



A Preliminary Analysis of the Preconditions for the Emergence of an Islamic Educational Movement in Al-Attas' Framework

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Abstract

*Past and contemporary Islamic movements overwhelmingly focused on political and economic reform, often neglecting the inner moral and intellectual condition of the individual. This paper argues that such neglect results from a fundamental confusion about the nature of education itself. The paper critiques the corporatisation of education and the reduction of authority to institutional structures rather than personal moral-intellectual integrity. The analysis offers a philosophical groundwork for rethinking Islamic educational initiatives beyond neoliberal and activist frameworks. Drawing principally on the educational philosophy of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, the paper inspired by his concepts of *adab* (recognition and acknowledgement of proper order) and *ta'dīb* (the inculcation of that order) as the necessary foundations for any authentic reforming initiative without neglecting education as its core; this process is what we name it the Islamic educational movement. We propose that such a movement must fulfil two preconditions. First, it must recognise the type of order it seeks, distinguishing between temporal orders (economic, political) which are sustained by external maintenance, and eternal orders (knowledge, truth) sustained by conscious commitment and integrity. Second, it must preserve the integrity of knowledge through the moral-spiritual refinement of the knower, as well as courageous actions that acknowledge its rightful places within the hierarchy of that type of order. It concludes that without recovering *adab* in the individual self-discipline of their soul, no collective reform, however well organised, can restore justice ('*adl*') or truth.*

Keywords: Al-Attas, *adab*, educational movement, Islamic movement, Islamic education, *ta'dīb*, justice ('*adl*'), integrity of knowledge, corporatisation of education, philosophy of education

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Introduction

Modernity accords excessive importance to progress, development, and innovation across all fields of knowledge. As a result, both societies and individuals have become disoriented regarding their direction and ultimate purpose in life, particularly under the influence of secular pragmatism (Abd Jelani, 2018, p. 20-22). Al-Attas characterises this condition as one shaped by “the spirit of here and now” (Al-Attas, 1978).

This is especially true for Muslims who are caught in the spirit emanated from the Islamic Movements beginning from the end of the 19th Century (Siddiqui, 1982, p. 6-7), a period marked by political dissonance during the Ottoman rule as well as the rise of Western scientific paradigms that questioned inherited religious beliefs and long-standing traditions. Various phases of social overhauls (reformations) have taken place since then that would alter the very foundation of one's position in religion.

This happened to coincide with the proliferations of modern educational initiatives (Shafie, 2004) in the form of institutionalisations of political authority, legal and economic development (Choueiri, 2010, p. 86). A significant portion of these educational and institutional developments drew upon the organizational frameworks and normative commitments of socio-political Islamic movements such as the Egypt's *Muslim Brotherhood* (Wonder, 2008), Turkey's *Hizmet* (Atay, 2019), Indonesia's *Muhammadiyah* (Muhammadiyah Education Council, 2014) and Malaysia's ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia) (Sundaram & Cheek, 1992; Hassan, 2003).

Despite their diverse national contexts, these movements share a common orientation. Which is a movement that predominantly focuses on achieving political and economic gains. With neoliberalism rising globally in the 1980s, education, healthcare, and religion was increasingly viewed in terms of efficiency, productivity, and market values. Institutions were reframed not just as cultural or moral spaces, let alone as a religious establishment, but as mere economic enablers. Islamic Movements are unfortunately mistakenly seen by Muslims themselves to bring about only social overhauls solely meant to aid economic stability masqueraded by its various political resurgence in the name of Islamic Reformation (Al-Attas, 1975; Sheikh Idris, 1977, p. 1; Wan Daud, 1998, p. 405-406). This predominant focus on political and economic outcomes has come at the expense of a deeper vision of education.

This paper is aimed to present a preliminary analysis on the criteria that preserves order and integrity of knowledge in ourselves as a condition for the Islamic educational movement to take place. To do this, we must first (1) identify the type of order that we seek and second, (2) preserve the integrity of knowledge through action. The two objectives will require an intellectual investigation basing from the works of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' proposition of the solution to the vicious cycle fuelled by *systemic* corruptions of knowledge breeding false leaderships which results into injustice where the discipline and order of reality (termed as *adab*) were compromised. The following sections elaborate this argument by first diagnosing the crisis of early modern movements, then expounding Al-Attas' concepts of justice and *adab*, and finally deriving the two preconditions for an authentic Islamic educational movement.

The Crisis of Early Modern Islamic Movements

Before returning to Al-Attas' solution, it is necessary to understand precisely why existing movements have failed to address the inner moral dimension of reform. In the time where movements such as organized intellectual activism most commonly adapt organizational systems (Dumovich, 2026; Alsoos, 2023; Mitchell, 1933; Abdul Malek, 2011) of orders under neoliberal values (Wan Daud, 2013), it poses a challenge to delineate the Islamic Movements from the other (Kramer, 1986). The deliberations regarding Islamic Reformation have always been concerned with ways of restoring order in our communities through establishing political authority and reformation of the system (Abdul Hamid, 2001). These instruments of change initiated by the self-proclaimed fundamentalists are mainly for the purpose of establishing a stable economic stand of achieving the ideal notion of an Islamic State to perturb the lost balance of the Muslim societies (Choueiri, 2010, p. 1-2). This explains why the current and existing discourse on institutions (or products of movements) always ties back to economics (North, 1991, p. 97). Yet this economic and political framing conceals a deeper problem.

Moreover, the focus on reform has more often than not been towards achieving social order, it is devoid of any concern on the inner order of the individual as human beings. Consequently, the reforming process has ignored the importance of individual moral judgement, a neglect which is often reflected in their leadership and pursuance of indefinite forms of justice. Ironically, in most cases of structured activism in NGOs or welfare organisations, leader-reformers in organizations often distanced themselves from the very process of substantive reform. They frequently overlook the fact that their prevailing condition is characterized by the absence of the essential element of genuine transformation; i.e. self-reformation (Abd Jelani, 2018; Almahdaly & Sufi, 2019). This is reflected in the dialectical tension between their conception of the ummah as a collective authority and their dismissal of individual moral responsibilities (Al-Attas, 1978, p. 106-107; Wan Daud, 1998, p. 405-406). This tension between collective ambition and individual neglect is not accidental but structural.

The reformer's role is often conceived without due regard for the personal responsibility that position demands (Wan Daud, 2000; Wan Daud, 2010). This encourages false leadership and to extrapolate this further, would be the cause for disorder in the workings of organization and hence a confusion of legitimacy and authority. How are we to respond when confronted with a systemic condition in which both leadership and the structures of knowledge production have become functionally inoperative? This condition is what Von Grunebaum describes as an effect of the disintegration of cohesive religious and intellectual traditions in the face of modern pressures that has often led to cultural disorientation. In other words, it creates disturbance and displacement in one's peaceful existence (Von Grunebaum, 1983). The consequences extend beyond leadership into everyday interactions.

Equally, this is also the case where at an individual level, interactions with an immediate person are constantly an act of identifying our place in relation to others by embracing a set of values that would be the basis of that placement (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 3; Abd Jelani, 2018, p. 23). Moreover, in the experience within a modern capitalistic environment, not only does it prolong one's ignorance of the existing problem, a matter of resolving it has become problematic.

Al-Attas's Solution and Framework for Proper Education Movement

Al-Attas offers a framework that directly addresses the neglect of internal dilemma identified above. This dilemma we constantly find ourselves in is precisely the condition of which Islam encourages us to act upon, and that is, to preserve both order and integrity of knowledge within ourselves for self-identification of our role in life. In *Islam and Secularism*, Al-Attas represented this predicament as the condition of being in a "vicious circle" (Al-Attas, 1978, p.

106), where truth is confused with falsehood, so much so that the resultant inability to recognize true authority begets wrong action. This relational condition is obvious when the realization of justice depends on the integrity of the agent in question. The outcome is what Al-Attas terms as the loss of ability to do right action (*adab*) towards oneself and others: a dichotomy between work and its meaning, leading to the disorderly and corrupted condition of a person unable to recognise right and wrong in their own actions (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 15-16).

Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas revisits the central concerns articulated in his seminal work *Islam and Secularism* published over fifty years earlier, he returns to this theme in a later work with renewed precision. In one of his last recent works *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Sūrah al-Nisā' (4):58 and Sūrah al-Mu'minūn (23): 12-14* (Al-Attas, 2015). In this later work, he gave a renewed perspective to the predicament on the displacement of the self and ultimately of others, rearticulating both the fundamental problem and its solution through the concept of Justice (*'adl*) in Islam. Through the *āyah* of *Sūrah al-Nisā' (4):58* (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 1), Al-Attas identified two key players that exercise justice: (1) the Keepers (*ahl*) of Trust and (2) Possessors of Command (*ūlū al-amr*) that in our times, the two key players have failed to recognize each other's place and positions due to the *systematic* (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 5) neglect of the possessors of command on religious knowledge in the intellectual tradition, as well as possessing inadequate 'knowledge of human nature to rightly identify individual persons of moral integrity and authentic knowledge' (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 5) in the keepers of trust.

Justice (*'adl*) as Al-Attas formulated it, and is original in its conception, is the condition of which things are in its rightful places.

"Justice is a harmonious condition or state of the affairs whereby everything is in its right and proper place- such as the cosmos; or similarly, a state of equilibrium [italics mine], whether it refers to things or living beings. With respect to man, we say that justice means basically a condition and situation whereby he is in his right and proper place." (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 65)

A *state of equilibrium* is a state where a mean is found in between two extremes. In the case of falling into two extremes, Al-Ghazālī mentioned that justice is the only virtue that extremes do not apply; i.e. an orderly condition can never be disharmonious, it can only be in either a state of order or disorder (Sherif, 1975, p. 72). Al-Ghazālī distinguished three different varieties of justice as moral justice, political justice, and economic justice (Fakhry, 1991, p. 201; Sherif, 1975, p. 72-73; Badrom, 2011, p. 34). Moral justice is the orderly relations of the different faculties of the soul to each other, whereas the last two fall under the fold of ethics for it is orderly relations with others in relation to the society and transactions (Badrom, 2011, p. 34).

What can be extracted from this precise rearticulation is the fact that the self-reformation is held in high regard into what would be the direct, albeit, not simple, solution to break the vicious cycle. The bridge between this and Justice (*'adl*) is in the rearticulation of what he calls as 'right action' in *adab*. Al-Attas stresses on the integral components of *adab* to be both knowledge (*recognition*) and action (*acknowledgement*) where the discipline of order took place. Wherein the former is not up to the self to attain but instead are given as a gift and trust (*amānah*) from God. Recognition of any form of relation transpires during the process of discernment, in which confusion, contradiction, or ambiguity will be gradually diminished as one reaches certainty. This understanding of *adab* has both recognition and acknowledgement as concrete implications for how individuals relate to their roles.

Amidst the confusion in scientific discourse over what constitutes man, Al-Attas provides a critical corrective by grounding the understanding of human reality not in evolutionary reductionism (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 41-42; Denisova, 2019), but by reasserting a metaphysical vision of man that is a spiritual, rational and purposeful dimension that modern science often neglects. Moreover, the nature of knowledge is such that when it arrives unto man, it provides meaning to oneself. The knowledge once understood, becomes meaningful when it is translated into action, hence the importance of the act of *acknowledgement* (Ahmad, 2002).

Understanding the nature of knowledge (Ismail, 2009) and how it arrives in the soul is significant in shaping the modes of action that seek to practice what is true and good. This is where Al-Attas' major contribution lies: he not only brought back the importance of knowledge as practiced in the Tradition by demonstrating the knowledge culture in all his intellectual pursuits and actions, he also specifically emphasized the acknowledgement and recognition of the right placement of knowledge and its spiritual influence to those who pursue it through his deliberation on *adab* (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 17; Ismail, 2012). As Al-Attas explains:

"Since meaning, knowledge and education pertain to man alone, and by extension to society, the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper places of things in the order of creation, must primarily apply to man's own recognition and acknowledgement of his proper place - that is, his station and condition in life in relation to his self, his family, his people, his community, his society - and to his self-discipline in actualising within his self the recognition by the acknowledgement." (Al-Attas, 2018, p. 27)

Al-Attas rightly define *adab* as:

"Adab is recognition and acknowledgement [italics mine] of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various grades and degrees of rank, and of one's proper place in relation to that reality and to one's physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials." (Al-Attas, 1980, p. 27)

Recognition ('*ilm*') and acknowledgement ('*amal*') of the proper places of things simply means that before any action is taken, understanding the aim and purpose of the action must first unfold. The arrival of knowledge itself within the soul is not within one's direct order or control, but is instead, given as a gift and a trust from God, it is meant only for those who uphold the religious virtues.

He later on related the microcosm into the macro where individuals will find themselves in the position of being the Keepers (*ahl*) of various trusts (*amānah*) in the religious, intellectual trusts, as well as cultural, political, economic, finance and defense trusts.

In simple terms, it means that once an individual assumes a particular role - such as that of a student, a mother, a community leader, a *khādim* and so on - the role necessarily entails corresponding responsibilities and accountabilities that comes with the role by means of the trust (*amānah*) given by God. This particular trust comes in both personal and societal form for it to be realised. On the matters of action through acknowledgement, it is through the understanding of *amānah* in terms of both its personal and societal form which are reflected in one's ultimate judgement (*hakama*) based on both theoretical and practical wisdom (*hikmah*). This hold of *amānah* is a legitimate security that needs to be achieved so that no oppression,

or a condition where power is exercised by ignorance of the order of the rightful place it resides. From this follows a crucial distinction about the nature of educational methods.

The strategic approach to educational methods of which a movement necessarily operationalizes does not presuppose a sort of standard operating *procedure*, but a standard operating *preparations*; preparations of the soul in receiving this knowledge for proper action to occur. A procedure merely concerns the governing of an outward consequential results of one's action instead of one's internal conviction. Before we go further, let's take a look at the defining elements that makes Islamic educational movement.

Defining Islamic Educational Movement

Unlike Hodgson's "Islamicate" (Hodgson, 1974), which denotes culturally associated but not necessarily religious phenomena, this paper's usage of "Islamic" in "Islamic education" is also not intended to merely denote a narrow set of religious sciences (such as Qur'anic recitation, theology, or jurisprudence alone). Rather, "Islamic" here functions as a qualifier indicating that the educational principles, aims, and practices under discussion are grounded in the worldview of Islam. In this sense, Islamic education claims universal value that addresses all aspects of life.

With Al-Attas' concepts of justice and *adab* established, the paper now defines what constitutes an Islamic educational movement in contrast to merely political or social movements. A movement that is educational must involve knowledge. The nature of knowledge is such that it is a property of man. For knowledge to be inculcated, re-*cognition* is key; it is the return of *cognition*, which is ultimately an act of the intellect in man that is innate and potential (*fiṭr*) in man since the day that the covenant was made with God (Al-Attas, 2023; Ahmad, 2017). For man to know and understand, man needs to return to the state where all was made known (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 47,111; Al-Attas, 1978, p. 12). Al-Attas' exposition of the Nature of Man emphasizes that the natural disposition of man (*fiṭrah*) is that man is a rational being (*al-ḥayyawān al-nāṭiq*) such that the intellect (*nāṭiq*) sits in man (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 31).

This conception of knowledge differs fundamentally from modern Western assumptions. Unlike the way knowledge is perceived by the West, where pure reason is bereft of transcendent virtues, the nature of knowledge as understood in Islam does not experience the dichotomy between theory and practice. For a practice within an initiative that aims to arrive at knowledge, it must be undertaken with a virtuous attitude. Knowledge culture not only warrants internalizing the love of knowledge but also the inculcating of spiritual maturity and ethical qualities in order to realize the individual and collective potential, as explained by Wan Daud's *An Exposition of the Knowledge Culture* (Wan Daud, 2019; Wan Daud, 1989). As an initiative, the implementation of a knowledge culture occurs within the individuals which later addresses the problem of the confusion of knowledge by having wisdom as the driving force and direction.

He provided in his deliberation, a case of a fresh re-embodiment of how it was practiced in the Islamic Civilization; of which the word *per-adab-an* is rightly termed. Having knowledge culture is not just internalizing the love of knowledge but also on the inculcation of mature character and ethical qualities (*akhlāq*) in order to realize the individual and collective potentials (Wan Daud, 2012, p. 27). The implementation of a knowledge culture within the individuals is an initiative that addresses the problem of knowledge by making truth as the main criteria of any action.

All of these elements converge in a single term; therefore, what is meant by the Islamic *educational movement* is due to education – in its true sense – a *ta'dīb*, being its core and proper aim, method, purpose and outcome of mobilization. Initiating knowledge culture within a person or society can thus be categorized as a type of movement that is educational (*ta'dībī*),

which means that it encompasses *any form of action which is made to pattern after a system of order and discipline that reflects both truth and reality, passed down through authoritative sources of knowledge.*

Islam considers knowledge (*‘ilm*) to be a universal aspect such that it encompasses the totality of life – the spiritual, intellectual, religious, cultural, individual and social. Knowledge based on truth which is practiced at the level manifested in both personal and societal is what *knowledge culture* represents (Wan Daud, 2012, p. 27). Islam’s fundamental principle in disseminating knowledge is that true knowledge is preserved such that it fulfils the *system* of order and discipline pertaining to the *kulliyah* – a concept conveying the idea of the universal - over particulars. The reason for this is to ensure that the educational experience is appropriate with the level of understanding of the knowledge itself. With this definition in place, the paper now turns to the two preconditions that must be fulfilled for such a movement to emerge.

Preconditions of the Emergence of an Islamic Educational Movement

Two preconditions are necessary: first, recognising the type of order sought; second, preserving the integrity of knowledge through action.

Recognizing the type of order

As mentioned in the previous section, we can conclude that in Islam, the rise and fall of a community should not occur in the direction of a vicious circle. A system of authority exists within the types of order that cater for communal needs during the times when leadership is well in place, but in the situation when leadership is replaced, a method of preserving harmony through education was developed.

The term order presupposes a position and place of something within a system. A thing that is situated unto a position without it making any connection or relation would not be considered as being in a system, hence a disorder. The key term here is ‘being within a system’ that represents a situation where a thing is united (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 14). In this case, the system of order in Islam is the reflection of the Qur’anic conceptual scheme (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 134; Al-Attas, 1980, p. 10; Acikgenc, 1996). Therefore, any system will reveal its centrality based on its sets of principles.

Let us see how a system of order in knowledge is connected by meaning making. The transference of knowledge of the object by the subject will usually arrive at *meaning* when its purpose and significance are *recognized* (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 15). Al-Attas said that meaning is the “...*recognition of the place of anything in a system, which occurs when the relation a thing has with others in the system becomes clarified and understood*” (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 16). This is the same as Ogden’s definition of meaning as “...*the meaning of anything is said to have been grasped when it has been understood as related to other things or as having its place in some system as a whole*” (Ogden & Richards, 1946, p. 196). Therefore, it can be said that meaning is recognition of things in relation to another. It is a system of *relation* having connected to each other in accordance with its rightful places. Consequently, the arrival of meaning occurs when one *recognizes the relations* and their concomitant places.

“The apparent and obvious meanings of the objects of knowledge have to do with their respective places within the system of relations; and their ‘proper’ places become apparent to our understanding when the limits of their significance are recognized. This then is the position of truth; that there are limits to the meaning of things in the way they are meant to be known,

and their proper places are profoundly bound up with the limits of their significance.” (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 15)

This conception of meaning as recognition of place has been challenged by modern and postmodern thought. Since the rising influence of modernism that seeks to reconstruct reality through its own reason, a strong counter narrative of deconstructing it with postmodern proposals, on the other hand, has exacerbated the problem which sees the notion of having a system and order of things impossible to achieve (Mobus & Kalton, 2015; Capra & Luisi, 2014; Pradhana, 2021, p. 123; West, 2017). However, Al-Attas reiterated, based on the consensus of authoritative scholars in Islam that ontologically, things are already in their rightful places, but mankind creates error in judgements thus exacerbating the confusion of knowledge concerning them which further generates disorder i.e. injustice (Al-Attas, 2015). Despite these challenges, Al-Attas insists on the ontological reality of order.

As it is the nature of reality with its many dimensions, there exist different types of order according to the factor that unifies it into a system. The unifying factor could be further divided into two; the external, and internal factors of an ontological unity. External factors like biological or material wealth, constitute temporal forms of order, since they are contingent upon time and space. Internal factors, such as knowledge, are eternal and timeless orders. Hence to preserve external order would merely require a consistent maintenance of its temporal features as long as they remain relevant; for instance, sustaining an economic system demands continual adjustments to material circumstances. By contrast, preserving internal orders demands consistent commitment and conscious recognition of the act itself, such as safeguarding the integrity of knowledge through *adab*, which ensures its proper transmission, hierarchy, and purpose. When order is achieved, the result is justice.

A situation when things are in their orderly mode is defined as a condition of justice. It is within the internal factors that sustain and preserve the order of discipline such that they provide a harmonious environment for the soul and things around us to absorb knowledge. Knowing the order of things is only a partial step towards fulfilling justice. Complying with it would require one to be true to the trust that is the belief (*īmān*) placed upon them (*amānah*) (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 5-7,112). Modern Western political theory, by contrast, reduces justice to either political convention or natural right, Al-Attas notes:

“Looking back into their historical past on the debates and deliberations about the origin and nature of justice, modern scholars and thinkers sum up in evidence that all human institutions, i.e. the state, its constitution, its laws, its contracts under seal, its treaties and agreements, its organization and operations, involve justice [Highlights mine]. This means, according to them, that justice is either something political or something natural. In this either/or dichotomy in their conception of justice, those who take the position that justice is political believe that justice is subsequent to the state and logically follows from it; that the determination of what is just and unjust is relative entirely to the constitution of the state and dependent upon its power and consequent upon its laws; that the institution of the state emerged in human history as a result of a transition of man from a ‘state of nature’ in which there is no justice and injustice for there to be such a thing as natural justice.” (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 24)

Al-Attas' own position, however, integrates all three types of justice. while prioritising moral justice as their foundation. We can extrapolate that the division between three types of justice represents the outcome of orders that exists in relation to what we have been discussing above. Orderly relations in a condition of political justice is the type of order that takes into account the external factor of power in social relations and its functions in different classes in society as well as the natural order of things, whereby economic justice is, in the same way, taking the external factor of wealth. The last outcome of orderly relations is of moral justice, and this is the most important form of order of all as it determines the course of the two justices through internal recognition and acknowledgement of the proper places of the faculties in the human soul; vegetative (*al-nabāṭiyyah*), animal (*al-ḥayawāniyyah*) and rational (*al-nāṭiqah*) (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 148-149). Hence recognizing the type of order is the beginning of achieving justice. The second part of inculcating right action (*adab*) as articulated by Al-Attas requires one to acknowledge the unifying factor of relations such that it will preserve its integrity.

Preserving the Integrity of Knowledge

The second precondition concerns not just what order is sought, but how knowledge itself is preserved. The centrality of knowledge has been emphasized as the unifying force that brings individuals together both spiritually and intellectually. Its purpose is to bring common belief and willing acceptance of truth as revealed through the Prophet (*wahy-Qur'an*) and exemplified through his action (*sunnah*). Knowledge in this sense is not mere acquisition of information, but a transformative process. Integrity is an *internal consistency and adherence to the moral principles that occurred in man's character* (Badron, 2011, p. 47). In the Islamic tradition, the term *ṣidq* was used to represent both integrity and probity (Badron, 2011, p. 47). When preserving the integrity of knowledge, the knowledge needs to be internalized by upholding (*amānah*) and becoming true to the trust (of knowledge) given (*īmān*); knowledge does not exist independently of the human being, rather it resides within the knower, who later shapes, embodies, and transmits it. Thus, the preservation of knowledge is inseparable from the moral and spiritual integrity of the individual. This is why Al-Attas emphasises the production of good men of *adab* rather than merely efficient administrators (Al-Attas, 2001, p. 54).

For an Islamic *educational movement* to occur, 'understanding' must precede action. The pursuit of 'understanding' is not merely preparatory, but constitutes a critical phase of the movement itself. In simple terms, one needs to *understand first before one acts*; and that in itself is a progressive movement. Any meaningful action must be grounded in prior clarity of the purpose of that action. This is what preserving the integrity of knowledge entails. Knowledge should not be considered as a peripheral function that merely follows action, as is often the case in the scientific method. Spiritual strength is a responsibility to sustain one's humanity whereas intellectual strength is to safeguard one's principles of belief - one's '*aqīdah*', one's worldview - not only for oneself, but for future generations, so that truth may be faithfully transmitted. A person is not asked to merely believe (*īmān*), but to believe with knowledge. As Al-Attas states regarding the intellectual power of justice:

"The Intellectual power of justice operates by means of theoretical and practical reason, the latter acting in agreement with the rules and principles of the former. This means, as a general rule applicable to everyone, that in order to act justly, theoretical reason must be developed and trained by proper discipline, otherwise practical reason will not be able to achieve right action or to avoid error." (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 14-15)

This theoretical discipline as mentioned above must be complemented by right practice. Preserving harmony through education should be seen as a natural inclination that encourages man to act justly according to the knowledge entrusted unto them. This gives an indication for us to look into the two actors that are central to the act of preservation of harmony through *adab* towards knowledge itself; the knowledgeable (‘*ālim*) and the seeker of knowledge (*muta’allim*). Having said that, the traditional practices of education would never regard the knowledgeable and the seeker of knowledge as two opposing *corporate* entities (Wan Daud, 1998, p. 215). The contrast between Islamic and Western conceptions of *corporate* identity is instructive.

The term *corporate* entities here is the point of departure between the Western conception of human relations and Islam’s. The idea of a corporation in the West assumes relations between abstract personalities (like an institution, a river or a planet) bestowed with legal rights and responsibilities (Makdisi, 1981, p. 224), to which this abstract personality’s existential position is relative according to the desires of the socio-politico-economic surroundings (Wan Daud, 1995; Wan Daud, 1998, p. 165). In Islam however, only an actual individual has an ontological position with a legal responsibility obligated by Shari’ah to uphold the integrity of knowledge based on the trust given by God (Ramli, 2020; Ramli, 2025). This individual responsibility has actual rights derived from interdependence of a socially constructed contract (Cerić, 1995). Going back to the discussion on order and its relation, only when a position has actual rights does its relation with others become clear and legitimate. The ‘*ālim-muta’allim* relationship is built upon cognitive, spiritual and ethical criteria as compared to the father-son relationship (Wan Daud, 1998, p. 213); which is built upon heredity in terms of wealth (inheritance) and blood ties (genealogical). These two preconditions, once established, provide a yardstick for evaluating existing reform efforts.

As emphasized above, any authentic Islamic educational movement necessarily begins with two essential preconditions: first the identification of the order or vision of society it seeks to realize; and second the preservation of the integrity of knowledge through its embodiment in practice. When these foundations are neglected, reform efforts tend to devolve into overemphasis of organizational techniques, the subordination of contestation of authority and reliance on popular trends. Such approaches are insufficient for shaping one’s identity; as they fail to reflect the wisdom inherent in collective identity as represented in any community or organization or in the religious term, the ummah. The fragility of contemporary identity makes this reflection urgent.

Islamic Educational Movement as Proper Social Change

Al-Attas elaborates on the importance of restoring right action (*adab*), namely, to produce good men of *adab*, persons who are conscious of their identity and sincerely place themselves and at the same time fulfil their duties placed upon them according to their capacities and potentialities (Wan Daud, 1998, p. 56,165).

“Good character is a stable state of the soul achieved by means of deliberate, purposeful and disciplined interaction by and within the soul of the principal virtues of wisdom, courage (shajā’ah), temperance (‘iffah), and justice.” (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 10)

Reducing the refinement of *adab* to mere good conduct without grounding it with right knowledge risks narrowing reform to social change alone; such reduction misdirects reform efforts, transforming them into merely social movements driven primarily by pragmatism rather than principled and intellectual foundations. This leads to a false prominence and exaggeration

of the Khaldunian framework; that is, the belief that the beginning stages of reform is social through *‘aṣabiyyah* (group feeling); or, political through *khilāfah* (caliphate) by most Muslim reformists in the 1970s (Tahir & Jalal Nori, 2023, p. 315).

Al-Attas had already diagnosed this tendency decades earlier. This was first highlighted by Al-Attas in the published proceedings a year after the International Islamic Conference on *Islam and the Challenge of our Age*, the 1977 First World Conference on Muslim Education which was held in Mecca. Al-Attas wrote a letter to the Council four years prior, urging the Council to take the matter and answer the call for solution to the Muslim predicament at the time.

“... they preoccupied themselves instead with sociology and politics, and aspects of jurisprudence that bear upon these subjects. Their experience of the decline of Muslim rule and the disintegration of Muslim empires made them take notice of Ibn Khaldun and they concentrated their efforts on the concept of Ummah and of the state in Islam. They naturally neglected to lay as much stress on the concept of the individual and the role the individual plays in realizing and establishing the Ummah and the Islamic state. Now it is true that the Ummah and the Islamic state are paramount in Islam, but so is the individual Muslim. For how can the Ummah and the Islamic state be developed and established if individually Muslims have become confused and ignorant about Islam and its world-view and are no longer good Muslims? When they say that the decline of the Muslims was caused by corrupt leadership, their identification of cause with corrupt leadership is not quite correct. If we ask ourselves what it is that is corrupt about their leadership, we will recognize at once that it is their knowledge that is corrupt, which renders their leadership corrupt. Corrupt leadership is the effect, and not the cause; and it is the effect of confusion and error in the knowledge of Islam and its world-view.” (Al-Attas, 1979, p. 6)

The effects of a Khaldunian framework interpreted by sociologists and anthropologists alike fail to see the essential ingredients that connect people together to form these *‘aṣabiyyah*. For example, this leads Montgomery Watt in his *Muhammad at Medina* to emphasize that the unity of the Muslim *ummah* is merely an extension of the tribal tradition of solidarity of the pre-Islamic era. He calls *Ummah* “the federation of tribes” (Watt, 1956). However, *‘aṣabiyyah* is merely the behavioural outcome of the unanimity, not the essence behind the relation. The consequences of misdiagnosing the cause of decline is the result of abuse of power, as Al-Attas warns:

“...the āyah 58 of al-Nisā’ is to warn us against our habitual tendency to stray from the right course in the exercise of power. This means that the Community in relation to the state as well as the individual in relation to the self, collectively and individually must not betray the trust of power to act justly. Without proper knowledge of individual character and understanding the way how this knowledge operates in its semantic as well as ethical relation to justice, the abuse of power is difficult to avoid.” (Al-Attas, 2015, p. 17)

The solution, therefore, is to reorient collective action toward the inculcation of *adab* in the individual self. This personal action will result in collective movement when all individuals recognize the type of order that particular initiative sought to achieve and acknowledge it by preservation of knowledge within the epistemic order.

Hence, Al-Attas' vision of the collective movement can be inferred as aiming to establish the individual role in realizing the common purpose in Islam, and the internal unity of ideas and mind is what brings meaning beyond social, economic or political solidarity (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 29; Al-Attas, 1978, p. 73). The unity in the ideas and mind occurs when recognition and acknowledgement of proper places of things in relation to each other are realized; this Al-Attas called as *adab* in the mind (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 17). Education (*ta'dīb*), however, is the inculcation of *adab* in the self. Therefore, the collective initiative brought out of this should be rightly termed an Islamic educational movement. This reorientation requires a fundamental reordering of priorities.

Recovering the Locus of Authority

Nowadays, the tendency to be either overly structural or to function in anarchy is gaining more traction than relying on the content of the structure itself. This is largely due to the fragile condition of one's affinity to the factors that define one's identity. The support system of education (*ta'dīb*) preserves and sustains knowledge through individuals who associate themselves to those who are knowledgeable, seekers of knowledge, and upholders of truth (*insān adabī*). The immediate hierarchy of this type of relation is such that those considered more knowledgeable and noble are granted authority over the rest as they themselves are expected to possess a high level of integrity compatible with the degree of knowledge entrusted to them. But in this day and age, this kind of structure could not retain its authority due to the perpetual secular philosophical program that levels everything. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud analyses that

"...modern education, due to its preoccupation with the production of useful citizens, transfers the locus of authority [italics mine] from the teachers to the university as a corporate institution." (Wan Daud, 1998, p. 232)

Recovering that *locus of authority* is therefore a central task of any Islamic educational movement. The relationship of the knowledgeable (*'ālim*) and the seeker of knowledge (*muta'allim*) is a crucial point to be addressed in the refinement of one's character. The purpose of man is to actualize his potentialities such that he progresses towards perfection (Al-Attas, 1995, p. 56); and that is, towards becoming a good man. In achieving this, one must go through a refinement of character through education, such that

"...education as the inculcation of adab in the self, a process that cannot, properly speaking, be obtained through a particular 'method'." (Wan Daud, 1998, p. 226)

This is why the cultivation of *adab* resists standardisation and requires personal commitment. Consequently, as mentioned previously, the integral components of *adab* as defined by Al-Attas, are knowledge (*'ilm*) and action (*'amal*), where the former is not up to the self to attain but instead are given as a gift and trust from God. It comes as no surprise that both intellectual activism and the inculcation of knowledge culture are challenging, as they demand commitment from the self to undergo the necessary change internally before influencing the

external. The bigger the responsibility one holds over society, the higher the priority in monitoring one's spiritual state so as to be resilient in facing challenges. Therefore, the reminder that Al-Attas and some of our teachers used to repeat to seekers of knowledge is to always be consistent and sincere in one's aims and objectives (); be patient when receiving challenges ahead; and have gratitude towards whatever condition one is in, all for the sake of cultivating the spiritual self to be a worthy recipient of the trust.

Conclusion

Finally, all these factors taken into account reaffirms Al-Attas' vision for the challenges of reforming the existing predicament of the Muslim world seeking to revive itself through education, and not mere empty activism or criticism. A common symptom that usually occurs in most organizations, moreover the ones based on intellectual activism, is precisely the struggle to maintain patience, sincerity and gratitude over the constructed hierarchy of authority. A struggle that comes up as part of the individuals' drive to retain the meaning behind the purpose of the sacrifices and efforts in bringing this knowledge to the masses.

At an individual level, the crossings of territories between different cultures (Glenn, 2010; Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Kuhn, 1962; Feyerabend, 1978) have made it more challenging for men to construct a coherent sense of identity and to discern their place in society in accordance to their purpose in life. Many who sought to find answers to that anxious state have found a sense of clarity and certainty through the framework of renewal and deliberation of the contemporary problems befalling Muslims in Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' works. This intellectual grounding consistently instils the courage to participate in the knowledge culture as it was understood.

The need for strengthening the Muslim collective understanding about the meaning of the self becomes ever more crucial today due to the nature of the challenges that face contemporary societies. The understanding of one's true self can lead to the enhancement of knowledge culture through educational activities. An Islamic educational movement sets the core of an Islamic movement which has been proven in history (Hussain, 2013).

However, the present study is only a first step. This paper has offered a preliminary philosophical analysis based on Al-Attas' written works. Empirical studies of contemporary educational initiatives and how far existing organisations embody or neglect the two preconditions of order of knowledge and integrity remain a necessary next step. Further research might also explore how the '*ālim-muta'allim*' relationship can be operationalised in modern institutional settings without succumbing to corporatisation. Finally, the most fundamental lesson is this:

Without the recovery of *adab* in the soul of the individual, no movement, however well organised, can restore justice and truth. The Islamic educational movement, when properly understood, begins not with a programme but with a prepared soul.

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