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## THE MUSLIM STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS (MSAS) AND THE FORMATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN *UMMAH*

Dr Mahsheed Ansari\*

**Abstract:** The evolution of Australian immigration policies led to the development of two key phases in the 20th century that changed the entry and settlement of Muslim migrants to Australia. Besides the phasing out of the White Australia Policy, the overlooked impact of the Colombo Plan and its correlation with the Muslim Youth Movement of Australia has not yet been considered. Moreover, the role of international students in universities led to the formation of Muslim student associations across Australian campuses from the 1960s. These associations and societies provided ground-breaking opportunities and safe spaces for the upward mobility, activism and communal development of their members. While the newly arrived Muslims were trying to find means to settle and lay the foundations of their communal life, the university associations were advancing into amalgamated national bodies, which through their activities soon became a referential establishment in national and international relations. This article traces the foundations and development of Muslim student associations in Australia, which shed light onto the Islamic revival euphoria that was prevalent at the time. This subsequently encouraged the Islamisation of the student associations as they became more focused on Islamic activism that contributed to the creation of the Australian *ummah*.

**Keywords:** *Muslim student associations in Australia, Australian ummah, AFMSA, FAMSU, Silma Ihram, international students*

Since the first contact of Islam with Australia, there have been significant barriers for Muslim settlers to form and grow the Australian *ummah* (community). As early as the 1650s, trade and commerce between the indigenous Australians and the Macassans fostered cross-cultural exchange that had a lasting impact on Indigenous communities' language, ceremonies and traditions. In the post-colonisation period after 1788, these developments in communal activities were significantly halted.<sup>1</sup> The arrival of the Afghan cameleers in the 1840s and the decades that followed saw the gradual emergence of communal homes and

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<sup>1</sup> Bilal Cleland, *Muslims in Australia: A Brief History (Excerpts)* (Australia: Islamic Council of Victoria, 2002), accessed November 17, 2018, [http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/cleland\\_islam.pdf](http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/cleland_islam.pdf).

places of worship as Ghan-towns and tin mosques emerged across the Australian outback.<sup>2</sup> These were the early foundations towards the development of the Australian *ummah* until the 20th century. These communities were very dispersed and isolated, and were mostly dismantled due to *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*.<sup>3</sup> The 20th century brought new Muslim migrants to Australia and new opportunities for the communal development of the young *ummah*. Amid these were skilled and educated Muslim youth who studied in well-regarded tertiary institutions across Australian campuses. These enthusiastic youth, along with local members of the Muslim community, contributed towards the identity formation of the young Muslim community in Australia.

This article explores the history of the Muslim student movement in Australia, as student associations on campuses across the country were formed as early as the late 1960s. The minority Muslim migrant communities struggled with a lack of belonging and had low communal spirit.<sup>4</sup> These societies and associations were an important platform that empowered, unified and created a sense of purpose in their participants, gradually building a strong sense of shared identity in the Muslims of the Australian *ummah*.

In the decades after World War II, there was an influx of Muslim migration, as Australia started to loosen its enforcement of the White Australia Policy, which gradually phased out, opening its doors to Muslim migrants from various countries.<sup>5</sup>

Another modification to the Australian foreign policy was the introduction of an innovative educational scheme, called the Colombo Plan, in 1951.<sup>6</sup> The scheme was aimed at strengthening relationships with Asia and provided aid to countries in need of assistance. The original signatories were Australia, Canada, Ceylon, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, United Kingdom, Malaya and North Borneo, with later membership expanded to 25 countries.<sup>7</sup> This led to the successful internationalisation of Australia's education system, which benefitted over 20,000 students by the 1980s. It also led to Australia's successful international engagement in the region.<sup>8</sup>

The Colombo Plan also opened a new opportunity for Muslim students who arrived in Australia as early as 1950s and 60s from Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan and India to

<sup>2</sup> Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns: A History of Afghan Cameldrivers in Australia* (Alice Springs, NT: Paul Fitzsimons, 2002). See also Zachariah, Mathews. "Origins of Islam in Australia." *Focus* (Jul-Aug, 1997): 27-29.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Lucille Jones, "The Years of Decline: Australian Muslims 1900-40" in *An Australian Pilgrimage: Muslims in Australia from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, ed. Mary Lucille Jones (Melbourne: Victoria Press, 1993), 84-85.

<sup>4</sup> Salih Yucel, *The Struggle of Ibrahim: Biography of an Australian Muslim* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2010), 41-59. See also Abdullah, Saeed. *Islam in Australia*. ProQuest Ebook Central: Allen & Unwin, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, "An Australian Pilgrimage".

<sup>6</sup> Haniifa Deen, "Muslim Journeys," National Archives Australia, accessed January 18, 2019, <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/snapshots/uncommon-lives/muslim-journeys/arrivals.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> National Museum of Australia, "The Colombo Plan," accessed January 14, 2019, [http://www.nma.gov.au/explore/features/endurance\\_scroll/harvest\\_of\\_endurance\\_html\\_version/explore\\_the\\_scroll/colombo\\_plan](http://www.nma.gov.au/explore/features/endurance_scroll/harvest_of_endurance_html_version/explore_the_scroll/colombo_plan).

<sup>8</sup> Alison Moodie, "Australia: Long History of International Higher Education," *University World News*, March 6, 2011, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20110305121304874>.

study at tertiary institutions.<sup>9</sup> Australia attracted foreign students from Iran, Afghanistan and Egypt as well.<sup>10</sup> Muslim student associations (MSAs) emerged in this era of rapid socio-political change. The presence of these international students ensured the establishment of various societies and associations, which had a lasting impact on the social and political relations between Australia and its regional neighbours.<sup>11</sup>

The election of the Labor Government and Gough Whitlam in 1972 saw the abolishment of the White Australia Policy by 1973.<sup>12</sup> Following this, in 1975, Malcolm Fraser accepted 200,000 Indo-Chinese refugees escaping the Vietnam War into Australia.<sup>13</sup> The change in policy from 'White Australia' to 'multicultural' developed swiftly, reassuring the newly settled Muslim migrants from Turkey, Lebanon and others who sought economic and educational opportunities in Australia that they could continue with their new settlement.<sup>14</sup>

The political changes implemented through the Colombo Plan and the seismic shift to a multicultural policy altered the history of migration to Australia.<sup>15</sup> With the acceptance of non-Whites, the migration of Asiatics and other non-Anglo and white Muslims were now possible. While the Colombo Plan welcomed international Muslim youth to Australian universities, post-White Australia Policy also encouraged general migration of non-Europeans with some assisted programs to Muslim migrants as well.<sup>16</sup> By the 1970s and 1980s, the Muslim youth were very diverse with the arrival of Muslim migrant Turks and Lebanese who were joined by other migrants such as the Albanians, Yugoslavians and Cypriots as well as some Anglo Australians.<sup>17</sup>

## MUSLIM STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS

Based on the National Archives of Australia, Muslim students from neighbouring Indonesia, Malaysia as well as Fiji and Pakistan were well-established in Australian campuses as early as the 1950s.<sup>18</sup> Their affiliations, though, were not always based on religious grounds. They formed associations based on the socio-cultural affinities between the international students who were mainly from countries that were signatories to the Colombo Plan.<sup>19</sup> In 1958, the president of the Overseas Students Association, Zainul Abidin, then a recent graduand of a Master of Arts from the University of Queensland, completed his final official presidential duty by chairing a "novel evening marking the celebration of Eid ul-Fitr"

<sup>9</sup> Hanifa Deen, "Excavating the Past: Australian Muslims." *The La Trobe Journal* 89, 2012. 63-80, 71.

<sup>10</sup> Deen, "Muslim Journeys."

<sup>11</sup> Deen, "Excavating the Past," 72.

<sup>12</sup> James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration* (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11. See also Nahid, Kabir. *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations and Cultural History*. New York, Routledge: 2005.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, see also Kevin, Dunn. "Islam in Sydney: Contesting the Discourse of Absence." *Australian Geographer* 35, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Deen, "Muslim Journeys."

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

with his 200 Asian and Australian guests.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it was the success of events such as these (marking an important religious and cultural date on the Muslim calendar) that empowered future Queensland University students to continue their efforts towards the formation of an association based on Islam and Muslims as the common denominator.

In 1964, the unintended success of the Colombo Plan for the Muslims students that arrived in Australia was marked by the establishment of the first MSA in Brisbane: the Muslim Student Association of the University of Queensland (MSAQ).<sup>21</sup> More than 50 years ago, the first executive committee of Australia's first MSA was formed by the seven international male students (Ahmed Aly, Abdel Razk, Amin Mubarak Dalil, Inche Nick Hadi Hashim, Zakir Rahmani, Hasan Basri and Mohammad Shahid Hamid Khan) and one female student (Sabiha Shamsi).<sup>22</sup> It was probably unknown to these eight students of Queensland University that their ground-breaking efforts would have an indelible effect on the course of the Muslim youth movement and subsequently the positive development of the Australian Muslim identity and community.

Another by-product of the Colombo Plan was the successful graduates from Australian universities who became significant leaders when they returned home. Professor Jamilah Ariffin, an Adjunct Professor in Global Health at Monash University, met her husband as a Colombo Plan student in Australia, while studying at University of Queensland in 1968.<sup>23</sup> Dato' Sri Mustapha Mohamed, after graduating from the University of Melbourne in 1974 with a first-class honours degree in economics, has had a successful political career as Malaysia's Trade Minister.<sup>24</sup> The graduates who worked in various industries became natural advocates for Australia, which encouraged industry and government policy towards positive relations with Australia. Many of them also returned to Australia for holidays and visits, and some remained and married Australians.<sup>25</sup>

### ***The Federation of the Associations***

In 2014, the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Muslim student movement in Australia was celebrated by the current Federation of Australian Muslim Students and Youth (FAMSY) as well as Muslim-based newspapers like the *Australasian Muslim Times*.<sup>26</sup> According to the *Australasian Muslim Times*, the newly formed MSAQ inspired the formation of other associations across Australia, including Adelaide, Armidale, Hobart,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Federation of Australian Muslim Students and Youth, "Our History," accessed January 15, 2019, <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/33411/20100702-0711/www.famsy.com/about-us/history.html>.

<sup>22</sup> AMUST Media, "50 Years Celebration of Muslim Student Movement in Australia," *Australasian Muslim Times*, November 7, 2014, accessed January 15, 2019, [www.amust.com.au/2014/11/50-years-celebration-of-muslim-student-movement-in-australia/](http://www.amust.com.au/2014/11/50-years-celebration-of-muslim-student-movement-in-australia/).

<sup>23</sup> Sally Percival Wood, *60 Years Australia in Malaysia 1955-2015* (Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia, 2015), accessed January 16, 2019, <https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/international-relations/60-years-australia-in-malaysia/assets/img/60-Years-Aust-in-Msia.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> AMUST Media, "50 Years Celebraton."

Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle.<sup>27</sup> The vision was then to form a national body that galvanised the six pioneering MSAs to form a national body, which became known as the Australian Federation of Muslim Student Associations (AFMSA) in 1968.<sup>28</sup>

By the 1960s and 70s, the Muslim organisations were keen to further the unification and consolidation of Muslim communities across Australia. Subsequently, the communities focused on a mission of infrastructure building, as new mosques in major cities and places of worship and gatherings for the settled communities were established.<sup>29</sup> Efforts towards the federation of the MSAs were also first made in 1966 during the Australian Federation of Islamic Societies (AFIS).<sup>30</sup> AFIS was an external federal body that was newly amalgamated in 1964. After a series of other developments, AFIS became the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) in 1976.<sup>31</sup> Since then, Muslim students on campus established and founded many Islamic societies across the various tertiary institutions in Australia, which further strengthened AFMSA. By 1981, the federation comprised 13 university based MSAs across Australia.<sup>32</sup> Fadlullah Wilmot, a convert student from Tasmania, along with Salman Harrahap an international student from Malaysia were instrumental pioneers who worked towards establishing the federation in 1967 and Salman was its first president in 1968.<sup>33</sup> He was also the first editor of its first publication, the *Light Journal*, being active in 1968-69.<sup>34</sup>

AFMSA increasingly affiliated more with non-university Islamic societies in Australia, budding its circle of influence. This was encouraged by the aims and objectives set out in its 1979 constitution.<sup>35</sup> Together, the two federated bodies (AFIC and AFMSA) acted as unifiers of other societies and key representatives of Muslims and Islam in Australia. However, although AFIC supported AFMSA, the latter maintained its independence.<sup>36</sup> The 1979 AFMSA constitution sets out its objectives as:

1. To uphold the disseminate and serve Islam in accordance to the teaching of the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad s.a.w;
2. To revitalise the faith of the Muslims;
3. To promote goodwill and cooperation among all Muslim youths for the cause of Islam and the well-being of the Muslim Ummah in all aspects of life;
4. To represent the Muslim students of Australia nationally and internationally in matters of concern to them;

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Qazi Ashfaq Ahmad, "Islam and Muslims in Australia," in *Islam, Muslims and the Modern State*, ed. Hussin Mutalib and Taj ul-Islam Hashmi (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Zia Ahmad, "Report of AFMSA Presented at the AFIC Federal Congress March 1978," *Salam Magazine* April (1978).

<sup>31</sup> Editorial Board, "Our Past, Present and Future," *Insight Magazine* May (1986).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ashfaq Ahmad, "Good News," *Salam Magazine: Ramadan Edition* September (1977), 1-14.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Australian Federation of Muslim Students Association, *Constitution* (Australia: Australian Federation of Muslim Students Association, 1979), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Editorial Board, "Report on Annual Convention AFMSA," *Salam Magazine* 9 (1979): 7.

5. To establish and maintain cooperation among Muslim students' association in all countries;
6. To promote the mutual interests of, and feelings of brotherhood among Muslim students in Australia;
7. To encourage and stimulate the teaching of, practice in and research into Islamic teachings and culture;
8. To ensure close cooperation with Islamic organisations and groups in Australia and overseas in enhancing Islamic dawah and betterment of the Muslim Ummah in every aspect of life;
9. To organise other activities not repugnant to the basic teachings of the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad s.a.w.<sup>37</sup>

Based on these broad aims, the federated body of the MSAs in Australia wanted to be the leading voice and represent Muslim students across Australia.<sup>38</sup> To achieve this, it established annual conventions, conferences and forums across Australia. It also started various publications for Muslim students on campus to grow awareness of issues related to Muslims in Australia and to raise concerns with relevant bodies. It also sought to be an alternative voice for Muslims by providing media through its various publications, such as newsletters and journals, to address the educational needs of Muslims and to educate Muslims about the Islamic faith and retaining an Islamic identity.

Consequently, the societies created a sense of community for Muslim students on campus, who came together and unified under the umbrella of their common faith.<sup>39</sup> This was significant as it encouraged constructive social activism and contributed to the development of the Australian *ummah*.

## UNIVERSITIES AS SAFE SPACES FOR MUSLIM YOUTH

The MSAs in Australia became a platform for Muslim youth in Australian universities to find a new sense of identity, to overcome the challenges of being a minority and to have a sense of satisfied belonging in their new country.<sup>40</sup> Christine Asmar suggests Muslim students experience less discrimination and more freedoms due to the secular and liberal environments afforded on university campuses.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the university campus, as an educational institute with liberal values, became a safe space and place for minority groups, such as Muslim youth, to find their voice.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> AFMSA, *Constitution*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Nayeefa, Chowdhury. "Presenting Islam: The Role of Australia-based Muslim Student Associations." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Christine Asmar, "A Community on Campus: Muslim Students in Australian Universities," in *Muslim Communities in Australia*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Abdullah Saeed (Kensington, NSW: University of NSW Press, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

Meanwhile, the second wave of Muslim migration post-World War II saw the entry of Muslims who settled and started to develop communities.<sup>43</sup> The MSAs focused on attracting educated members of the community who had access to a tertiary education in institutions across Australia. These were respected and well-regarded places; they formed their own societies to build their young *ummah* on the campuses, but also to address the cultural and generational gaps experienced as ‘outsiders’.<sup>44</sup> The MSAs’ success was based on these international students speeding up the associations’ “professional and organisational” aspect; however, local and settled Muslims of Australia were also instrumental in homogenising the Muslim community to the Australian context. This included the inclusion of Australian Muslim converts such as Fadlullah Wilmot, Siddiq Buckley and Silma Ihram, who were very active in these formative years. The associations became a powerful mechanism to consolidate the educated Muslim youth across Australia as well as agents that instil and reinforce an Australian Muslim identity through service-based on-campus activism.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Local and National Activities***

Despite the national federation, most MSA members were involved in the local activities organised by their own campus or state-based campuses. For many Muslim associations, the key activities centred on the services needed by students to observe their religious obligations while abroad, particularly the obligatory five daily prayers.<sup>46</sup> Many were successful at establishing a place of worship or *musallah*, which usually comprised a room adjacent to a washroom facility large enough to host the Friday congregational prayers and other prayers.<sup>47</sup> This was especially important in cities that had no off-campus mosques. The campus *musallahs* are still being used to conduct Friday prayers across most Australian university campuses, these prayer rooms are almost always attended (depending on location) by non-student Muslims as well. The Sydney University and Macquarie University prayer rooms are good examples of high non-student attendance.<sup>48</sup> These signify that the process of facilitation for Muslim prayers, particularly the Friday prayers in major suburban towns, commenced at the Australian campus prayer rooms first.

The other student services that became constitutional objectives for many MSAs included providing information about Islamic prayer times and significant holy days.<sup>49</sup> They also included providing some form of Islamic education as well as social events for Muslim students, particularly encouraging social engagement with the international students who were often living on their own. Some of the university associations started publishing their own regular newsletters, such as the University of New South Wales MSA and the Sydney

<sup>43</sup> Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Nahid Kabir, “What does it mean to be un-Australian?” *People and Place* 15, no.1 (2007).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Asmar, “A Community on Campus,” 141.

<sup>47</sup> Ahmad, “Islam and Muslims in Australia,” 338.

<sup>48</sup> Editorial, “Announcement: Friday Prayer Times,” *Sydney University Muslim Student Association Newsletter* May (1981).

<sup>49</sup> University of New South Wales Muslim Student Association, *Constitution* (Australia: University of New South Wales Muslim Student Association, 1983).



University Muslim Student Association (SUMSA), which was established in 1972.<sup>50</sup> Towards the end of the 1970s, in line with the general global mood of Islamic movements, SUMSA members felt the need for a more disciplined study of Islam and established the weekly ‘Senior *usrah*’ (Islamic unity forum) talks at Sydney University. They covered topics on belief, jurisprudence and practice of Islam, and the life of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to playing a central role in the provision of Friday prayer facilities, the student associations were also successful at bringing the community together on festive days like Eid ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha. This fostered the development of positive communal belonging and solidarity.<sup>52</sup> An example of this is recorded in the SUMSA newsletter of September 1982, which recounts the Eid celebration of 25 July 1982, when SUMSA hosted an Eid party at the Belmore Club along with 230 of its participants, including those from other societies.<sup>53</sup> The social event provided a variety of food as well as guest lectures by Sheikh Tajuddin al-Hilali, then imam of Lakemba mosque, Dr Qazi Ashfaq Ahmad, representing Sydney University, and Elsayyed Kandil, then president of AFMSA. The SUMSA newsletter recounts a successful event, seen from the active participation of members, and more importantly the “bringing together of diverse Muslim bodies and individuals throughout Sydney”.<sup>54</sup> Activities such as Eid parties, weekly Friday prayers, campus MSA newsletters as well as other public forums engendered the creation of the Australian *ummah*.

## POWER, VOICE AND ISLAMISATION

By the 1970s, the MSAs, in their local chapters on every campus as well as across all states and at national level, collectively provided a three-tiered infrastructure that empowered Muslim youth towards social activism. Despite some controversies surrounding the increased external involvement and politicisation of student associations, Muslim students became increasingly mobilised through these various activities.<sup>55</sup> They found their own voice in becoming an advocate for Islam and promoting the Islamic ideal for Muslims in Australia. The student movements were better educated and had the literacy and social means to promote Islamisation projects to the Muslims of Australia. This reinforced the common identity of Muslim migrants and quickened the development of the Australian *ummah*.

Although there are slight variations with regards to constitutional aims in relation to Islamisation and *dawah* activities, many associations, like the University of New South Wales MSA, increasingly focused on the endeavour “to establish a divinely guided student community and believes in Allah S.W.T. and Prophet Muhammad S.A.W., enjoining good,

<sup>50</sup> See *University of New South Wales MSA Newsletter*, May 1981.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Asmar, “A Community on Campus,” 140.

<sup>53</sup> Editorial, “Eid Celebrations,” *Sydney University Muslim Student Association Newsletter* May (1981).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> The scope of this article limits the focus to tracing the historical development of MSAs and the student movement in Australia; the impact of political Islam will not be discussed.

promoting righteousness and forbidding evils.”<sup>56</sup> Objectives such as these echoed the national Islamisation project as listed in the aims and objectives of the national federated body – AFMSA – which lists as its first objective, ‘to uphold, disseminate and serve Islam in accordance to the teaching of the Holy Qur’an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad s.a.w’.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, the MSAs perceived themselves as organisations that “live and operate in conformity with the Islamic way of life and strive hard to make Islam better understood by all.”<sup>58</sup> To meet these objectives, the annual conventions provided the essential training and education in Islam to the leaders of the various MSAs across Australia. In 1982, AFMSA organised a presidents’ conference in the Australian Capital Territory. The leadership or presidents’ conference was essentially a training session for MSA national leaders who were educated by local and international guest speakers. Later, the leadership conferences evolved into a train-the-trainers course in Sydney.<sup>59</sup>

The AFMSA annual conventions and leadership camps rotated to different Australian university campuses across the states and territories, allowing for participation and engagement of local students and dignitaries. The political representatives of Muslim majority countries like Malaysia and Saudi Arabia were able to connect to Australian Muslim youth to the global Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamat Islamiya. The conventions provided an opportunity for the national body to come together in an annual face-to-face meeting. At these conventions, the office bearers were regulated and decisions were made on publishing responsibilities, which were rotated annually. Other duties included the printing of the Eid cards, membership fees and guidelines; international conventions and elections of the next office bearers were also discussed. In 1974, the annual convention was held at the Australian National University. The High Commissioner for Malaysia, Dr Awang bin Hassan, formally opened the seventh annual convention of the AFMS at The Bridge.<sup>60</sup> As the president of AFMSA, Tengku Abdul Aziz also addressed the 1974 convention.<sup>61</sup> 1977 marked the 10th annual convention of AFMSA and, by the mid-1980s, more than 14 annual conventions had been held by AFMSA since the late 1960s.

The annual conventions were based on specific themes that reflected the concerns and needs of the Australian *ummah*. They were a great means to educate the Australian *ummah* on important topics, such as the 1979 convention theme of ‘Living Islam’. This theme was addressed by the international guest speaker from Saudi Arabia, Dr Hassan Bajouda, and Imam Abdul Raheem Rane along with regional and local speakers from Malaysia and

<sup>56</sup> Editor, “Muslim Students Association,” *Tharunka* (Kensington, UNSW: 1953 - 2010) Monday 7 March 1983, 39.

<sup>57</sup> *AFMSA Constitution*, 1979, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Editor, “Muslim Students Association,” *Tharunka* March (1983).

<sup>59</sup> Ahmad, “Islam and Muslims in Australia,” 329.

<sup>60</sup> Edna Boling, “New Gallery Premises,” *The Canberra Times*, May 23, 1974, 11.

<sup>61</sup> National Archives of Australia, ‘Photograph of AFMSA President Tengku Abdul Aziz, Canberra, 1974’, *National Archives of Australia*. Accessed 18.01.19  
<http://www.images.act.gov.au/duslibrary/imagesact.nsf/8574356a230114e8ca256ad500042b9c/74ab0b925b384ee74a256d650078415e!OpenDocument>.

Australia.<sup>62</sup> From May 15-18 1980, Sydney University hosted the 13th AFMSA annual convention at the university's prestigious Wesley College. The theme for 1980 was 'Islamic Revival.' Dr Ashfaq Ahmad was one of the invited guest speakers from the Mechanical Engineering Department at the University of Technology Papua New Guinea.<sup>63</sup> This theme was further disseminated in 1980 at AFMSAs 'National Seminar' held in Zetland Sydney to commemorate the "15th Century Hijra." The theme explored the implications of Islamic revival on individuals and society, especially in Australia.<sup>64</sup> The National Seminar was also supported by AFIC, which shows the interconnection and relationship of the two entities. The 1980 theme of 'revival' was timely, as the world had just witnessed the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which had instilled a new possibility across the Muslim world about an 'Islamic revival'. This was also reflected in the AFMSA members; thus, the convention themes suggest the national and international sentiments of the Australian *ummah*.

The conferences gave AFMSA and MSAs an important role in the Muslim community in Australia, as well as the wider Australian community. They filled an important gap that would impact Muslim generations in Australia for decades to come. Unlike the previous Muslim predecessors, such as the children of the cameleers, many of whom could not retain their traditions, customs and beliefs, the MSAs and federal body became an important continuation of Islamic education, faith and tradition.

### ***Publications***

Educational activities instilled and reinforced the ideals of the Islamic tradition as well as the Islamisation project linked with the Islamic revival and movement euphoria prevalent at the time. These ideals were further disseminated through the regular production of two publications by AFMSA: the *Salam Magazine* and the *Light Journal*. These were part of the constitutional responsibility of the Public Relations Officer of AFMSA or Secretariat, respectively.<sup>65</sup> The publications were an important activity that fulfilled the AFMSA's main role, which is "conveying the message of Islam or *dawah* in Australia" as well as "training of leaders and workers,"<sup>66</sup> becoming a key activity of the societies. The publications produced by the other student associations independent of AFMSA included, *Al-Qalam* published by the Tasmanian Students Islamic Society, *Al-Manar* and *Nurul-Islam* published by the Muslim Youth Movement in Victoria, as well as many newsletters from other MSAs. Other community publications in circulation, such as *Al Minaret*, were in print as early as the 1960s.

Starting in the late 60s, 70s and 80s, the AFMSA and MSAs met the needs of Muslim students on Australian campuses through the various publications, such as newsletters, magazines and journals that were in regular circulation. The *Salam* magazine and campus-

<sup>62</sup> AFMSA, "Living Islam," *12<sup>th</sup> AFMSA Annual Convention Brochure* (Australia: AFMSA, 1979).

<sup>63</sup> AFMSA, *Invitation to AFMSA Annual Convention*, December 6, 1979 (Australia: AFMSA: 1979).

<sup>64</sup> Ahmad Ashfaq, "National Seminar: 15<sup>th</sup> Century Hijra," *Salam Magazine*, edition unknown (1980).

<sup>65</sup> Australian Federation of Muslim Students Association, *Constitution*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Chowdhury, "Presenting Islam."

based newsletters had Islamic sections, which always included articles on topics such as scripture, verses from the Qur'an and hadith narrations of Prophet Muhammad in Arabic and English. The articles focused on topics such as faith, prayers and stories of prophets.<sup>67</sup> At a time when printed material in the English language was rare, these were important ways to educate and preserve Islamic tradition amid the students and youth. The publications also had a social element, with puzzles, fun corners, crosswords and quizzes. There was also an opportunity to write letters to the editor with a guaranteed response in the next issue. Announcements about services, conferences, how to order Islamic books in the English language and how to purchase a *hijab* were also included.<sup>68</sup> These were all an essential element that normalised the practice of Islam and created a sense of community across the Australian state campuses. The latest global news from around the world was also a permanent feature, as many were eager to read the latest news from their countries of birth.

The 15 September 1977 edition of *Nurul-Islam* published by the Muslim Youth Movement of Australia (a member and participant of the AFMSA) included a ladies' corner. The publications had entries from Muslim women; for example, *Al-Qalam* published by Tasmanian Students Islamic Society had Muslim women writers like Aziza Abdel Haleem, Azizan Baharudin, Maisom Abdullah and Fara Waheeda Zulkifli in the 1980 edition. This publication was more scholarly and the articles were more critical and analytical.<sup>69</sup>

The May 1981 publication of *Light Journal* by AFMSA included a full transcript of a speech delivered by Silma Ihram (also known as Silma Buckley) titled "An appeal to 'born Muslimat' from a new Muslimah."<sup>70</sup> The female contributions to the publications were not always mentioned, as not all articles acknowledged the authors' names, while some editions acknowledged the writers' efforts and participation, including females, such as the May 1982 edition of *Light Journal*, where a Sister Fauzia is acknowledged by the production team from Monash University.<sup>71</sup>

The publications were a medium of communicating the Islamic calendar, with dates provided for key festivals and events, including the fasting month of Ramadan, the first days of Eid ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adah as well as the other significant days and months. The publications were very important at a time when there were few means to communicate with the community and they were used to provide updates on community affairs. The "Letters to the Editor" section also provided a means of connecting and communicating their thoughts, reflections on life and struggles as a migrant community in Australia. The letters and responses provided another platform to create a safe space for developing healthy Muslim identities. Women and men wrote letters acknowledging the value the articles brought to their life and they also raised criticisms or concerns about events in the community. They connected Muslims between Australian states and territories, forming a uniform and

<sup>67</sup> See *UNSW MSA Newsletter* (1983) and *SUMSA Newsletter* (1980).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Basri Hassan and Tajul Hashim, *Al-Qalam* (Hobart: Tasmanian Students Islamic Society, 1980).

<sup>70</sup> Silma Ihram, "An Appeal to 'Born Muslimat' from a new Muslimah," *Light Journal* 11, no. 4 (1981).

<sup>71</sup> Editorial Board, *Light Journal*, 11, no. 4 (1982).

collective identity. This was an important step in the settlement process of the minority Muslim community as it provided a sense of spirit and belonging, speeding up the healthy settlement and integration process into their new Australian *ummah*.

## **REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL UMMAH AND BELONGING**

The development of the student movement in Australia occurred within a global context where the Muslim youth consciousness was motivated by the ‘Islamic revivalist’ sentiments prevalent at that time due to the geo-political advances made by Islamic parties in some Muslim majority nations. This consciousness was strengthened by the possibilities brought about by regional and international organisations as well as Saudi backed financial support. The global youth movements were also loosely linked to Islamic movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamat Islamiyya. Within this setting, the Muslim students through their campus activism were empowered by collaborations with organisations like the International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations (IIFSO), Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, Regional Islamic Da’wah Council of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY).<sup>72</sup> These organisations provided an international platform and increased their sense of belonging to the global network of Muslim *ummah*, dispelling any lack of communal belonging.

There were opportunities and risks associated with involving foreign nations like Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, and having greater international links to external Islamic movements. Some of these involvements reflected the then global trend of political Islam, shifting the associations’ focus towards politically orientated movements. These manifested imperceptibly with an over-emphasis on political Islam across the campuses. There were two developments, one that emphasised political Islam, creating a sense of marginalisation away from the wider Australian community. The other was a sense of concern and oneness with Muslims across the globe. The latter resulted in continued interest in global news covering Muslim nations across the planet, as projected in their regular publications.

In the October 1977 edition of *Salam* magazine, Zia Ahmad recounts his overseas trips to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia where he attended the First International Youth Conference in Saudi Arabia along with 113 representatives from nearly 60 different countries. The conference was organised by WAMY and the General Secretariat of Islamic Conference newly constructed school 50km in Abha, Saudi Arabia. The conference was attended by “Australian Muslim Youth including Ziaul Islam Ahmad from Sydney, Abdul Rahim from Melbourne and Ibrahim Abdullah from Wollongong.”<sup>73</sup> The guest speakers were Dr Ahmad Totonji and Dr Mustafa Muslim. The camp provided an opportunity for the Muslim youth to meet, afforded them a platform to exchange details and strengthen Islamic unity, especially among the various Muslim youth movements of the world. WAMY pledged almost \$90,000

<sup>72</sup> Abu Anees, “A Survey of Muslim Youth Organisations in the World,” *Insight Magazine* May (1987).

<sup>73</sup> Zia Ahmad, “1st International Youth Conference in Saudi Arabia,” *Salam Magazine* October (1977).

towards the Muslim Youth Movement in 1977.<sup>74</sup> There is also evidence of financial assistance to external youth movements.

In 1976, AFMSA organised a national seminar on the “Muslim Students Movements and Islamic Resurgence, attended by ‘100 brothers.’”<sup>75</sup> In the same year, AFMSA representatives and officer bearers were invited to international conferences, including the Australian Student Movement in the first International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations Conference in Istanbul, Turkey, as well as the Mosque Conference in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and the Muslim Youth Movement International Conference of Malaysia. Mohammad Zakaria, the Muslim youth representative of Australia, stated in his *Australia Report*, presented at the WAMY conference in 1976, there was a need for a leadership training program due to a lack of trained leaders among students. This encouraged the then President of WAMY, Anwar Ibrahim, who was appointed as the Asia Pacific representative which included Australia, to attend AFMSA’s annual convention in May 1986 to meet the request of Australian students for more training and leadership programs in *dawah*.<sup>76</sup> The visits by international guest speakers from Saudi Arabia and Malaysia to Australia signified the importance given to the Muslim Youth Movement in Australia. The coming of Anwar Ibrahim was significant in meeting these objectives. The sense of accomplishment with this event and contribution was also significant in instilling a new identity to Muslim youth.

In line with these regional and international developments, in 1983, AFMSA became *Ittihad al Jamaat Al-Islamiah* (Federation of Islamic Groups) and its membership was opened to non-students. In 1991, this name was changed to FAMSU. FAMSU now has chapters in four Australian states: New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria.<sup>77</sup>

## **GENDERED SPACES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR MUSLIM WOMEN ON CAMPUS**

Since the inception of the first MSA at Queensland University in 1964, Muslim female students have been active members of campus life across Australian campuses. The 1970s gave birth to a new evolution in the role of women as they began to pursue tertiary education and enter the workforce in greater numbers than before. The MSAs also grappled with this, but they opened the door for Muslim female students on campus to participate in the activities of Muslim student associations. Despite the lack of official records of women as office bearers at AFMSA, especially in the 70s-90s (with the exception of the secretariat role), one-third of the participants at the annual AFMSA conventions were female.

Female students were very active within the local AFMSA chapters as well as the individual MSAs. Initially, Muslim female students on campus were mostly international students from Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan; however, by the late 70s, some local Muslim

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Federation of Australian Muslim Students and Youth, “Our History.”

women were also enrolled in Australian universities. The women who got involved left lasting legacies, like Jamilah Ariffin and Silma Ihram. Many of the active members are now in leading roles, such as microbiologist Professor Khatija Yusuf, who is the Deputy Vice Chancellor at a Malaysian university and wife of Professor Khalid Yusuf, a cardiologist and vice chancellor at a Malaysian university and former president of AFMSA and the founder of *Usrah* (Islamic Unity Forum) study circles in Australia.<sup>78</sup>

### ***Silma Ihram and the Secretariat***

Silma Ihram was active on campus at Sydney University in the late 70s, where she was enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts, Arabic and Islamic studies. As a White Anglo-Saxon woman, Silma challenged societal standards and stereotypes in the wider Australian culture and amid the Muslim circles on campus.<sup>79</sup> Silma's free spirit inspired and challenged the norms and traditional views of women in society. She recalls being the only woman on campus in 1978-1979 at Sydney University wearing the Muslim head covering – *hijab*.<sup>80</sup> Due to the secular nature of university culture, there was a more general and liberal acceptance of her, although there were many “puzzled looks” from people who were not sure of the Islamic nature of her *hijab*, which was a “new and foreign concept” to Australians at that time. Not quite a nun nor an ethnic, Silma brought about an interesting intersection of the cultures of Islam with the Anglo-Saxon heritage of Australia.<sup>81</sup>

In 1977, after giving birth to her first child, Silma continued attending onsite lectures and tutorials. This was an uncommon practice at the time. Despite some negative comments, Silma submitted and completed her assessments that year.<sup>82</sup> It was also in those years that Silma became involved in SUMSA as well as MSA of the University of NSW. The joint efforts and close collaboration with the Muslim youth movement brought about the invitation of Malaysian politician Anwar Ibrahim in 1979. Silma attended meetings, regular sessions and *usras* on campus.

As AFMSA became more involved in local, national and regional youth movements, the need for an external secretariat was discussed at the 10th and 11th AFMSA annual conventions.<sup>83</sup> This role was soon established and Silma was appointed officially as the secretariat of AFMSA. She regularly attended the office in Zetland, conveniently positioned next to the AFIC offices, in 1979-80. Silma was actively involved in the MSAs and the

<sup>78</sup> See Christine, Asmar., Prude, E. and Inge, L. “Unwelcome sisters'? An analysis of findings from a study of how Muslim women (and Muslim men) experience university.” *Australian Journal of Education*, 1, 47-63. Kensington, University of NSW Press, 2004, and Christine, Asmar. “Internationalising Students: Reassessing diasporic and local student difference.” *Studies in Higher Education*, 30, 3, 291-309. Kensington, University of NSW Press, 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Hanifa, Deen. “Caravanserai: Journey Among Australian Muslims.” *Fremantle Arts Centre Press*, 2003, 43-58.

<sup>80</sup> Silma, Ihram. ‘Interview by Mahsheed Ansari’. *Oral History Interview Muslim Women Pioneers*. Centre of Islamic Studies & Civilisation, Charles Sturt University, ISRA Centre, 31 October, 2018.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Editorial Board. “Report on Annual Convention,” 7.

national body AFMSA, for which she was awarded the Centenary Medal in 2002 by former Prime Minister of Australia John Howard.<sup>84</sup>

The late 70s and early 80s allowed for Muslim female students to participate and be active in MSAs across Australian campuses. The conferences and publications instilled and reinforced their Islamic faith and practice. These became the precursor for the women-based organisations that revolutionised women's activities in the Australian *ummah*.<sup>85</sup> AFMSA and the 'Ladies Affairs Unit' became pivotal in empowering the Australian *Muslimah* to learn and keep faith as well as retain a positive Muslim identity. They also contributed to the evolution and mobilisation of Muslim women, who went on to lead successful careers and families and became contributing citizens serving the Australian *ummah*.

## CONCLUSION

MSAs historically played a critical role in consolidating, organising and empowering the Muslim community in Australia. They achieved this through various campus activities and publications as well as local, national and international conferences. International students on campus facilitated the bridge between Australia and South East Asian communications and networking. Resident Muslim students also joined as they started to enrol in tertiary studies. By locally meeting the spiritual and social needs of the Australian *ummah* and at the international platform, they found it easier to organise themselves and gain regional and transnational collaborations. They also cooperated with other state and federal Islamic institutions like AFIC as well as international organisations like IIFSO and WAMY. The clear link between the Australian MSAs and its federated body AFMSA with the regional and international organisations was a by-product of the global Muslim youth effort towards Islamisation and in spirit of Islamic revival. The global youth movements were loosely linked to Islamic movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamat Islamiyya. The revivalist euphoria inspired by some political events was an influential characteriser of the student movement in Australia that was undoubtedly impacted by it. Members of AFMSA and MSAs became powerful voices for the community, many of whom became spokespersons for Muslims in their communities. Their activism instilled a strong sense of communal belonging as their Islamisation objectives were successful in supporting the healthy growth of the Australian Muslim identities, which contributed to the successful and continual development of the Australian *ummah*.

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<sup>84</sup> Silma Ihram, "Silma Ihram (Auburn) Australian Democrats (NSW Division) (2007 NSW State Election)", accessed January 15, 2019  
<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/68517/200703070000/nsw.democrats.org.au/candidates/auburn.html>.

<sup>85</sup> This theme will be further expanded upon in the author's upcoming book chapter titled "*Al Momina* down under: The untold stories and legacies of Muslim women pioneers in Australia" for Brill.



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