

Selected stops in Said Abdul Aziz Peace Journey¹

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It is truly an honor to be able to introduce Abdul Aziz Said for this biographical project. I was lucky and privileged to play a small part in his long and magnificent academic and applied journey of building and contributing to the field of peace studies.

For more than half a century, Abdul Aziz Said has dedicated himself to the advancement of theory and practice in the fields of international relations and international peace and conflict resolution. As the senior ranking Professor at American University in Washington, DC and the Director of the School of International Service 's International Peace and Conflict Resolution Division, Said has been responsible for developing a wide range of innovative educational, research, and outreach programs. These programs include a Master of Arts degree and four dual or joint degree options, as well as concentrations at the doctoral and undergraduate levels.

It is needless to say that introducing Professor Said is a challenging and uncomfortable task. Challenging because he has done so much in his academic and professional career, but beyond the life in academia he has touched the lives of so many people. So it will not be wise to try and claim that this forward comprehensively covers his work, thus the uncomfortable dimension because you will feel guilty that you have certainly left out important publications, organizations, declarations that he has started, or a journey with an influential peacemaker.

I have contemplated on how to introduce him as one of the pioneers in IR who pushed the limits of the discipline on many fronts. In his 56 years of teaching and researching, he has contributed in many ways to the peace study and IR fields. I have opted in the following essay to illustrate a few of the major stops in his academic career path and contextualize them to be able to understand the significance of his lifelong work.

The following essay is not going to list his 19 books and hundreds of articles, op-eds, and other publications that Abdul Aziz Said has made. It will not list the conflict areas that he has worked in as a peacemaker throughout his life. But, it is obvious to say that he has been involved in peacemaking efforts in most conflicts in the Middle East since 1960s. And as you know between the 1950s and 2011, there were plenty of these opportunities in the Middle East.

¹ This a DRAFT FORWARD d for a forthcoming book (2021) on Professor Abdul Aziz Said contribution to the field of peace and conflict resolution (Written by Nathan Funk and Meena Sharify-Funk).

Instead, I have chosen a few areas that I think capture some aspects of his contribution to peace studies and International Relations and Peacemaking. This might give the reader a glimpse of the statue of Said Abdul Aziz, the Mualim (teacher).

Culture and Religion in IR:

In the 1960s and 1970s the study of culture was not part of the mainstream IR theories or research, however that did not prevent Said from conceptually advocating through his first book and articles for IR students and scholars the role of culture in the study of IR and its influence on diplomacy. A theme that the field of IR only began exploring in a more serious way 20 years later. In these two early pieces, "Non-Western Traditions and the Western World," *Free World Forum*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 1960), pp. 3-5. "The United States and the Middle East and North Africa," in *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 22, No. 10 (June 1970), pp. 41-47. he already stated his life-long hypothesis; western policy paradigm is biased and neglect the local traditional cultural forces that are in play. For over 50 years, Said will continue to write about the inadequacies of Western diplomacy and the ways it proposes to handle the conflicts in Africa and Middle East and the rest of the world. In his writing said tackles this issue through number of central prisms, including: human rights, cultural and traditional identity, religion and spirituality, Islam and Arab national identities. Above all these analytical lenses that he utilized in his journey of confronting the power paradigm, has it manifested itself in his home city: Washington DC. He used the universal and humanist framework as a larger umbrella.

Similar story with the study of ethnicity which he included in his early writing as far back as 1964 (see *Ethnicity and U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed., Second Edition, Praeger: 1977 and 1981. *Ethnicity in an International Context*, ed. (with L.R. Simmons), Transaction Books, 1976). His approach continues to provide a space for the marginalized voices, even when the pressure of the dominant paradigm in academic institutions and society was to emphasize assimilation and denial of differences. Said's writings pointed towards pluralism and recognition and respect of ethnic identity and called for the creation of ethnic studies within IR. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, following the civil rights movement and the decolonization of Africa and Middle East, ethnic studies was beginning to emerge in academic institutions. The struggle then was how the ethnic studies are going to be framed. Said advocated for a space based on the recognition of human dignity of such marginalized communities. Dominant majority societies in USA and European states debated the models of assimilation and integration versus pluralism and diversity. Ethnic and cultural assimilations were put forward as ideal models to deal with racial and linguistic differences. Said landed on pluralism and diversity and not with the proponents of full assimilation.

To fully understand and appreciate the journey that Said did in his career, one has to recognize his origins. He arrives to Washington as a young student from the eastern desert of Syria (Al

Hasakeh area) and born to Christian family. He was educated in Muslim culture, schools, and and he was the son of tribal leader who opposed the French colonial system in Syria for many years. He moved to Washington just after the Second World War. America was in one of its peaks, having defeated both Germany and Japan using its massive military power and even dropping the nuclear bomb on Japanese cities. It only took him a few years after earning his degree from AU to begin voicing his critical views on issues related to human rights abuse and applying top-down development models in African and non-Western contexts.

Such critiques became clearer in late 1980s and early 1990s when he began dealing with US foreign policy in the Arab region. According to him, American policy toward the Islamic world should target some of the root causes of terrorism—exclusion, maldistribution of resources, absence of legitimate and genuinely participatory political authority—rather than Islamic revivalism and fundamentalism. For example, after the Israel's April campaign in Lebanon, the US donated \$100 million to Israel to combat terrorism. This money could have been better spent for the reconstruction of southern Lebanon. Furthermore, US officials needed to make clear that support for Middle Eastern governments, including Israel, is contingent not on mere political and economic expedience, but on criteria such as civil and political as well as economic, social, and cultural human rights—especially cultural due process, protection of the human person and human dignity, and the promotion of authentic, participatory community. Many Muslims are sensitive to perceived double standards in US foreign and domestic policies and question American sincerity on issues of non-proliferation, international law, and human rights for all peoples. The US should attempt to take this into account when formulating policies, making every effort to pursue a balanced approach to the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, and demonstrate that it is committed to reconciliation with the Iranian people. (Said and Funk, 1996).

Abdul Aziz's critique of the Western foreign policy paradigm did not prevent him from being critical of governance and policies of Muslim and Arab regimes. On the contrary, his analysis and diagnostics of the conflicts and problems in the Middle East always began with the call to recognize the institutional and structural challenges.

“The establishment of nation-states in the Middle East accompanied intellectual and political institutional discontinuity with the basic values of the dominant religion of Islam. The efforts by Middle Eastern governments to assimilate and modernize produces a crisis of alienation (mobilization, coercive assimilation, and imperialism) and the rise of ethnicity. The traditional Islamic institutions have lost their effectiveness as organizing principles and as safeguards for social justice and political participation. The Shari'ah (Islamic Laws), which served as a protective code for individual Muslims since the seventh century, is suffering near total neglect. The universalism of Islam has not found expression in the new nation-states.” (FUTURES December 1989).

Rooted in his human rights paradigm of 1960s he continued to write about the obstructions of economic and social development in Africa and the Middle East.

“The resulting dilemma for Muslims is that, when they reject Western political, economic and social values as inappropriate to their needs, the West views them as xenophobic and reactionary. They become isolated internationally-Khomeini and Qadhafi are two glaring examples. However, when Muslims compromise their own values and traditions and adopt those of the West, they suffer internal displacement. They are rejected domestically. The Shah and Sadat are two tragic victims.” (FUTURES December 1989)

Voicing human rights narratives and discourse during the McCarthy era was another step in Said's professional life. During the Cold War, the US government had launched a fierce campaign to restrict any form of sympathy with the Soviet regime or communist ideology. The dominant paradigm was democracy and capitalism. Academics and practitioners were expected to sing the same song. The McCarthy machine was successful in recruiting and pressuring faculty members from around the country. But at the American University, Said with some of his colleagues stood their ground and did not allow the US government interfere with their academic freedom. The prism of human rights and freedom was the lens which he utilized in that period to voice his rejection of the mainstream paradigm. His book on *Human Rights and World Order* (Transaction Books/Praeger, 1978) illustrates such trends in his approach to peace in such an era.

In responding to the Middle East conflict many policymakers and their plans to fix the region came to ask for Said Abdul Aziz's perspective. His analysis of the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is always based on the perceptual framework. Similar to his other areas of analysis of IR problems. Thus the Middle East was no different. “We would therefore propose that the future can promise more than linear evolutionism and cultural collision, to the benefit of East and West, Arab and Israeli, Muslim, Christian, and Jew. We can choose to view culture not merely as an obstacle, but also as a dynamic resource.” Calling for dialogue and needs based negotiation approach was the main message that he consistently repeated to bring a viable solution to the deep-rooted conflict in that region. With Funk they assert that: “A more cooperative conflict resolution approach would incorporate three components: first, settling the atmosphere, which gives the participant a feeling of comfort; second, developing effective conflict resolution power— shared positive power rather than "negative" power—which gives the participant a sense of safety; and, finally, moving toward effective conflict resolution steps, which creates a coordinated pace.” (“The Middle East and United States Foreign Policy: Searching for Reality”, Abdul Aziz Said and Nathan C. Funk Brown, *Journal of World Affairs*, Summer 1996 vol. III Issue 2 (1996 P. 36))

Bringing God into IR:

As early as the 1970s, Said introduced the need to consider religion in diplomacy and development. In his early work on African and Middle Eastern development models, he advocated for a different way to view the role of religion in such context.

For him the word development in Islam refers to the development of the soul in its return back to God. Divine Will continues to function in all phases of human history and in all instances of human life. In contrasting Muslim society and culture with Western:

“Divine Will for Muslims is the equivalent of the law of nature in the Western context... In the Islamic perspective, history has never been taken to be the ultimate matrix of reality; history is not reality-God is reality... Islam has never divorced the material from the spiritual life; making one’s bread is as much an act of faith as saying one’s prayers. (the Paradox of Development in The Middle East)

According to Said, the Islamic idea of development cannot easily be reduced to any of the existing models that prevail in the West today. It cannot be reduced to the models advanced by modernized Muslim thinkers. Development is a process through which human beings choose and create their future within the context of their environment to achieve a creative society. It is concerned with the dignity of the individual, a secure level of self-esteem, and the establishment of institutions appropriate for these ends. The goals of development are to realize the potential for human societies and for the total human being. (the Paradox of Development in The Middle East)

Such framing of international and national development was being debated in early 1960s and 1970s with strong push towards participatory models. Said joined the voices that called for further localization of development models and for genuine engagement with cultural and religious actors on the ground.

Localizing Peace:

Localizing peace is another theme that Said tackled in his most recent activities at American University. Beyond teaching courses on it and working with graduate and undergraduate students who arrive to SIS wanting to launch a career outside the US, Said’s course comes to convey a strong message of localizing peace. Look for peacebuilding opportunities in your own neighborhood. This also fits well with the humility of “do what you can where you are”. A Sufi value that calls for service and localized engagement. In his framing of the concept with Funk (“Localizing Peace-Agenda for Sustainable Peacebuilding,” Nathan C. Funk and Abdul Aziz Said, *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 2010 vol.17) they emphasize the need for utilizing traditional and local cultural frameworks in responding to conflicts. Although they did not devote great efforts in the operational implications of such approach in international development. Nevertheless, they emphasized three main concepts "peace as a locally constructed reality," "culture as a resource," and "outsider as facilitator" that need to be articulated in greater detail, in relation to the types of time commitment and results criteria that are appropriate to this type of engagement.

“Limits of interventionism” is indeed a factor that is facing many peace workers in the field. To what extent do we have the right to travel outside of our own countries and societies to work in conflict areas in which we have very little understanding of their culture and religion? Also to what extent do the United States and other superpowers have the capacity to fully transform the local dynamics without damaging the infrastructure and the lives of many people? “Act local and think global” is the slogan and path that advocates and practitioners in the field suggested to increase the impact or effects of our intervention. The idea of the slogan is that since we are all interdependent and interconnected, then peace building intervention in Washington DC will affect the peace in Mindanao Philippines and Sri Lanka. Changing domestic policies in Washington and London can have effect on other parts of the world too. In addition, localizing peace has immediate impact on the acting individual. The humility of working within your own community in which you know its language and cultural norms. Abdul Aziz Said’s most recent initiative at American University advocated for such a path of intervention. A more focus on domestic intervention which can also avoid the conflict tourism which certain intervention models have de facto encouraged (spending a period of 1-2 years in a conflict area and then move to another one with the cycle of funding or donor policies).

Expectedly Said has put forward similar principle in early 1970s when he discussed development approaches in the Islamic context.

“Returning to the Middle East, and the larger context of the Third World, three possibilities must be examined: either retake the road of ‘Westernizing’ the world, assuming the contradictions in the Western camp (among liberals, Judeo-Christians and Marxist-Socialists) can be resolved; or accept the hegemony of one of the Western groups, or of a non-Western world-view; or build a truly eclectic world humanist culture. Such an eclectic humanist culture would provide space for the growth of a truly Islamic model.” (the Paradox of Development in the Middle East)

According to Said, in the long run, it is better for the Middle East to develop through its own Islamic traditions. Otherwise, the people of the region will remain torn between traditionalism and secularism, between fundamentalism and Westernization. A change through continuity is both safer and more viable than a change through discontinuity. The challenge is how to develop the Middle East through its own traditions, not through Western secular ideologies. The first is deep-rooted in the heart of the masses as mass culture and mass behavior. The second is uprooted from mass culture and can easily be seen as external penetration.

Institutionalizing Peace and Conflict Resolution.

The third area to be highlighted is the journey of creating a peace and conflict resolution program at AU. Said began offering his first courses in peace studies at AU in the early 1980s. Following that it took him and his committed students another 13 years before the School of International Service agreed to create a Master’s program of International Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR). The story of launching that program reflects Abdul Aziz’s spirit of advocacy and

compassion. A number of his students marched into a faculty meeting and demanded from the administration and faculty to approve such a Master's degree. The fight at that time was whether IPCR can be an academically rigorous program and aligned with the international relations power paradigm. In the context of the peace and conflict resolution field, this program was among the first wave of new graduate programs to be created in the United States. George Mason University created the International Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) program; Syracuse University created their own program too. Insisting on having peace studies as an integral part of the conflict resolution graduate program was certainly Said's vision. Other faculty members and the school wanted to name it conflict management or settlement (assuming that will earn them more academic and professional credibility in Washington circles). However combining and bridging peace and conflict resolution approaches was the path which Said pushed with the students in the early 1990s.

Looking at his work in the early 1970s and 1980s, one can understand the values and means which Said Abdul Aziz had been advocating when confronting the IR traditional and mainstream theoretical and practical constructs. Conflict resolution is not a mechanical process and conflict cannot be solved through tools and techniques. "We need human spirit and values."

I joined Said in 1997 to build the foundation of the graduate program. Today this has become one of the largest Master's programs at the school and attracting many high-achieving students. For over 10 years, Said steered the program with gentle and compassionate leadership to become one of the flagship programs for SIS, which is one of the largest IR schools in the country.

As you all know, to build such a peace studies program in Washington DC means being able to fight and stand your ground against the many forces that negate the very foundational values of peace and conflict resolution studies. In particular, confronting both the offensive and the just war theorists, researchers, and policy makers who dictate the culture of violence discourse.

In the middle of this, Said always speaks and writes of the need for an alternative paradigm based on nonviolence and justice policies.

Overcoming the Dilemma of Engagement with the other

Abdul Aziz's academic accomplishments can also be better understood and appreciated if examined within the context of his life in Washington DC and teaching at SIS (at least 30% of its students aim to join the foreign service). Thus, being critical of US foreign policy in the Middle East and Muslim world and being a foreign-born citizen between the 1960s and 1990s during the Cold War imposed certain challenges on the capacity of the scholar to engage in policy practice. Said made his decision early in his career to actively engage with the policy makers circles. In addition to offering himself as a mentor to many international students from around the world, Abdul Aziz Said frequently lectured and participated in national and international dialogue and peace conferences. His public service includes consulting the US Department of State, the Department of Defense, the United Nations and the White House Committee on the Islamic

World. He has served as the president of the regional chapter for the International Studies Association and as moderator for the Ecumenical Council of Washington. He advises and serves on the Board of Directors for various international non-governmental organizations including Search for Common Ground, Global Education Associates, the National Peace Foundation, the International Youth Advocate Program, the Omega Institute, Nonviolence International, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, and Jones International University-University of the Web. He is also a member of the editorial boards for Human Rights Quarterly and Peace Review. But beyond these traditional engagement, his office convened many backchannel meetings from opposing diplomatic sides, especially from the Arab world. Also offered advice to many US government officials who were assessing certain shifts in their policy making towards the Middle East. The capacity to express gentle and critical voice and yet maintain continuous engagement lines, is one of the principles that Abdul Aziz Said preached for in his scholarly work on conflict resolution and peacebuilding. He also practiced it with US government officials. In his description of dialogue and its function in dealing with Muslim world Said always emphasized the need to be authentic and convey the reality as perceived by all parties (see Making Peace with Islam, Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, not Static, Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice, Cultural Diversity and Islam).

Is he a Muslim at all?

Since the late 1980s and in particular throughout the last three decades of his work, Said embraced his spiritual identity as a humanist and universalist with strong roots in Sufi tradition. His references to Ibn Arabi, Rumi, and other Sufi masters were integral part of his scholarship and practice.

In fact in his most recent work, “The Universal Transcendent Dimension of Peace,” was more visible, he emphasized the interconnectedness and holistic approaches to peacebuilding. Although, returning to the localized peacebuilding frameworks, nevertheless the underlying message was that we all need each other to live in genuine peace. Statesmen, civil society, religious actors, youth, women, etc. are all connected in the web of life that requires us to cooperate in resolving and addressing our human challenges. For him, consensus and cooperation are the two core values that should guide IR and diplomacy, the new frame of reference of world problems is an artifact of the minds and hearts of the people. (See Towards Cooperative Global Politics.)

“First, Second and Third Worlds must become one world. Oppressors and oppressed must be seen as people; reason and intuition become faces of truth; planning and spontaneity become reality; civilization and barbarism become culture; propositional knowledge and anecdotal knowledge become the root of knowledge. World order becomes a historical process whereby human beings choose and create their future within the context of their environment to achieve a humanist and creative society.”

This call for new world order to replace the existing order has accompanied Said for five decades of his work. He called for new world order in response to the Washington realist issuing a prediction in early 1990s that new world order is emerging. His new world order to be founded on human solidarity and wholeness of planetary life.

(See “The Whole World Needs the Whole World,” *Kosmos*, Fall/Winter 2001, <https://www.kosmosjournal.org/article/the-whole-world-needs-the-whole-world>)

In fact as a young Syrian immigrant to the US, Said carried his cultural and religious identity with him. The study of culture and its relations with politics was corner stone in his work since the 1960s. However, as he accumulates more experience in Washington Circles and globally, he moves closer to the spirituality and explores its link to international relations. Obviously advocating and introducing such dimension in mainstream academics and in particular in international relations which is governed by the power politics is no easy task. We only can imagine the level of cynicism and resistance Abdul Aziz would receive from strangers and even from colleagues. Nevertheless, he continues to “push the cart” (as he loved to say in describing these circumstances). One of his stories illustrating this position by his critics is the “pile of Peas”:

His friend who met him and mocked him for continuing to work with peace and idealism saying, “Are you still at the end or back of the Bus? What are you doing Said? Are you still working with piles of peas?” Said answering him: “I am mining a pile of Gold.”

Thus a major significant area of research and teaching that Abdul Aziz Said has pioneered at AU and beyond is the area of religion and peace, specifically the relationship between Islam, peace and pluralism. In the early 1990s, in the post-Cold War, “Islamic terrorism”, “Jihadism”, “Islamic fundamentalism”, and many other negative labels emerged and became widespread among US foreign policy and western policy makers who were searching for a new enemy to replace the Soviet Union. In the “heart of the Empire” and during the early rise of the Islamophobic sentiments, Said succeeded to launch a special endowed academic chair, Mohammed Said Farsi, Chair of Islamic Peace. This provided him with an opportunity and space to build a major research agenda and place Islamic peace, diversity, and pluralism in the center of one of the major international relations school. The path was open to mentor and explore new hypotheses in the study of peace, conflict resolution, and Islam. In collaboration with rising scholars who have similar passion, Abdul Aziz Said contributed several important publications in this field. Looking at publications such as: *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static* (co-edited with Meena Sharify-Funk and Mohammed Abu-Nimer), Routledge Publishers, August 2006. *Bridges, Not Barriers, Essays on Exploring a Global Dream*, The Fetzer Institute, Summer 2006, Essay Number 1. *The World of Islam*, (with Abdul Karim Bangura). Pearson Custom Publishing, 2004. *Cultural Diversity and Islam* (co-edited with Meena Sharify-Funk), University Press of America, 2003. *Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice* (co-edited with Nathan C. Funk and Ayse Kadayifci), University Press of America, 2001.

Building the ground work for a new subfield in peace studies is not an easy task. But Abdul Aziz moves with close group inspired by his leadership and host the first international conference on such theme in 1996 at AU². Also bringing voices like Sheikh Jawdat Said from Syria who was jailed many years for his nonviolent resistance and standing against the Assad regime since the early 1980s. Also bringing grand Sufi sheikh M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen from India and Sri Lanka to the class rooms and podiums of Washington DC.

These were not typical academic scholars who easily fit into the positive empirical evidence driven culture of the School of International Service. Thus it was both a struggle and bold move to bring the voice of a Muslim religious leader into such a space and during such an era in Washington DC.

Observing State Department and US government officials listening to a Muslim religious leader on how to handle the crisis with Saddam Hussein or how to relate to the Muslim world in more just and compassionate ways was an amazing sight, especially a few years before and after 9/11. Abdula Aziz Said's leadership was behind these multiple international conferences on Islam and peace and allowed such a vision to unfold.

Introducing religion in IR is still a challenge even today, only a few years ago the International Studies Association (ISA) conference (2014), launched its first section on religion, interfaith, and peace. However, Abdul Aziz has been championing the need to integrate the study of religious identity into IR theories and policy making for at least three decades. He has been the occupant of the Farsi chair for Islamic peace at American University since 1996. The only endowment in the western and maybe globally that focuses on such theme in an academic setting. In fact, through this he led the creation of a set of courses on Islam and peace which included: Islamic peace paradigm, conflict resolution in Islam, Islam and human rights, and Islam.

The introduction of spirituality in IR and peace studies is another area that he has introduced through his courses and recent writing. His special paper on Spirituality which was published by the Fetzer Institute (*Bridges, Not Barriers*, Essays on Exploring a Global Dream, The Fetzer Institute, Summer 2006, Essay Number) provides a guiding map for scholars and practitioners in peace building on the need to expand our understanding of conception and framing of spirituality and a path toward forgiveness and love.

In this paper and his other publications, Said reiterated his global and humanist appeal to see harmony and cohesion within the rich human diversity. Thus rejecting cultural superiority and domination by embracing diversity has been his lifelong message.

As he and Funk expanded on the notion of cultural triumphalism, he stated: Cultural imperialism is an attitude of superiority over, and insensitivity to, other cultures. In the Western instance, a

² Mubarak Awad (nonviolence International) Karim Douglas Crow, Mohammed Abu-Nimer; Michael Bear, Ayse Kadayifci, Nathan Funk and Meena Sharify Funk, Betty Setka are few of the scholars and practitioners who worked with Abdul Aziz aid on this vision of Islamic peace.

literary, abstracting, generalizing, scientific culture is thought of as presenting a ‘higher’ form of truth than oral-aural, folk anecdotal cultures. Yet a retreat to a cultural ghetto by any group—be it Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or whatever—is not only a denial of the rich diversity of the modern cultural experience, but also a rejection of responsibility for future generations. The inexorable dynamics of modern history rule out pretensions by any one group or cultural tradition of establishing a world hegemony. We have moved from a humanity that experienced its collective life as fragments of the whole to a humanity experiencing itself as whole. We are the heirs of the Old World order; but our legacy would be much greater if we could be the architects of a new order founded upon human solidarity and the wholeness of human life. This is true to the geniuses of all human traditions.

The Sufi Teacher and Mentor:

In his academic 56-year journey, Said mentored and touched the lives of thousands students, scholars, and practitioners. When working in this field of peacebuilding, it is hard not to meet his mentees. In many of the cities that I have visited in the last 20 years around the world, every time I introduce myself as a professor from American university, one person will ask me: “Is Said Abdul Aziz still there? Please tell him I said hi.”

In 2014 in the ISA hotel small shop on the corner, I stepped in to buy coffee. There was a man who was in his late sixties who, when he read my name tag, said “I am an alumni of AU and I remember a Middle Eastern professor and he was on fire when he taught me in 1961.” (I noted in my head that is before I was born). In a remote city in southern Mindanao, Philippines, where I was doing a training in peacebuilding, a man approached me and asked me to pass his greetings to Professor Said, who taught him in 1972. Said’s legacy extend beyond class rooms, books, articles, and magazines; his worked touched the hearts and minds of many, carrying a spiritual message of peace and harmony.

” A core belief and lifelong message of Said Abdul Aziz has been the notion that instead of masking spirituality in terminology of objectivism, empiricism, or mechanical separation of the human from the scholar., we should not shy away from our spiritual path, even as academics

Thus, the academic story of Said’s contribution to the field of peace and conflict resolution cannot be accurately captured without acknowledging his work as a Sufi teacher and mentor. Beyond his rich scholarship contribution and influencing policy makers all over the world, especially in the Middle East region, the story will not be completed if I do not share with you that as a Sufi master, Said has hundreds of *moreeden* (disciples) who have followed his path and sought his knowledge and wisdom in guiding their lives.

In his basement or office surrounded by his spiritual and peace library, icons, and instruments, Abdul Aziz Said speaks about peace, tranquility, inner strengths, and his sources of inspiration.

Being a Sufi master, scholar, advocate, and peace maker are all qualities that he carries with him on a daily basis. I have witnessed many manifestations of these qualities every time I've encountered him in the last 20 years.

His work was always guided by the famous Ibn Arabi saying about spirituality and humanism:

My heart has become capable of every form:

It is a pasture for gazelles,

And a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols,

And the pilgrim's Ka'ba,

And the tables of the Tora,

And the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love,

Whatever direction its caravans may take,

For Love is my religion and my faith..

Muhyiddin 'Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240)