C. Formichi (London: Hurst, 2015), 249-69; Mohd Faizal Musa, “The Malaysian Shi’a: A Preliminary Study of Their History, Oppression, and Denied Rights,” *Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 4 (2013): 411-63; Zulkifli Zulkifli, “Being the Shī’ite among the Sunnī Majority in Indonesia: A Preliminary Study of Ustadz Husein Al-Habsyi (1921-1994),” *Studia Islamika* 11, no. 2 (2004): 275-308; Zulkifli Zulkifli, “The Struggle of the Shi’is in Indonesia,” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2013); Syed Farid Alatas, “The *Tarīqat al-‘Alawiyyah* and the Emergence of the Shi’i school in Indonesia and Malaysia,” *Oriente Moderno* 18, no. 2 (1999): 323-39; Chiara

discuss how the Bā ‘Alawī convert their kin and locals into Shī’a Islam. Whilst these studies place the Bā ‘Alawī centre stage in Shī’a conversion experiences in Malaysia and Indonesia, their role has either been downplayed or is virtually non-existent in Singapore.²

Likewise, in her own research of conversions to Shī’a Islam amongst the Bā ‘Alawī of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, this researcher found the phenomenon to be relatively common in Indonesian and Malaysian communities. However, the researcher only found two Singaporean Shī’a Bā ‘Alawī converts who had connections and had settled in Johor, Malaysia. These connections influenced their eventual conversions to Shī’a Islam. A lack of Shī’a informants amongst Bā ‘Alawī of Singapore would make most researchers dispense with a study on Singapore. As Aljunied noted, because of “the relatively unassuming nature of Islam in the country, there developed a pervasive perception among many observers that an in-depth study of Islam and Muslims in such a small setting would not be instructive to allow for broader observations about the character and progress of religion in the region as a whole.”³ As a result, Islam in Singapore “is probably one of the less understood areas in the study of the venture of the world faith in Southeast Asia.”⁴

Yet, Pickvance explained that “we should accept the diversity of causal processes created by the different patterns of development of different societies and seek to build these into our explanations rather than rely on models of explanation that force us to exclude them.”⁵ Seeking this plurality in causes requires an explanation as to the differences in conversion trajectories amongst the Bā ‘Alawī in Singapore vis-à-vis that of Malaysia and Indonesia. This article attempts to understand the reasons for the lack of interests in conversions to Shī’a Islam amongst Singaporean ‘Bā ‘Alawī and argue for the importance of the value of fieldwork that does not seem to yield any data. It propounds that researchers should provide explanations for the idiosyncratic absence of data.

Overview of the Bā ‘Alawī

The trajectory of Islam that is practiced by the Bā ‘Alawī can be represented through three historical figures. The first is Aḥmad bin ‘Īsā al-Muhājir (d 956), Prophet Muhammad’s ninth generation descendant who migrated from Iraq to Ḥaḍramawt to escape persecution. Although

Formichi, “One Big Family? Dynamics of Interaction among the ‘Lovers of the Ahlul Bayt’,” in *Shī’ism in Southeast Asia: Alid Piety and Sectarian Construction*, ed. M. Feener and C. Formichi (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015), 269-91; Nurul Fadiyah Johari, “Fearing the Enemy Within: A Study of Intra-Muslim Prejudice among Singaporean Muslims,” (master’s thesis, National University of Singapore, 2016), <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/135852>; Asif Widiyanto, “Rapprochement between Sunnism and Shiism in Indonesia,” *Epistemé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 16, no. 1 (2021): 31-58; Yuka Kayane, “Urban Sufi and Politics in Contemporary Indonesia: The Role of Dhikr Associations in the Anti-‘Ahok’ Rallies,” *South East Asia Research* 27, no. 3 (2020): 225-37; Siti Sarah Muwahidah, “For the Love of Ahl al-Bayt: Transcending Sunni-Shi’i Sectarian Allegiance” *Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies* 9, no. 3 (2016): 327-58; Ken Miichi and Yuka Kayane, “The Politics of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: The Shi’a Response to the Sampang Incidents of 2011-12,” *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 51-64; Syamsul Rijal, “9. Opposing Wahhabism: The Emergence of Ultra-traditionalism in Contemporary Indonesia,” in *The New Santri Challenges to Traditional Authority in Indonesia*, ed. Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), 151-76.

² Nurul Fadiyah, “Fearing the Enemy Within”; Nurlaila Binti Khalid, “Understanding the Sunni-Shiite Transitions Among the First Generation Malay Shiites in Singapore,” (master’s thesis, National University of Singapore, 2016); Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, “Chapter 9 Shariah Revivalism,” in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Modernity*, ed. Norshahril Saat (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 195-230.

³ Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, foreword to *Equipping the People with Knowledge: The Role of Syed Ahmad bin Muhammad Semait in Disseminating Islamic Teachings in Modern Singapore*, by Dr Muhammad Mubarak bin Habib Mohamed (Singapore: Nusantara Books, 2020), 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Christopher G. Pickvance, “Four Varieties of Comparative Analysis,” *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 16, no. 1 (2001): 22.

Omar Edaibat has since disputed this claim in his thesis, the Bā ‘Alawī has portrayed al-Muhājir as the individual responsible for spreading Sunnī Islam to the valley.⁶ The next phase was the acceptance of Sufism by al-Muhājir’s descendant, Muḥammad bin ‘Alī al-Faḳīh al-Muqaddam (d. 1232). The Bā ‘Alawī espoused a unique form of Sufī Islam known as Ṭarīqa ‘Alawīyya.⁷ Though no elaborate ritual marks the entry into the *ṭarīqa*, the Bā ‘Alawī is assumed to be part of the *ṭarīqa* by virtue of their lineage. The third figure is ‘Abd Allāh bin ‘Alawī al-Ḥaddād (d. 1720). Al-Ḥaddād canonised the tenets of the *ṭarīqa*. The adoption of Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī’s (d. 1111) Sufī sciences (*taṣawwuf*) concretised the Bā ‘Alawī as practicing a form of Sunnī-Shafī’ī Islam that is embedded within a Ghazālīan *taṣawwuf* and Ash‘arīte theology, which they brought to various parts of the Malay world including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore as they migrated.⁸ The *ṭarīqa* was influential in shaping the form of Sunnī-Shafī’ī-Ash‘arīte theology that have come to dominate Muslim beliefs and practices in the Malay world.⁹

Shī’a Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia

Scholars have positioned the Bā ‘Alawī as playing an important part in bringing Twelver Shī’a¹⁰ Islam to Indonesia and the rest of the Malay world as early as the 19th and 20th centuries.¹¹ Jalaludin Rakhmat,¹² was certain that the Bā ‘Alawī who brought Islam to the Malay world were Shī’īs who either embodied Sunnī practices or practised *taqiyya* (dissimulation). There were Indonesian Bā ‘Alawī families who professed Shī’a Islam publicly, such as the descendants of the late 19th century figures—Sayyid Ali bin Ahmad Shahab, Sayyid Aqil bin Zainal Abidin, and Sayyid Muhammad bin Ahmad Al Muhdar.¹³ In Malaysia, the process of Shī’itisation can be observed in the Ninety-Nine Laws of Perak and Perlis introduced by the Bā ‘Alawī Sayyid Hasan Jamalullail, said to have Shī’a leanings during the reign of Sultan Ahmad Taj al-Din Shah in the 16th century.¹⁴

⁶ Omar Edaibat, “The Bā ‘Alawī sāda of the Ḥaḍramawt valley: An intellectual and social history from tenth-Century origins till the late-sixteenth century,” (doctoral thesis, McGill University, 2017).

⁷ Ḥabīb ‘Abdallāh bin ‘Alawī Al-‘Aṭṭās, *The Bani Alawi Path: Principles, Method and Practice*, trans. Rizwana Sayed (London: Sakina Publishing, 2021).

⁸ Eng seng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (California: University of California Press, 2006); Nico Kaptein, *Islam, Colonialism and the Modern Age in the Netherlands East Indies: A Biography of Sayyid ‘Uthman (1822-1914)* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Latifah Abdul Latiff and Mohammad Redzuan Othman, “Hadrami Sayyids in Malaya, 1819-1940,” *Jurnal Usuluddin* 38 (2013): 141-70; Syamsul Rijal, “Internal Dynamics Within Hadrami Arabs in Indonesia: From Social Hierarchy to Islamic Doctrine,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 11, no. 1 (2017): 1-28.

⁹ Refer to Muhammadiyah As’ad, “The Dynamics of the Indonesian Hadramis on the Maulid Celebration,” *QIJS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 8, no. 2 (2020): 389.

¹⁰ Twelver Shī’a Islam is the dominant form of Shī’a Islam that is practised by Shī’īs in the Muslim world including Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. The most distinctive feature of this form of Islam compared to Sunnī Islam is its notion of spiritual successorship as belonging to Prophet’s family starting from his son-in-law and cousin, ‘Alī, and a line of descendants ending with the occultation of the twelfth Imām or spiritual leader. Devotion towards these spiritual leaders is then the core of Shī’a Islam with their sayings and actions canonised to guide Shī’īs in their Islamic belief and practice together with the Qur’ān. Their communal ritual practices are then more diverse and elaborate than their Sunnī counterparts. The births and deaths of these leaders and other members of the family of the Prophet especially his younger grandson, Ḥusayn, who was martyred in Karbala, Iraq are the major focal points of Shī’a devotional practice. This article focuses on Twelver Shī’a Islam because not only are the studies on Shī’a Islam on this group but all of the converts interviewed by the researcher converted to Twelver Shī’a Islam.

¹¹ Refer to Zulkifli Zulkifli, “Being the Shī’ite”, for a list of important figures who have brought Shī’ism to Southeast Asia.

¹² Jalaludin Rakhmat. “Dikotomi Sunnī-Syī’ah tidak relevan lagi,” in *Syiah dan Politik di Indonesia Sebuah Penelitian*, ed. A. R. Zainuddin and Basyar (M. H. Puslitbang Politik dan Kewilayahan Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia & Penerbit Mizan, 2000), 92-103

¹³ Zulkifli, “The Struggle of the Shi’is in Indonesia.”

¹⁴ Mohd Faizal, “The Malaysian Shi’a.”

However, conversions to Shī'a Islam by Indonesian Bā 'Alawī peaked after the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979. Despite the implementation of Suharto-era governmental policies against Shī'a Islam, several Bā 'Alawī continued to build their Shī'a identity and institutions. Abdul Qadir Bafagih, the leader of Pesantren Al-Khairat, a religious school in the town of Bangsri, central Java, made a public proclamation in 1982 that he had converted to Twelver Shī'a Islam.¹⁵ The Bā 'Alawī, Sayyid Ahmad Baragbah,¹⁶ shared Shī'a resources with his family upon his return from his studies in Qum, Iran, in 1984. He then opened Pesantren al-Hadi in Pekalongan, a school aimed at producing scholars who would be sent for further studies in Iran.¹⁷

Yayasan Pesantren Islam (YAPI) was set up by Habib Syed Husein bin Abi Bakr Alhabsyi, deemed the spiritual head of almost all Shī'īs in Indonesia.¹⁸ Alhabsyi was credited for writing and disseminating works on Shī'a Islam and ecumenism that further promoted Shī'a Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia.¹⁹ His school then became a propagation centre for Twelver Shī'a Islam.²⁰ Bā 'Alawī members were then involved in Twelver Shī'a Islam proselytising efforts in the late 20th and early 21st century Indonesia. Upon their return from Qum, Iran, several individuals, such as Ali Ridho Alhabsyi, Muhsin Labib, Habib Husein Alhabsyi's stepson, Umar Alatas, Ahmad Baragbah, and writer Achmad Rusdi Al-Idrus, became prominent individuals involved in promulgating Shī'a knowledge.²¹ Hussein Alkaf would publish various newsletters and journals, to propagate Twelver Shī'a Islam.

Two brothers, Umar and Husein Shahab, were involved in promoting Twelver Shī'a in Indonesia and, to some extent, Malaysia.²² Husein Shahab has taught in as many as 20 Islamic institutions,²³ authored books on Ṣufī Islam, and translated into Bahasa Indonesia and Malay Arabic and Persian Shī'a works. So feared was the possibility of Husein Shahab's influence on Malaysian society, he was prevented from completing his studies and expelled from Malaysia three years later.²⁴ Shahab's brother, Umar Shahab, is the current head of Ahlul Bayt Indonesia (ABI) organisation formed in 2010.

Evidently, Twelver Shī'a Islam brought by Indonesian Bā 'Alawī was not welcomed across the Malay straits in Malaysia. From the 1990s, Shī'īs in Malaysia were actively criminalised and persecuted by Malaysian civil society and governmental authorities, buttressed by religious laws across the nation under Mahathir's reign.²⁵ This soon culminated in the arrests of ten Shī'īs under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for inciting religious disharmony and threatening the integrity of the nation. Shī'īs were then arrested under the ISA from 1997 to the early 2000s. Two of the detainees were Bā 'Alawī, Syed Mokhtar al-Haddad and Syed Hassan Al-Attas.²⁶ Some scholars in Indonesia and Malaysia seem to conflate Shī'a Islam with the Bā 'Alawī. Bā 'Alawī detractors, such as the Malaysian Shamsuddin Harun, have declared the Bā 'Alawī as fake Sunnis.²⁷ He highlighted how Alwi Alhaddad, a singer from Indonesia, played an

¹⁵ Assegaf, "Aspects of Shī'ism in Contemporary Indonesia."

¹⁶ Assegaf, "The Rise of Shī'ism in Contemporary Indonesia."

¹⁷ Formichi, "One Big Family?"

¹⁸ Formichi, "One Big Family?"

¹⁹ Zulkifli, "The Struggle of the Shi'is in Indonesia."

²⁰ Formichi, "One Big Family?" 273.

²¹ Assegaf, "Aspects of Shī'ism in Contemporary Indonesia."

²² Assegaf, "The Rise of Shī'ism in Contemporary Indonesia."

²³ Zulkifli, "The Struggle of the Shi'is in Indonesia."

²⁴ Zulkifli, "The Struggle of the Shi'is in Indonesia."

²⁵ Mohd Faizal Musa, "The Malaysian Shi'a"; Mohd Faizal Musa, "Sunni-Shia Reconciliation in Malaysia," in *Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia: Discourses and Struggles*, ed. Norshahril Saat and Azhar Ibrahim (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019).

²⁶ Marcinkowski, "Aspects of Shī'ism in Contemporary Southeast Asia."

²⁷ Sazli Arshad, "Waspada terhadap Habib & Syiah - Ustaz Shamsuddin Harun," *Sazli Arshad YouTube Channel*, April 23, 2017. Accessed June 2023.

important part in promoting Shī‘a Islam in the Malay world. He argued that it is through rituals such as the singing of *nashīd* (devotional songs), grave visitations, and the sighting of the Prophet when one is awake (*yaqzah*) that the Bā ‘Alawī brings Twelver Shī‘a Islam to others. This short section on the rise of Twelver Shī‘a Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia showed how the Bā ‘Alawī were its first converts in both countries. They began proselytising it to the community and the Muslim society at large. It is, therefore, not difficult to find large segments of the Bā ‘Alawī community who profess Twelver Shī‘a Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The Rise of Shī‘a Islam in Singapore

The Muslim community of colonial Singapore was taken by surprise in 1907 when a Bā ‘Alawī, Sayyid Muhammad al-‘Aqil al-Hadrami, declared that cursing the Umayyads, the first Muslim dynastic empire, was praiseworthy due to the empire’s admonishable behaviour towards the household of the Prophet.²⁸ However, Zulkifli²⁹ and Mohamed Fairouz *et al.*³⁰ argue that the insinuation that al-‘Aqil was therefore a Shī‘ī simply because of his declaration is intellectually spurious, as it presumes a superficial dichotomy between Sunnī and Shī‘a beliefs; elements of support towards the household of the Prophet have always been present in the Malay world.

Nonetheless, what is certain is that in Singapore, the two most important Shī‘a families were not Bā ‘Alawī. They were the Gujarati Hindu convert Jumabhoy family, whose patriarch, Rajabali Jumabhoy, migrated to Singapore in 1918, and the Iranian Namazie family, whose patriarch, Mohamed Javad Namazie, arrived on the island around the same time.³¹ Whilst Twelver Shī‘a Islam in Singapore during the colonial period remained within these two families, it went on a different trajectory after the country’s independence. In 1972, the Sunni organisation *Himpunan Belia Islam* (HBI, Muslim Youth Assembly) was formed to protect the purity of Islam and was seen as staunch followers of Wahhabism, a literalist form of Islam founded in Saudi Arabia. Individuals within HBI began to monitor Twelver Shī‘a Islam and attended talks held by the Jaafari Muslim Association Singapore (JMAS).

Ironically, these individuals became attracted to Twelver Shī‘a Islam. Two Indonesian Bā ‘Alawī individuals, Syed Ahmad Baragbah and Syed Husein Shahab, were credited for helping teach and provide Shī‘a materials to HBI individuals who would convert to Twelver Shī‘a Islam.³² Indonesia became an important hub for Twelver Shī‘a knowledge, as not only did teachers and books from Indonesia cater to Shī‘a needs in Singapore, but the Iranian ambassador to Indonesia was also the proxy to Singapore since the latter does not house an Iranian embassy. The Malaysian Bā ‘Alawī scholar, Syed Hussein Alatas, also delivered a lecture called *Imam Hussein and the Islamic Faith* in 1987 during the Commemoration of Karbala at the Islamic Fellowship Association in Singapore. Resultantly, indigenous Malay conversions to Twelver Shī‘a Islam began to burgeon in Singapore. Whilst Twelver Shī‘a Islam in the colonial era was dominated by the Gujarati Jumabhoy and Iranian Namazie families, today, most contemporary Shī‘īs in Singapore are Malays. Nonetheless, though the Bā ‘Alawī of Indonesia and Malaysia had managed to influence indigenous Malay conversions to Twelver Shī‘a Islam, they were unable to convert their Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī counterparts.

²⁸ Mohamed Fairouz Mohamed Fathillah, Mohd Shairawi Mohd Noor, and Ahmad Munawar Ismail, “Persepsi golongan Syiah terhadap beberapa persoalan akidah Ahli Sunah Waljamaah di Malaysia,” *UMRAN - International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies* 7, no. 1 (2019): 69-48.

²⁹ Zulkifli, “The Struggle of the Shi’is in Indonesia.”

³⁰ Mohamed Fairouz et al., “Persepsi golongan Syiah.”

³¹ Marcinkowski, “Aspects of Shi’ism in Contemporary Southeast Asia.”

³² Marcinkowski, “Aspects of Shi’ism in Contemporary Southeast Asia.”

Bā ‘Alawī Converts to Shī’ism in Singapore

This researcher had conducted research on conversions to Shī’a Islam amongst the Bā ‘Alawī in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore between 2021 and 2024. Though she could easily locate a pool of willing Shī’a informants in Malaysia and Indonesia, there was a paucity in the number of Shī’a informants from Singapore.

According to Singapore’s 2020 Census Population, the Bā ‘Alawī make up 0.22% of the Singaporean population or a total of 9,028 individuals, together with other Arabs.³³ This meant that the Bā ‘Alawī was a close-knit community aware of the biographies and personalities within the different familial networks.³⁴ Given the researcher’s shared background as a Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī who had close relations with various leaders in the community, access to Shī’a informants would have been relatively easy. However, only two converts were identified in Singapore, with only one eventually participating in the research. The reasons behind this lack of Bā ‘Alawī Shī’a informants from Singapore, compared to Indonesia and Malaysia, is the focus of this article.

Method

This article focuses on the ways in which the Bā ‘Alawī has moulded the landscape of Islam in Singapore and prevented conversions. In-depth, unstructured interviews with six contemporary Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī religious scholars was conducted for this research. An interview with a Bā ‘Alawī individual who organises various religious courses for the general Bā ‘Alawī community, together with an interview with Ustazah Farhana Munshi, a non-Bā ‘Alawī expert of the Ṭarīqa ‘Alawiyya, are also part of the data. Oral historical interviews of three prominent Bā ‘Alawī religious scholars from the 1980s to 2000s are also included. They are Ustaz Syed Isa Mohamed Semait, the second and longest serving Mufti in Singapore, Ustaz Syed Abdillah Ahmad Aljufri, former President of Singapore Islamic Scholars & Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS, Persatuan Ulama dan Guru-Guru Agama Islam Singapura), and Syed Ali Ahmad Semait, the son and successor of Ustaz Syed Ahmad Semait, a prominent religious scholar and the founder of the religious publication company, Pustaka Nasional. In addition, biographies of Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī religious scholars that were featured in the *Obor Ummah* (Beacons of the Ummah) series published by Singapore’s PERGAS were also included for this research.

Factor One: Network of Prominent Bā ‘Alawī Religious Figures

The 1980s and the 1990s witnessed the advent of a strong network of Bā ‘Alawī *ulama* (religious scholars) shaping the trajectory of Islam in Singapore. One could find Habib Abas (d. 2018) discussing religious knowledge with his contemporaries and teachers which include Shaikh Omar Al-Khatib (d. 1997), Ustaz Syed Abdillah bin Ahmad Aljufri (d. 2003), and Ustaz Syed Ahmad Semait (d. 2006).³⁵ Similarly, Ustaz Syed Abdillah Aljufri received advice from Johor Muftī Habib ‘Alawī bin Ṭāhīr al-Ḥaddād (d. 1962), Syeikh Omar al-Khatib, and Ustaz Syed Abu Bakar bin Taha Alsagoff (d. 1956).³⁶ Ustaz Syed Abdul Rahman Alkaff (d. 2004)

³³ Department of Statistics Singapore. *Census of Population 2020 Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion*. 2020.

³⁴ Refer to Ameen Ali Talib, “Hadramis in Singapore,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17, no. 1 (1997): 89–96; William Roff, “Murder as an Aid to Social History: The Arabs in Singapore in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Transcending Borders*, ed. Huub de Jonge and Nico Kaptein (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 91-108.

³⁵ PERGAS, *Beacons of the Ummah: Tracing the Footsteps of Singapore’s Islamic Religious Leaders, 3rd Series* (Singapore: PERGAS, 2023).

³⁶ PERGAS, *Beacons of the Ummah: Tracing the Footsteps of Singapore’s Islamic Religious Leaders* (Singapore: PERGAS, 2014).

also maintained close relationships with the Indonesian Habib Salim b. Ahmad b. Jindan and the Meccan Bā ‘Alawī Sayyid Muhammad b. Alawi Al Maliki (d. 2004).³⁷

Syeikh Omar al-Khatib, a migrant from Ḥaḍramawt, was an especially important member of the *ulama* community in Singapore.³⁸ Even though he was not from the Bā ‘Alawī family, he was regarded as an expert of Bā ‘Alawī history and various religious sciences. Many *ulama* such as Ustaz Syed Ahmad Semait referred to Al-Khatib to guide them in their religious rulings and also as a source of information in books they published.³⁹ Saad (pseudonym), a close confidante of the Malaysian Habib Zain Alhabshi (d. 2010), explained that Habib Zain studied under Al-Khatib.⁴⁰

Al-Khatib was not the only non-Bā ‘Alawī scholar who partook in the dissemination of *ṭarīqa* knowledge. Indigenous Malay scholars such as Ustaz Muhammad Noor Taib (d. 2012), Ustaz Daud b. Ali (d. 1989), Ustaz Ahmad Sonhaji b. Muhammad (d. 2010), and Ustaz Embek Ali (d. 2008) were taught by Bā ‘Alawī scholars and exchanged knowledge with their Bā ‘Alawī contemporaries.⁴¹ They then taught *ṭarīqa* knowledge to their Singaporean congregation. The Bā ‘Alawī during this time had therefore build a strong network of *ulama* thereby ensuring the propagation and dissemination of a unified religious knowledge.

This network of Bā ‘Alawī scholars held and dominated official religious leadership position in Singapore. Singapore’s former Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, credited Syeikh Syed Isa Semait (d. 2025) for establishing most of the pivotal religious institutions for the Singaporean Muslim community.⁴² He led Singapore’s *Fatwa* Committee which was a panel of the most important religious scholars in Singapore which generate religious rulings pertinent to issues that arise in Singaporean society.⁴³ Similarly, Syed Isa’s brother, Syed Ahmad Semait (d. 2006) was an important leader in PERGAS, holding office at the *Majlis Masyhaikh Pergas* (PERGAS High Council).⁴⁴ He also became a treasurer during his tenure there. Most importantly, he was also part of the MUIS Fatwa Committee.⁴⁵

Ustaz Syed Abdillah Aljufri was also an important leader in the Singaporean Muslim community with his appointment as Local Council of Mosques secretary. His teaching circuit included mosques and also various government schools. Considered one of the greatest Islamic scholars in Singapore, Ustaz Syed Abdillah planned the religious calendar of Masjid Sultan where he is its trustee and wrote answers to queries in his weekly Islamic column titled *Kemusykilan* (Doubt) in *Berita Harian*.⁴⁶ Another Bā ‘Alawī, Syed Haroon Aljunied (d. 2024) was credited for modernising the administration of MUIS during his tenure as secretary at MUIS from 1985 to 2007.⁴⁷

³⁷ PERGAS, “Beacons of the Ummah, 3rd Series.”

³⁸ PERGAS, “Beacons of the Ummah.”

³⁹ PERGAS, “Beacons of the Ummah.”

⁴⁰ Personal communication, June 27, 2025.

⁴¹ PERGAS, “Beacons of the Ummah.”

⁴² Zhaki Abdullah, “Singapore’s Second Mufti Sheikh Syed Isa Semait Dies at Age 87,” *The Straits Times*, July 7, 2025.

⁴³ Zhaki Abdullah, “Singapore’s Second Mufti Sheikh Syed Isa Semait Dies at Age 87.”

⁴⁴ PERGAS, “Beacons of the Ummah.”

⁴⁵ PERGAS, “Beacons of the Ummah.”

⁴⁶ Siti Rafidhah Mahmood Angullia, and Mohamed Qusairy Bin Taha, *Tokoh Wasatiyah tempatan– Ustaz Syed Abdillah Al-Jufri & pandangannya tentang pendidikan madrasah di Singapura (Bahagian 1)* (Singapore: PERGAS, 2021).

⁴⁷ Farid Hamzah, “Bekas setiausaha Muis, Syed Haroon Aljunied, meninggal dunia”, *Berita Harian*, November 27, 2024.

Ṭarīqa knowledge and the Bā ‘Alawī community played an important role in the worldview of these Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī leadership. An example can be seen in an interview with Syed Isa Semait with the National Archives of Singapore. His interview began with him speaking at length about issues pertinent to the Bā ‘Alawī community, such as the migration of Aḥmad bin ‘Īsā Al-Muhājir which he said stemmed from the latter’s desire to safeguard his lineage and beliefs from the increasing polemical tensions between Sunnīs and Shī‘īs at that point in time.⁴⁸ Similarly, Muhammad Mubarak saw Syekh Syed Ahmad Semait as playing a vital role in shaping Islamic thought in Southeast Asia through his publishing company, *Pustaka Nasional*.⁴⁹ The company published translated works from the Middle East, Indonesia, and Malaysia.⁵⁰ He especially concentrated on works by scholars of the *ṭarīqa*. The translation of the *ṭarīqa* renewer, Imām ‘Abd Allāh bin ‘Alawī al-Ḥaddād’s work alone had been reprinted twenty-five times and sold in Malaysia and Indonesia, thereby illustrating the impact of his company in propagating Islamic and specifically *ṭarīqa* literature in the Malay world.

Echoing Mohd Azman,⁵¹ Ustazah Farhana Munshi⁵² explained that the Bā ‘Alawī *ulama* tend to propagate the *ṭarīqa* in a localised manner so that the public “didn’t even know they are in the *ṭarīqa*”. Ustazah Ain (pseudonym) remarked that many of her friends had practiced Bā ‘Alawī rituals such as the recitation of *Rātib al-‘Atṭās*, seeing it as a common Islamic practice rather than one attached to any *ṭarīqa*.⁵³ In other words, Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī *ulama* had successfully packaged Bā ‘Alawī rituals as common practices of Singaporean Muslims. This further renders the Bā ‘Alawī *ulama* as the *de jure* figures who are sought for authoritative religious knowledge. This is reflected by comments made by Ustazah Ain:⁵⁴

If you look at Sheikh Omar al-Khatib or Ustaz Abdillah Aljufri, that part (*ṭarīqa*) was, I wouldn’t say hidden, but reflected more in their *akhlak* (character), in their *ibadah*, that kind of thing. It wasn’t like I’m a Ṣūfī saint or I would sit in one *zāwiya* (Ṣūfī prayer space) and practice 1000 *adhkār* (repeated supplications)... They were really in the thick and thin of the community. They were very much in every institution that there was, and therefore everyone could identify them as their own scholar and have opportunities to learn from them... Very few identify with it (*ṭarīqa*) or rather very few are aware that there is a *ṭarīqa*, but many actually practice it without knowing because it is part of family traditions. The *ṭarīqa* is not perceived as exclusive and therefore accepted.

Through their leadership, the Bā ‘Alawī were able to cement the tenets of the *ṭarīqa* within the Singaporean Muslim community. The next sections show how the personality, authority, and actions of these figures curb interests in conversions among the Bā ‘Alawī in Singapore.

⁴⁸ Syed Isa Mohamed Semait, “Special Project,” Accession Number 003382, National Archives Singapore, January 29, 2019.

⁴⁹ Muhammad Mubarak bin Habib Mohamed, *Equipping the People with Knowledge: The Role of Syed Ahmad bin Muhammad Semait in Disseminating Islamic Teachings in Modern Singapore* (Singapore: Nusantara Books, 2020).

⁵⁰ Muhammad Mubarak, *Equipping the People with Knowledge*, xx.

⁵¹ Mohd Azman bin Mohsin, “Rātib al-‘Atṭās dalam Tarekat ‘Alawīyah amalan di masjid Ḥabib Hasan, Johor Bahru,” (doctoral thesis, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2017).

⁵² Personal communication, April 23, 2025.

⁵³ Personal communication, June 1, 2024.

⁵⁴ Personal communication, June 1, 2024.

Factor Two: Dominating Part-Time & Full-Time Madrasah

Sharon Siddique⁵⁵ and Suzaina Kadir⁵⁶ saw MUIS as attempting to have hegemonic and centralised control over the development of Islam in Singapore. MUIS became the medium through which the state interprets, dictates Islamic laws, and ensures the Muslim community's fealty towards the state's agenda.⁵⁷ MUIS was seen as representing the true, legitimate form of Islam in Singapore.⁵⁸ Since the Bā 'Alawī and their non-Bā 'Alawī religious allies saturated the top positions in these state-religious institutions, that form of Islam that MUIS represented can be assumed to closely resemble the Bā 'Alawī *ṭarīqa*.

The Bā 'Alawī *ulama* of Singapore played an important part in streamlining and unifying the religious curriculum in Singapore. Ustaz Syed Ahmad Semait, for example, was also involved in the production of Islamic books for Malay secondary school students.⁵⁹ Besides that, Ustaz Syed Abdillah was involved in creating the *Asas Agama Islam* (Islamic Foundations) textbook for the Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK) subject that was introduced by Singapore's Ministry of Education: "I was required in MUIS when they wanted to implement Section 81 and 82 if I am not mistaken, that deals with religious education in AMLA. That was not implemented yet. So, when they wanted to implement, they wanted to make a unit for religious education."⁶⁰

The sections which he was referring to are Sections 87 and 88 which relate to *madrasah* (religious schools) in Singapore.⁶¹ Whilst Section 88 dictates that grants to religious schools are to be administered by MUIS, Section 87 deals with the relationship of the *madrasah* with MUIS.⁶² It stated that MUIS has the power to inspect and close down any religious schools, employ teachers to these schools, and control the way the schools are to be conducted. The curriculum of these schools should also come under the purview and approval of MUIS.

With this section in place, Ustaz Syed Abdillah Aljufri began playing a primary role in moulding the Islamic education system in Singapore. Sakinah Abdul Mutalib *et al.* described the current Islamic education as divided into three which are part-time, full-time, and for the community level.⁶³ While Ustaz Syed Abdillah Aljufri did conduct classes at the community level in his private capacity,⁶⁴ he was also employed by MUIS to shape part-time and full-time *madrasah* education. He stated that:⁶⁵

⁵⁵ Sharon Siddique, "Administration of Islam in Singapore," in *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*, ed. Taufik Abdullah and S. Siddique (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 1986)

⁵⁶ Suzaina Kadir, "Islam, State And Society in Singapore," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (2004); Suzaina Kadir, "Uniquely Singapore: The Management of Islam in a Small Island Republic," *ICR Journal* 2, no. 1 (2010)

⁵⁷ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "Governing Islam and Regulating Muslims in Singapore's Secular Authoritarian State," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 66, no. 2 (2012); Kerstin Steiner, "Governing Islam, the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) and Islam in Singapore," *Australian Journal of Asian Law* 16, no. 1:6 (2015).

⁵⁸ Suzaina Kadir, "Islam, State And Society in Singapore,"; Suzaina Kadir, "Uniquely Singapore,"; Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, "Religious Representation in Secular Singapore: A Case Study of MUIS and Pergas," *Asian Survey* 53, no. 6 (2013)

⁵⁹ PERGAS, "Beacons of the Ummah."

⁶⁰ Syed Abdillah Ahmad Aljufri, "Education in Singapore (Part 3: Malay/Tamil)," Accession Number 002030, National Archives Singapore, July 8, 1998.

⁶¹ Singapore Statutes Online, *Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966 (Singapore)*, s. 87; Singapore Statutes Online, *Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966 (Singapore)*, s. 88.

⁶² Singapore Statutes Online, *Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966 (Singapore)*, s. 87; Singapore Statutes Online, *Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966 (Singapore)*, s. 88.

⁶³ Sakinah Abdul Mutalib, Nur Izaty Mohammad Irwan, Nur Irdina Mohammad Irwan, and Syed Najihuddin Syed Hassan, "The contribution of Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah in Singapore to Islamic Education," *Journal of Quran Sunnah Education and Special Needs (JQSS)* 8, no. 2 (2024)

⁶⁴ PERGAS, "Beacons of the Ummah."

⁶⁵ Syed Abdillah Aljufri, [Audio File].

“Firstly, my responsibilities were to create a curriculum for *madrasah*, then *madrasah* in mosques, and to think of what are the training that can be provided for teachers and so forth... So my responsibilities were firstly the curriculum, then the content of the curriculum. The curriculum takes a long time because I have to look through the curriculum of all the Madrasah and make them appropriate.”

Under his purview, a range of “publications of religious books for secondary schools, religious textbooks for secondary schools in the form of *Qur’ānic* text, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *hadith* (Prophetic narrations), *tawhīd* (monotheism), history ...” were then authored.⁶⁶

His explanation of the importance of a unified *madrasah* curriculum is especially pertinent for the phenomenon under study: “The most important is the education of children in the *madrasah*, either part-time or full-time, as it is an important fortress for the betterment of the community.”⁶⁷

It was evident to Ustaz Syed Abdillah that the youth had to be inculcated with a specific form of knowledge to ensure the preservation of the Muslim community. This would prevent them from being attracted to other beliefs that MUIS leadership considered deviant.⁶⁸ Ustaz Syed Abdillah further explained that the need for a more unified *madrasah* curriculum would help “to circumvent any wrong beliefs.”⁶⁹

Ustaz Syed Abdillah preserved *Tarīqa ‘Alawiyya* tenets not only exclusively within the Bā ‘Alawī community but throughout the Muslim community in Singapore, thereby ensuring its continued strength. As a translator of his books, Ustazah Farhana Munshi explained that Ustaz Abdillah’s *Asas Agama Islam* books mirrored the 17th-century *tarīqa* scholar Aḥmad bin Zayn bin ‘Alawī ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥabashī’s short treatise titled *Risāla al-Jāmi‘ah* (The Essentials of Islam) and other basic *fiqh*, *‘aqīda*, *taṣawwuf* and *sīra* books readily available in Tarīm, Ḥaḍramawt.⁷⁰

Ustazah Farah Aljunied, Senior Director of Higher Education and Research in MUIS, explained that although there is no centralised *madrasah* curriculum in Singapore that is directly controlled by MUIS to date, “generally all the *madrasah* will be teaching the same topics,” many of which are probably inherited from Ustaz Abdillah’s efforts.⁷¹

Ustazah Ain best encapsulates the impact of the work of Ustaz Syed Abdillah Aljufri in preventing conversions.⁷²

Ustaz Abdillah even wrote a textbook, the Islamic Religious Knowledge textbook, and that became a reference point for a whole generation of young Muslims at that point in time because they got that every day in school, they were learning religion in school at that point in time... So, the community started realising that there is a proper reference point not just people but there are books that I go to and I learn... and so we were aware that there is a community of Shī‘ī practitioners in Singapore but I think what has happened is that they themselves do not actively or strongly and outwardly go out and try to convert people because people are aware that this

⁶⁶ Syed Abdillah Aljufri, [Audio File].

⁶⁷ Syed Abdillah Aljufri, [Audio File].

⁶⁸ Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, “Religious representation in secular Singapore”,

⁶⁹ Syed Abdillah Aljufri, “Education in Singapore.”

⁷⁰ Personal communication, April 23, 2025.

⁷¹ Personal communication, May 29, 2025.

⁷² Personal communication, May 29, 2025.

is our *madhhab*, this is what has been taught to us and that Shī'ī is a very different group. Therefore, we won't turn you down and say you are not Muslim, but we know that you are different from the larger *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (Sunnī).

The above statement shows how Ustaz Abdillah's involvement in the restructuring of the *madrrasah* curriculum has also allowed him to cement the *madhhab* (jurisprudence) and *'aqīda* (creed) of the *ṭarīqa* as the dominant form of Islam to be taught and practiced by the Singaporean Muslim community. His persona as a respected religious authority in the country lends credence to the texts that he created. Both his personality and textual works have thwarted not only interests in conversions to other forms of Islam but also a missionary spirit from manifesting amongst Shī'ī Muslims. This was also suggested by Ustazah Farhana Munshi, who stated that the 1990s were filled with:⁷³

...well followed and well respected *asatizah*. The community respected them, and I feel that this gave them leverage that up till now people remember them and follow their teachings, that their books are being kept by the older generation... that was why there is no strong influence of the Shī'ī...to penetrate because of these people being there, they blocked it.

Factor Three: Dominating Home Education

Within the Bā 'Alawī community, its *ulama* further made their homes a centre of religious education. Syeikh Omar al-Khatib's daily classes in his home drew crowds not only from the lay Bā 'Alawī person but also the *ulama*, such as Habib Zain Alhabshi, who would play a pivotal role in preventing the dissemination of Shī'a Islam in Johor, Malaysia.⁷⁴

Ustaz Abdillah Aljufri was requested to conduct lessons in various homes.⁷⁵ Similarly, other than within mosques, Sharifah Badriyah Alsagoff (d. 2007) also created study groups in various homes.⁷⁶ Her students would then venture to create such study groups in their own homes.⁷⁷ Habib Abas conducted classes with students, some of whom are Bā 'Alawī, every week at his home.⁷⁸ Encouraging students to replicate this, fifteen houses in Singapore became the cartographical nodes in which his *ṭarīqa* practices are cemented.

These homes became the loci on which *ṭarīqa* traditions were acted out. Following the tradition of *ṭarīqa* scholars, Habib Abas would begin his classes with the *mawlid* before proceeding with his religious lesson.⁷⁹ Ustaz Syed Abdul Rahman Alkaff would read *Wird al-Laṭīf* and *Rātīb al-Haddād* every morning and evening respectively as part of his routine. His daily religious lessons would also begin with a reading of the *mawlid*.⁸⁰ The *Rātīb al-Haddād*, *Sūra Yasīn* (thirty-sixth chapter of the Qur'ān) and *al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā* (recitation of the ninety names of Allah) would be recited every Thursday night as per *ṭarīqa* tradition.⁸¹

⁷³ Personal communication, April 23, 2024.

⁷⁴ This finding was based on an interview with an Indonesian Shī'ī informant who recalled various instances of Habib Zain attempting to prevent conversions to Shī'a Islam within the Bā 'Alawī.

⁷⁵ PERGAS, "Beacons of the Ummah."

⁷⁶ PERGAS, *Beacons of the Ummah: Tracing the Footsteps of Singapore's Islamic Religious Leaders, 2nd Series*, (Singapore: PERGAS, 2019).

⁷⁷ PERGAS, *Beacons of the Ummah*.

⁷⁸ PERGAS, "Beacons of the Ummah, 3rd series."

⁷⁹ PERGAS, "Beacons of the Ummah, 3rd series."

⁸⁰ PERGAS, "Beacons of the Ummah, 3rd series."

⁸¹ PERGAS, "Beacons of the Ummah, 3rd series."

The importance of houses as venues to safeguard Bā ‘Alawī *ṭarīqa* education and thus curb conversion was highlighted by Syeikh Syed Isa Semait:⁸²

Each individual will try to ensure that their children, even though do not study religion deeply, at least they do not go astray until they can become deviant. And the books and the practices that they do are all to push so that their children and grandchildren are safeguarded. Maybe you have heard that each week we have something like *tadārus* (congregational study) where we read *kitab-kitab* (texts) such as *nahu* (grammar), *fiqh*, *ḥadīth* as such. This weekly or fortnightly meetings are activities which are practiced by our ancestors... gatherings to read these *kitab* are practices that have been *warisi* (inherited/legacies of) their ancestors.

Factor Four: The Secularisation of Islamic Knowledge

The above quote showcased the *ulama*’s attempt to ensure that the next generation is rooted in a basic form of *ṭarīqa* education amidst an increasing lack of interest in deep religious knowledge. This reflected the *Muftī*’s acknowledgement of the increased effects of the Singapore state’s secularisation and modernisation agenda.⁸³ Whilst there were still Bā ‘Alawī who attended full-time *madrasah*, most attended secular institutions.⁸⁴ Ustazah Ain supported this by saying that she could only name a few Bā ‘Alawī who attended a full-time *madrasah* with her when she was an adolescent,⁸⁵ while most went into secular institutions.

Barro *et al.* found that governmental restrictions played a role in preventing religious conversions.⁸⁶ The Singapore government, creates restrictions on religions to ensure the maintenance of secularism and also inter-religious harmony.⁸⁷ The Bā ‘Alawī *ulama* embraced the increased secularisation of religious knowledge. For example, Ustaz Syed Abdillah Aljufri lauded the government’s effort to integrate secular education within the Islamic *madrasah* school system, arguing that an Islamic education should be a combination of “*ukhrawī*” (otherworldly) and” *duniawī*” (thisworldly).⁸⁸ He claimed that the *madrasah* embraced the government’s initiative and that they took their “own initiative” to include secular subjects “because they want to prove that students who undergo religious education can also succeed in the secular.”⁸⁹

This initiative had resulted in religious values being increasingly uprooted for modern and secular values which stressed upon economic sustenance, consumerism, ostentation, and materialism in the 21st century.⁹⁰ *Ṭarīqa* values that emphasize humility and material ascetism had to give way to the internalisation of secular values, further reducing a deep attraction and

⁸² Syed Isa Mohamed Semait, “Special Project.”

⁸³ Refer to Suzaina Kadir, “Islam, State and Society in Singapore,”; Walid Jumblat Abdullah, “Religious Representation in Secular Singapore.”

⁸⁴ Syed Isa Mohamed Semait, “Special Project.”

⁸⁵ Personal communication, June 1, 2024.

⁸⁶ Robert J. Barro, Jason Hwang, and Rachel McCleary, “Religious Conversion In 40 Countries,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (2010)

⁸⁷ Muhammad Haziq bin Jani, “Post-Salafism and its Prospects Beyond Saudi Arabia,” *RSIS Commentaries*, no. 19 (2023); Vivienne Wee, “Secular State, Multi-Religious Society: The Patterning of Religion in Singapore,” (conference presentation, Conference of Religion and Authority in East and Southeast Asia, May 2-9, 1989), 1–35.

⁸⁸ Syed Abdillah Ahmad Aljufri, “Education in Singapore.”

⁸⁹ Syed Abdillah Ahmad Aljufri, “Education in Singapore.”

⁹⁰ Fadhil Yunus Alsagoff, “Between Immanence and Transcendence: An Ethnographic Study of the Ba ‘Alawi and the Tariqa ‘Alawiyyah in 21st Century Singapore, (unpublished bachelor’s thesis, National University of Singapore, 2018). Scholarbank@NUS.

attachment towards the *ṭarīqa*.⁹¹ Alsagoff explained that many youths found it difficult to root themselves deeply into the *ṭarīqa* due to Singapore’s modernizing and secularisation agenda.⁹² *Ṭarīqa* classes, events, and rituals become even more unattractive because they were held in the Malay language.⁹³ The increase in materialism and modernist pursuits prevented the Bā ‘Alawī from desiring a deeper understanding of the religion. As Ustaz Syed Ahmad Semait said: “... for this generation, where many people have run away from religion due to their chase of materialistic gains until they have forgotten themselves and automatically forgotten Allah.”⁹⁴

Ustazah Farhana Munshi explained that Shī‘a Islam was not a problem that the Bā ‘Alawī faced. She continued that: “Singapore’s problem is the liberals... the *dunia* (this-worldly affairs)... We do not have a fight with the Shī‘īs. We have a big fight with some of the *duniawi* people. It is probably because of the affluence of Singapore and the westernisation of Singapore.”⁹⁵

The movement from what looked like a golden age of Bā ‘Alawī *ulama* in the 1980s and 1990s to a lack of religiosity from the 2000s onwards as a result of increasing modernisation and secularisation can be seen in Syed Ahmad Semait's son’s struggle in finding scholars to continue the legacy of those in his father's generation.⁹⁶

We were lacking writers who can write in Islamic titles, so what we did was we went to Pergas, which is the Islamic theological association in Singapore, and we decided to work with them to groom some of the younger scholars to write because there were no second generation after the first generation of writers in Singapore.

When asked, all Singaporean informants said they could no longer name prominent Bā ‘Alawī religious scholars from the country, as they no longer existed in the current time, as Ustaz Mukhriz attested: “Who do we want to look up to in Singapore?... for every successful nation, there should be a personality.”⁹⁷

This was echoed by all the current *ulama* in Singapore, who did not see themselves as pivotal and prominent influencers in Singapore’s religious scene. Ustazah Ain lamented how neither she nor her father could name any Bā ‘Alawī as prominent religious community leaders today. She continued that:⁹⁸

I think there was, but I am sad that we are using the past tense. So, we had our former *Muftī*, who is also not very well now, so he is very much out of the public sphere. We had Syed Isa Semait, we had his brother, Syed Ahmad Semait, we of course had Syed Abdillah Aljufri, we had Habib Abas... So basically, we had representations from various families. It reflected how the community at that point in time looked at their role not only within the Bā ‘Alawī community but also the larger Muslim community as religious leaders or at least as people who would want

⁹¹ Zain bin Ibrahim Bin Sumaith, *Thariqah Alawiyah jalan lurus menuju Allah*, trans. Ali bin Yahya and Husin Nabil Jakarta (Indonesia: Rabithah Alawiyah/Penerbit Nafas, 2009); Rizwana Sayed, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *The Banī ‘Alawī Path: Principles, Method & Practice*, by ‘Abdallāh bin ‘Alawī al-‘Atṭās, trans. Rizwana Sayed (London: Sakina Publishing, 2021), 1-15.

⁹² Alsagoff, “Between Immanence and Transcendence.”

⁹³ Alsagoff, “Between Immanence and Transcendence.”

⁹⁴ Muhammad Mubarak, *Equipping the People with Knowledge*, 72.

⁹⁵ Personal communication, April 23, 2025.

⁹⁶ Syed Ali Ahmad Semait, “Communities of Singapore (Part 3),” Accession Number 003169, National Archives Singapore, November 6, 2015.

⁹⁷ Personal communication, September 8, 2023.

⁹⁸ Personal communication, June 1, 2024.

to continue and contribute in the religious realm. And so, in that sense, although some of them may not have been to tertiary education but they are so well read. We had people like Sheikh Omar al-Khatib, who had his classes... So, it was a very vibrant community at that point, but sadly the younger ones had not really taken that up. While some had gone on to Tarīm (spiritual centre for further learning) and all that, they have not come back to community-wide, local leadership.

Factor Five: *Ṭarīqa* ‘Alawiyya as Conduit to Bā ‘Alawī Arab Identity

Nevertheless, Singaporean Bā ‘Alawī wanted to maintain their unique cultural Arab identity in multi-racial Singapore. Manger saw the *ṭarīqa* as the conduit through which the Bā ‘Alawī maintain their identity despite having pursued non-religious vocations.⁹⁹ For Alsagoff, the Bā ‘Alawī sought the maintenance of their tradition through religiosity by virtue of them being descendants of the Prophet.¹⁰⁰ Aisha, a 25-year-old Bā ‘Alawī woman, explained that she and her friends were not aware that they were brought up in a strictly *Ṭarīqa* ‘Alawiyya way. Her father, Ustaz Mukhriz, had studied under al-Khatib and Ustaz Abdillah Aljufri. Her family, under her father’s guidance, would read *Wird Sakran* and *Rātib al-Ḥaddād*, but were not aware of the people behind these religious works and that they were in the path of the *ṭarīqa*. Aisha went through a normal, typical Singaporean life which she defined as the secular route of education.

However, her encounter with a colleague who had showed a lot of respect towards her because of her familial background had made her come to the realisation that the Bā ‘Alawī was an esteemed group of people. For Aisha, it was important to know what the Bā ‘Alawī identity meant. As such, she began holding online religious classes where she drew in *asatizah* to teach Bā ‘Alawī female youth. She remarked that “if I see the youth in Singapore, I don’t really think they know what the Bā ‘Alawī means.”¹⁰¹ She informed that she had a desire for the “Bā ‘Alawī to know who they are and what their responsibilities are.” For Aisha, learning the *ṭarīqa* was a way to reconnect with the Bā ‘Alawī Arab identity.¹⁰²

I think mostly the religious identity... This was a discussion that I had with my husband, who is in the Bā ‘Alawī scene. Like when we go for exhibits on Arabs in Singapore, it is mostly about the way we dress, the trading our ancestors brought to Singapore, music, rarely it is mentioned about religion and religion is such... yes our culture is all about those, but it is a mix and mesh of culture and religion where religion is part of our culture... For me, of course, culture is important, but that religious (part) is lacking from the cultural part...

Ustazah Farhana Munshi credited Singapore’s education system and Bā ‘Alawī home education for easing the Bā ‘Alawī rediscovery of the *ṭarīqa*.¹⁰³

Being educated by the government, the Bā ‘Alawī began to appreciate *‘ilmu* (knowledge)... My students who are Bā ‘Alawī, when I teach Imām al-Ḥaddād, when I teach from *turāth* (religious texts and legacies) of the Bā ‘Alawī, when I teach from the inheritance from the Bā ‘Alawī in English, they are recognising that it is the truth... In a sense, they have always been on it with their families, but now it is built up very firmly with the knowledge.

⁹⁹ Leif Manger, *The Hadrami Diaspora: Community-building on the Indian Ocean Rim* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

¹⁰⁰ Alsagoff, “Between Immanence and Transcendence.”

¹⁰¹ Personal communication, May 1, 2025.

¹⁰² Personal communication, May 1, 2025.

¹⁰³ Personal communication, April 23, 2025.

What was limited is not the Bā 'Alawī level of faith but their ability to commit deeply to the *ṭarīqa* as a result of the modernization agenda in Singapore. Such can be observed in Ustaz Mahmood's musing:¹⁰⁴

I feel Singaporeans are too busy to think of all that. With worldly matters, with everyday life. They are busy with work and career and family, which is different from the situation in Indonesia, where the lifestyle is more relaxed, and they have more time. Singapore is a rat race where they have no time. I mean we do have *Alwehdah* (Arab Association of Singapore), but *Alwehdah* is also into displaying Arabic culture rather than religion, even though there are religious activities that they do get involved in. Our numbers are few, and we are also separated. If in Indonesia, people sit in one *Kampung Arab*. Hence, we are not that strong to congregate to discuss about religious or creedal issues. We don't have the time. They will congregate for cultural activities, not religious ones.

Aisha further explained that the Bā 'Alawī youth had a very basic religious identity that they would not be able to distinguish and identify Shī'a from other forms of Islam. The *ṭarīqa* for her was the conduit for them to strengthen their cultural identity. Limited knowledge of the *ṭarīqa* yet coupled with a desire to maintain their unique culture has led the Bā 'Alawī in Singapore to continue being in the *ṭarīqa* superficially which also prevented them from being exposed and attracted to Shī'a Islam. According to Ustaz Mukhriz:¹⁰⁵

The Bā 'Alawī whether male or female, still want to stay in the *ṭarīqa*. Knowing we are the descendants of the Prophet, follow the *'aqīda Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, follow the path of our ancestors, without a doubt they feel proud, it is good. So, for them to go to another *madhhab* or *ṭarīqa* it is very difficult.

This is illustrated by a conversation with another Singaporean Bā 'Alawī woman who informed that she read the *Khulāṣa*, a collection of supplications and prayers, which has become one of the most important canonical texts of the *ṭarīqa*. However, when the *Ṭarīqa 'Alawiyya* was mentioned, she stated that she did not know what it was. Evidently, whilst she was practicing the tenets of the *ṭarīqa*, desiring to be connected to her cultural tradition, she was unaware what that tradition entailed.

Conclusion

Singapore represents a methodological and theoretical quandary for many scholars of Islam. As a religion practised by a minority group, its relatively diffident and unassuming nature has caused researchers to do away with a study in that context due to the assumption that no valuable insight can be obtained from such a small context like Singapore. Yet, one of the most important features when comparing different outcomes for a phenomenon is curiosity towards explaining this difference.¹⁰⁶ Just as explanations for reasons towards conversions in Indonesia and Malaysia should be discovered due to their surging numbers, there should also be an explanation for the lack of similar data in Singapore, which has equal sociological import and value. Pickvance argued that it is important that researchers build an explanation of the processes that cause these differences and exceptionalism to occur within the specific society.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Personal communication, September 9, 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Ustaz Mukhriz, personal communication, September 8, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Pickvance, "Four Varieties of Comparative Analysis."

¹⁰⁷ Pickvance, "Four Varieties of Comparative Analysis," 22, 26.

This paper is an attempt to explain Bā ‘Alawī conversion exceptionalism in Singapore. It explains five factors for the lack of conversion. Firstly, in the 1980s and 1990s, a strong network of Bā ‘Alawī scholars monopolised the Islamic scholarly field in the country, ensuring that Shāfi’ī Islam is the dominant form of Islam. Secondly, Bā ‘Alawī scholars were tasked by the Singapore state to create a unified Islamic curriculum to be used in both full-time and part-time *madrrasah*, thereby cementing the dominance of Shāfi’ī Islam in the country. Thirdly, Bā ‘Alawī scholars created a network of home-based Islamic educational classes on top of their sermons in mosques and the media, ensuring their continued dominance in a wide reach of Muslim audience. Fourthly, Bā ‘Alawī scholars partook in Singapore’s state modernisation and secularisation agenda which led to the dilution of deep religious knowledge and curbed conversions to Shī’a Islam. Lastly, a desire to preserve their cultural identity further entrenched the Bā ‘Alawī within the *Ṭarīqa* Alawiyya. The *ṭarīqa* provided them with the means to express their unique Arab identity, which effectively prevents them from desiring to convert to Shī’a Islam. The Singaporean case of a dearth of conversions within its Bā ‘Alawī community exemplified the nuanced relationship between agentival activism, state regulation and intervention, and identity formation in creating contingencies for conversions.

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