Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Systems in Khmer Islamic Community: Challenges and Solutions

Norany Sman♣
sman.norany@rupp.edu.kh

Sambo Ke♦
ke.sambo@rupp.edu.kh

Fidelis Chosa Kastuhandani♠
chosakh@usd.ac.id

DOI: https://doi.org/10.56389/tafhim.vol19no1.1

Abstract

This study explores the development, challenges, and prospects of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Cambodia's Khmer Islamic community. While more than 600 institutions now provide IRE, the systems remain diverse, drawing on Malaysian, Singaporean, Arab, and local curricula that often lack standardisation and contextualisation. A qualitative approach was employed through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentary analysis with stakeholders including the Mufti of Cambodia, representatives of the Cambodian Muslim Teachers Association (CAMTA), and educators from five schools. Findings show significant variation across Malaysian, Singaporean, Kuwaiti, Saudi, and customised models, with uneven content, depth, and implementation. Key challenges include weak governance, absence of a centralised curriculum, shortages of trained teachers, inadequate professional development, and poor infrastructure. The study recommends reform through a unified framework grounded in Islamic educational philosophy, systematic teacher training, regular curriculum evaluation, and integration of modern pedagogical methods, ensuring both cultural preservation and alignment with national education goals.

Keywords:
Khmer Islam/Cambodian Muslim community, Cham/Cham Muslims, Islamic Religious Education (IRE), curricular practices.

Article history:
Submission date: 26/3/2025
Received in revised form: 11/8/2025
Acceptance date: 17/3/2026
Available online: 1/6/2026

Funding:
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest:
The author(s) have declared that no competing interest exists.

Cite as:
Norany Sman, Sambo Ke, and Fidelis Chosa Kastuhandani, "Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Systems in Khmer Islamic Community: Challenges and Solutions," *TAFHIM: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 19, No. 1 (June 2026): 1–18.

♣ Lecturer in English, Department of English, Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). Led the research, developed the core concept, and authored the final manuscript.

♦ Assistant Professor, Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). Collaborated on study design and the literature review.

♠ Assistant Professor, Universitas Sanata Dharma, Indonesia. Contributed to study design and reviewed the literature.

Introduction

Education is central to the progress of both developed and developing nations. As Rijalullah and others note, it encompasses knowledge, values, and practices that underpin curriculum design, pedagogy, and the administration of learning institutions.[1] Designing curricula, managing schools, and developing teaching strategies are difficult tasks if stakeholders lack a sound understanding of education. Curriculum and learning are closely interrelated: principles such as critical thinking, inclusivity, lifelong learning, and practical application should inform curriculum design.[2] Dewantara defines education as the process of directing a child's innate talents, curiosity, and creativity towards the enjoyment and benefit of learning, enabling personal growth and fulfilment.[3] In this view, teachers act not only as instructors but also as mentors, guiding students to discover their potential and role in society.[4]

Educational systems must therefore be critically assessed and, where necessary, restructured and contextualised to guide future improvements. This is particularly relevant in developing countries such as Cambodia, where Islamic education plays a vital role for Khmer or Cham Muslims. It supports their social mobility and aims to prepare them for meaningful lives both in this world and in the hereafter.[5] In recent years, the number of institutions in the Khmer Islamic community has grown markedly in response to the demand for education in a competitive global environment. More than 600 schools now provide religious education in varying formats, drawing on models from Malaysia, other Southeast Asian nations, the Arab world, Egypt, and Singapore.[6] Some are primary schools offering only Islamic Religious Education (IRE), while others provide both religious and secular programmes (Khmer K-12).[7] However, there is still no comprehensive written documentation of IRE to guide

1. Muhammad Rijalullah et al., "Islamic Education: A Deep Look at Educational Goals in the Digital Age," *L'Geneus: The Journal Language Generations of Intellectual Society* 11, no. 3 (2022): 78–83.
2. H. Masduki Duryat, *Paradigma Pendidikan Islam: Upaya Penguatan Pendidikan Agama Islam di Institusi yang Bermutu dan Berdaya Saing* (Bandung: Penerbit Alfabeta, 2021).
3. Jagad Aditya Dewantara, "From Place of Attachment to Sense of Belonging: Promoting Good Citizenship through Civic Education," *Jurnal Civics: Media Kajian Kewarganegaraan* 20, no. 1 (2023): i–iv.
4. Suparlan, "Pendidikan Anak dalam Perspektif Islam," *PENSA* 2, no. 3 (2020): 249–61, https://doi.org/10.36088/pensa.v2i3.949.
5. Norany Sman, "Current Trends in Education System in Cambodian Muslim Community," *Kesturi (ASASI)* 31, no. 1–2 (2021): 35–57.
6. Ibid. See also Higher Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Cambodia (HICIRAC), *Curriculum Framework* (Cambodia: Department of Education, 2023–2024), 22–30.
7. Ibid.

curriculum development. This is largely due to shortages of trained personnel and teaching materials.[8]

The integration of curriculum practices from abroad has shaped IRE in Cambodia. Schools adopt religious texts and subjects such as *fiqh* (Islamic law) and *tafsīr* from Arab traditions,[9] while Singapore's model has encouraged a more structured use of contemporary teaching methods and technology.[10] Malaysia's bilingual system,[11] balancing religious and secular subjects,[12] has also influenced Khmer schools. Together these approaches aim to uphold Islamic teachings while adapting to modern educational standards. For Khmer Muslims to improve their educational outcomes and contributions to Cambodian society, however, the system must be properly structured and standardised.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has initiated national projects to enhance the education system and to ensure clear learning outcomes.[13] This mandate applies equally to public, private, and communal schools, whether secular or religious. Principals are expected to align their school goals with MoEYS standards. Yet within the Khmer Islamic community, there remains no unified curriculum framework. The adoption of diverse foreign models has produced wide variation in IRE implementation across schools, with only a few revising their curricula annually. In search of better-structured programmes, some parents send their children abroad to Malaysia, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey. Although many teachers are experienced in delivering Islamic subjects, most lack training in effective pedagogy. Given the diversity of imported curricula and the absence of proper structure, the recent expansion of IRE in Khmer madrasas requires systematic study, targeted support, and careful curriculum development.

8. Cambodian Muslim Teachers Association (CAMTA), "Congress on Islamic Education in Cambodia," March 5–6, 2024 (Phnom Penh, 2024).
9. A. Akrim, Rudi Hasrian Setiawan, Selamat Selamat, and Nurman Ginting, "Transformation of Islamic Education Curriculum Development Policy in the National Education System," *Cypriot Journal of Educational Science* 17, no. 7 (2022): 2538–52, https://doi.org/10.18844/cjes.v17i7.7685.
10. Try Masriah, Ajizah Wafik, and Mahwiyah, "Islamic Education Curriculum Development," *Amandemen: Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Studies* 1, no. 1 (2023): 15–21, https://doi.org/10.61166/amd.v1i1.3.
11. HICIRAC, *Curriculum Framework*, 9–10.
12. Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Globalization of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia," in *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*, ed. K. Miichi and O. Farouk (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 11–43, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137436818_2.
13. Kimkong Heng and Koemhong Sol, "Cambodia's Education System: Development and Persistent Challenges," *Innovations and Challenges in Cambodian Education: Youth's Perspectives*, ed. Kimkong Heng et. al (Phnom Penh: Cambodian Education Forum, 2023), 1–19, https://cefcambodia.com/2023/09/18/cambodias-education-system-new-developments-and-persistent-challenges/ .

Literature Review

The quality and effectiveness of IRE in Cambodia have come under increasing scrutiny, particularly regarding institutions that operate without central oversight. Eng observes that while the Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Cambodia (HICIRAC)[14] maintains a supervisory role, schools funded by Malaysian and Arab donors often lack the cohesive structures, quality assurance mechanisms, and standardised curricula found in the Cambodian national education system.[15] Addressing these disparities requires a commitment to contextualisation and consistency in instructional practices across the Khmer Islamic community. Broader scholarly discourse on Islamic education provides a theoretical basis for these local reforms. Al-Ashraf emphasises that substantial reform in Muslim education globally must begin at the primary and secondary levels, with a specific focus on restructuring teacher training to better serve student needs.[16] Furthermore, the systemic problems observed in religious education are often linked to broader deficiencies in leadership and foresight. Rahman suggests that such intellectual stagnation often stems from a lack of initiative among Muslim intellectuals to modernise educational frameworks.[17] For Khmer Muslims, education is not merely an academic pursuit but a vital tool for community revitalisation, the reinforcement of identity, and improved quality of life. Because their IRE systems are heavily modelled after Southeast Asian and Arab traditions, understanding the educational landscapes of Malaysia, Singapore, and the Arab world is essential to refining the Cambodian context.[18]

From Traditional Madrasahs to Modern Schools

IRE in Cambodia's Khmer Islamic community has long-standing roots, shaped by migration, trade, and the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia.[19] The Cham

14. The Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Cambodia (HICIRAC) is the primary state-recognised body for Islamic governance in the country. While HICIRAC is the formal title used in government communications and international diplomacy, several variations appear in different contexts: the Supreme Islamic Council of Cambodia is often utilised in media and high-level national discourse; the Cambodia Islamic Council frequently serves as shorthand in regional educational and development assemblies; and the Senior Islamic Leadership Council of Cambodia typically refers to the collective body of senior *'ulamā'* (scholars) and imams who provide guidance alongside the Mufti of Cambodia.
15. Okha Sos Kamry, Mufti of Cambodia, in discussion with the researcher, Phnom Penh, 3 April 2025.
16. Syed Ali al-Ashraf, *New Horizons in Muslim Education* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 24–45.
17. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 84–86.
18. HICIRAC, *Curriculum Framework*, 22–30; and Okha Sos Kamry, in discussion with the researcher, Phnom Penh, 3 April 2025.
19. Sman, "Current Trends in Education System in Cambodian Muslim Community," 35–57; and Okha Sos Kamry, in discussion with the researcher, Phnom Penh, 3 April 2025.

people—many of whom migrated from what is now southern Vietnam and converted to Islam in the fifteenth century—are the principal ancestors of Cambodian Muslims, often referred to as Khmer Islam or Cham Muslims.[20] Islamic education in these communities was initially informal. *Ulama*, or religious scholars, taught in *masjid*s (mosques), *surau*s (prayer houses), or in their own homes.[21] By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, specialised Islamic institutions, or madrasahs, began to appear, offering instruction in Arabic, the Qur'ān, and *fiqh*.[22] In rural areas with significant Muslim populations, these institutions functioned alongside the traditional Cambodian school system.

Religious education suffered severe disruption under the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979). Schools were closed, and Islamic leaders and scholars were persecuted as part of the regime's suppression of religion. Following the regime's fall, international Islamic organisations and the Cambodian Muslim community worked to restore madrasahs and revive Islamic education in the 1980s.[23] Historically, Qur'ānic schools in mosques, suraus, and private homes provided the foundation of religious learning. Attendance was expected of all Muslim children, with an emphasis on memorising Qur'ānic chapters and verses.[24] Yet, as educational demands shifted, these traditional schools declined. In the late 1960s, more modern approaches began to emerge, supported by teachers trained in Mecca, Medina, and Cairo. These newer systems integrated secular subjects with Islamic studies, reflecting a strategic effort to link religious education with national progress and international relevance. This integration symbolised Cambodia's broader ambition to build a society that was at once rooted in Islamic principles and capable of competing in a globalised world. Today, IRE in the Khmer Islamic community continues to expand, blending contemporary curricula with traditional teaching. The combined approach allows students to preserve their Islamic heritage while meeting the needs of modern Cambodian society.

Islamic Philosophy of Learning

From an Islamic perspective, individuals are expected to embody noble character in their relationships with God, themselves, other people, creation, and the environment.[25] The central aim of education is to elevate moral

20. Akrim et al., "Transformation of Islamic Education Curriculum Development Policy in the National Education System," 2538–2552.
21. Sman, "Current Trends in Education System in Cambodian Muslim Community," 35–57.
22. Masriah et al., "Islamic Education Curriculum Development," 15–21.
23. Ahmad Fauzi, "Globalization of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia," 11–43; and Sman, "Current Trends in Education System in Cambodian Muslim Community," 35–57.
24. Sman, "Current Trends in Education System in Cambodian Muslim Community," 35–57.
25. Siti Aimah, "The Role of Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Shaping Students' Morals and Ethics at Junior High School," *Afkarina: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 8, no. 2 (2023): 101–10, https://doi.org/10.33650/afkarina.v8i2.9396.

values through knowledge, guiding learners towards virtuous conduct. Islamic education places strong emphasis on cultivating moral and spiritual virtues, encouraging submission to God rather than the pursuit of social status or worldly achievement.[26] Its broader purpose is holistic: nurturing personal growth, emotional well-being, and social harmony. Rooted in values of balance, ethical behaviour, and mindfulness, Islamic teachings provide a framework for purposeful living in the modern world. At the school level, this philosophy translates into the development of key competencies that integrate moral, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of learning (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Students' key competencies in Islamic perspective at school level.

Source: *National Curriculum Framework*. Geneva: UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2017, p. 13.

The diagram above illustrates that the primary goal of Islamic education at the school level is to provide a comprehensive framework for life, emphasising self-awareness and personal growth—both essential for emotional and mental well-being. Its teachings encourage balance in diet, health, and spirituality, while also fostering strong, respectful relationships built on empathy and kindness. Islam inspires critical and creative thinking, enabling individuals to find

26. Jalaluddin, *Teologi Pendidikan Islam* (Jakarta: Rajawali Press, 2002); Oleh Hujair AH Sanaky, "Paradigma Bahru Pendidikan Islam: Sebuah Upaya Menuju Pendidikan yang Memberdayakan," *JPI FIAI Jurusan Tarbiyah* 8, no. 6 (2003): 5–15; Aimah, "The Role of Islamic Religious Education Curriculum," 101–10; and Hasan Basri, "Integrating Islamic Values into Modern Educational Curricula: Challenges and Opportunities," *Join: Journal of Social Science* 1, no. 5 (2024): 303–17.

purpose and contribute meaningfully to society. In the modern context, Islamic education stresses the responsible use of technology and media, recognising their potential for sharing knowledge when guided by ethical values. It also promotes sustainable practices, advocating environmental protection and careful resource management, thereby nurturing a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Together, these principles guide learners towards a balanced and purposeful life that benefits both the individual and the wider community.

This philosophy of learning thus provides a well-rounded approach to education, integrating intellect, character, and spirituality, and creating positive and competitive school environments. Grounded in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, it affirms that knowledge serves not only personal growth but also social advancement, motivating students to pursue both rational and divine understanding. Applied to Khmer IRE systems, this framework ensures clearly defined objectives and outcomes. It encourages students to internalise Islamic principles, develop moral qualities such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy, and contribute positively to society. The emphasis on intention (*niyyah*) and active engagement further ensures that students apply their learning with sincerity and purpose. By cultivating reflection and critical thinking, this approach enables students to integrate Islamic values into everyday life.[27] For this reason, the design of IRE in the Khmer Islamic community must be anchored in this philosophical foundation to ensure greater consistency and standardisation.

Research Structure

To obtain in-depth insights into curriculum practices within the Khmer Islamic community, this study posed a series of guiding questions to school stakeholders: (1) What curriculum practices are implemented at the primary and secondary levels? (2) What Islamic subjects are introduced at these stages? (3) What improvements or changes have been made to the existing curriculum? (4) What challenges arise when adopting curriculum practices from other countries? And (5) What suggestions can enhance the current curriculum and its teaching methods?

A qualitative approach was employed, combining semi-structured interviews with analysis of secondary data drawn from articles, books, research papers, and national, local, and international documentation. Participants included the Mufti of Cambodia, a representative of the Cambodian Muslim Teachers Association (CAMTA), five religious teachers, and five school administrators or directors. All held bachelor's or master's degrees and had extensive professional experience. These participants were drawn from five

27. Sanaky, "Paradigma Bahru Pendidikan Islam," 5–15; Aimah, "The Role of Islamic Religious Education Curriculum," 101–10; and Basri, "Integrating Islamic Values into Modern Educational Curricula," 303–17.

schools that had adopted and customised different IRE models. In addition, daily observations were conducted at these schools. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, generating rich content and ideas. Data analysis followed a descriptive and thematic method: transcripts and notes were read repeatedly for familiarity, meaningful segments were coded, patterns identified, themes refined, and final categories aligned with the research questions. To strengthen reliability, validation strategies included member checking, participant review of transcripts, and verification of preliminary findings. These measures enhanced the credibility of the conclusions.

Research Findings

The study revealed significant insights into the state of IRE in the Khmer Islamic community. Data from documents, secondary sources, observations, and interviews demonstrate the diversity of curriculum models, varying degrees of adaptation from foreign systems, and persistent challenges in ensuring quality and consistency. Between 2000 and 2009, several private schools and self-managed institutions emerged in both urban and rural areas, operating independently of the Mufti of Cambodia. Their aim was to provide both secular and religious education, particularly to orphans and disadvantaged Muslim students. Around twenty schools have since reformed their curricula to adopt mixed models integrating Islamic and secular subjects.[28] In contrast, other schools are funded by Arabic networks, dominated by the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS) and Umm al-Qura. These institutions adhere closely to what they regard as the "true Islam" and the Prophet Muhammad's method of teaching.[29] Since 2009, the number of private and public schools in the Cambodian Muslim community has increased sharply, now exceeding 600 institutions. IRE is offered from kindergarten to upper secondary levels. Of these, 435 schools operate in formal settings, 54 in *surau*s, 34 in mosques, and the remainder in private homes.[30] Almost all religious teachers—about 99 per cent—are local graduates of institutions in Malaysia, other Asian countries, or Arab states. However, curricula are often implemented without local adaptation, and learning outcomes are rarely aligned with adopted programmes.[31]

28. Interview with a CAMTA representative, 13 March 2024.
29. Interview with the Mufti of Cambodia, 3 April 2025.
30. Sman, "Current Trends in Education System in Cambodian Muslim Community," 35–57; and HICIRAC, *Khmer Islam Population in Cambodia* (Cambodia: Khmer Islam Census Office, 2020).
31. Interview with Ashari Sales (founder of Norol Iman School, NICS), 22 March 2025; HICIRAC/CAMTA representative, 3 April 2024; Mufti of Cambodia, 3 April 2025; Director of al-Khalid bin al-Walid School, 17 March 2025; and Director of Norol Iman Chroymetrey School, 22 February 2025.

The Malaysian Curricula

Most Islamic schools in the Khmer Islamic community that adopt the Malaysian model organise IRE into four levels: kindergarten (three years under the Malaysian curriculum and two years in schools following certain Arab or Singaporean models), primary school (six years, Grades 1–6), secondary school (three years, Grades 7–9), and high school (three years, Grades 10–12). Communal schools generally follow the curriculum guidance issued by the Cambodia Islamic Council. At the kindergarten level, the Senior Islamic Leadership Council of Cambodia partners with the Department of Islamic Affairs of the Federal Territories (Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan, JAWI) through Malaysia's Department of Islamic Development (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, JAKIM). Subjects include Qur'ān recitation, memorisation, and practice, as well as obligatory and supererogatory supplications, English, Mathematics, and Khmer.

For primary education, HICIRAC has adopted the curricular model of Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (JAIS), Malaysia. Subjects at this stage include Qur'ān studies and memorisation, *ḥifẓ*, *tawḥīd*, *fiqh*, *akhlāq* (ethics), *imlā'* (dictation), *sīrah* (Prophetic history), *tajwīd* (rules of recitation), and both Arabic and English. At the Islamic primary level (Sijil Menengah Ugama, SMU), the curriculum—based on the model of Yayasan Islam Kelantan—comprises Qur'ān and *ḥifẓ*, *tafsīr*, *akhlāq*, *imlā'*, *sīrah*, *tajwīd*, Arabic and English, *tawḥīd*, *ḥadīth*, *naḥw wa ṣarf* (Arabic grammar), and *muṭāla'ah* (literature and reading). At the secondary level (Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia, STAM), the curriculum follows that of the Malaysian Ministry of Education. Subjects include Qur'ān and *ḥifẓ*, *tafsīr*, *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Qur'ānic sciences), Arabic, English, *tawḥīd*, *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, *'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, *naḥw wa ṣarf*, *inshā'* (composition), *al-balāghah* (rhetoric), *adab wa al-nuṣūṣ* (Arabic literature), *manṭiq* (logic), *al-farā'iḍ* (laws of inheritance), and *al-'arūḍ wa al-qāfiyah* (Arabic prosody). One exception is the Kan Imam Saan School (Okhna Khnour) in Kampong Chhnang, which maintains a traditional curriculum and teaches the Champa (Cham) script. In private schools and non-governmental centres, curricula are typically selected by school leaders—often graduates of foreign institutions—without reference to the official framework of the Cambodia Islamic Council, the Mufti of Cambodia, or the HICIRAC.[32]

The Singaporean Curriculum

A small number of schools (four in total) follow the Singaporean curriculum, operating from kindergarten to primary level. These schools provide full-time

32. Interview with HICIRAC/CAMTA representatives, April 3, 2024; and HICIRAC, *Curriculum Framework*, 22–30.

programmes with relatively affordable fees, while orphans receive free education, accommodation, and meals. At the kindergarten stage, pupils are taught to recognise and appreciate God. They memorise short daily supplications—such as those before sleep, upon waking, and before and after meals—and selected short *sūrah*s to aid in performing the five daily prayers.[33] At the primary level, the curriculum combines academic and moral education, encouraging students to observe their prayers more consistently and equipping them with basic life skills. Riyadh International School (RIS) is distinctive for adopting an international programme modelled on Singaporean standards. Since 2020, it has structured its religious curriculum from kindergarten (three levels) through primary (six years, Grades 1–6). At the primary level, core Islamic subjects include Basic Islamic Moral Education, Physical and Health Education, and Fundamental Life Skills. Textbooks are written by experienced teachers, many trained in Arab states and specialising in children's education. RIS uses Khmer, English, and Arabic as media of instruction.[34] Core subjects across Singaporean-model schools include: (1) Arabic; (2) *Qur'ān* and *du'ā'*; (3) *Iqrā'*; (4) *fiqh*; (5) *akhlāq*; and (6) *tawḥīd*.

The Kuwaiti Curriculum

Another major model is the Arab–Kuwaiti system, implemented in 33 schools from primary through high school with financial support from Kuwait. These schools operate under the supervision of the Cambodia Good Source Association (CGSA). Rahma International School (RIC), one of the institutions studied, adopts this model. Despite Arab support, RIC offers fewer Islamic subjects than An-Nakmah Islamiyah al-Thanawiyah School or most Cambodian schools following Malaysian curricula. Arabic and English serve as the main instructional languages, and most teaching materials are in Arabic.[35] Islamic subjects taught at RIC, with varying levels by grade, include: (1) Qur'ān recitation; (2) Arabic; (3) *fiqh*; (4) *tawḥīd*; (5) *ḥadīth*; (6) *naḥw wa ṣarf*; (7) *Iqrā'*; (8) *inshā'*; and (9) *tafsīr*.

The Customised Curriculum

A further model is the customised approach, in which textbooks are adapted from Arab states and Asian countries. This is mainly used in full-time private institutions, of which fewer than ten exist in Cambodia. Since 2014, these

33. Interview with Picksry Ron (Director of Emaan International School), 23 April 2025; and Novy Krim (Teacher at Emaan International School), 23 April 2025.
34. Riyadh International School (RIS), "Course Syllabus 2024," unpublished internal document, Phnom Penh, 2024.
35. Interview with Nasiet Sim (Director of Rahma International School), 17 July 2024.

schools have offered Islamic education from primary through high school.[36] The Islamic subjects offered, adjusted for difficulty across levels, include: (1) *al-Muqaddam* (introductory Qur'ān recitation); (2) *al-Ma'thūrāt* (compilation of supplications); (3) Qur'ānic language; (4) *'aqīdah;* (5) *fiqh*; (6) *Iqrā'*; and (7) *naḥw*.

The Bassaer (Saudi Arabia) Curriculum

A final model is the Bassaer curriculum from Saudi Arabia, implemented in four schools in the Khmer Islamic community since 2011.[37] Other private schools and NGO centres similarly select curricula independently, often led by principals trained abroad, without reference to the Mufti or HICIRAC.[38] Communal schools, meanwhile, continue to operate in informal settings, where the Cham language is also taught. At Norol Iman Chroymetrey School (NICS), the kindergarten curriculum includes *al-tibyān*, *al-adhkār*, *al-ḥifẓ*, and *al-lughah al-'arabiyyah*. At the primary level, eight subjects are taught: (1) Qur'ān recitation; (2) *ḥifẓ*; (3) Arabic; (4) *tawḥīd*; (5) *fiqh*; (6) *ḥadīth*; (7) *sīrah*; and (8) *al-qirā'ah* (reading). In 2024–2025, the Cham language (Bahasa Cham) was added to preserve Cham identity. At lower secondary level, subjects include: (1) Arabic; (2) *ḥifẓ*; (3) *tawḥīd*; (4) *ḥadīth*; and (5) *fiqh*. At upper secondary, the curriculum expands to: (1) *tilāwah*; (2) *ḥifẓ*; (3) *tafsīr*; (4) *ḥadīth*; (5) *sīrah*; (6) *fiqh*; (7) *tawḥīd*; and (8) Arabic.

Challenges and Difficulties

The findings highlight several challenges in delivering and managing IRE in Khmer Islamic schools. In most institutions, IRE includes the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* alongside a diverse and often inconsistent range of Islamic subjects. Morality and Qur'ān memorisation are emphasised, and schools frequently supplement these with extracurricular activities such as computer studies, sewing, sports, and other life and digital skills. Many of these programmes are organised and supported by overseas organisations, local associations, communities, and external donors. According to Eng, although HICIRAC seeks to regulate IRE, schools supported by Malaysian and Arab networks lack a centralised framework, standardised curricula, quality assurance mechanisms, and clear pedagogical approaches—features that distinguish Cambodia's national education system. [39]

36. Interview with Conel Mat (School Manager at ALIHSAN Cambodia), 13 June 2024.
37. Interview with Yacob Faridah (Deputy Director at NICS) and the Director of NICS, 22 March 2025.
38. HICIRAC, *Curriculum Framework*, 22–30.
39. Kok-Thay Eng, *From the Khmer Rouge to Hambali: Cham Identities in the Global Age* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2014); and Sman, "Current Trends in Education System in Cambodian Muslim Community," 35–57.

One major challenge is weak governance, compounded by the absence of standardised curriculum design and a shortage of qualified teachers. Some schools operate without a single trained educator, while others rely on inexperienced staff. Although certain private institutions offer integrated curricula that combine Arabic, Malaysian, English, and religious training, significant concerns remain regarding curriculum consistency and teacher competence. The result is wide disparity across schools in the range and depth of Islamic subjects taught. Teacher training and professional development opportunities are scarce. As al-Ashraf stresses, restructuring teacher training is urgent,[40] particularly for religious education at primary and secondary levels. Some schools employ recent graduates or even high school leavers, while others recruit overseas graduates unfamiliar with Cambodian classroom needs. Without exposure to pedagogy or instructional design, many teachers—despite subject knowledge—lack essential teaching skills. The absence of practicums and training in ethics or methodology undermines student learning. Rahman attributes such shortcomings to the failure and inaction of Muslim intellectuals.[41] Teaching, both an art and a science, requires structured preparation. Training centres should therefore provide formal programmes for new graduates, and workshops should be organised to strengthen teaching careers, expand general knowledge, and build digital competencies. Annual evaluations by school management or expert panels, together with regular quality assurance reviews by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), are essential to ensure that curriculum design is standardised and learning objectives are consistently achieved.

Infrastructure is another pressing concern. Facilities in most Islamic schools remain inadequate for modern teaching and learning, particularly in the digital era. MoEYS has emphasised the need to upgrade education systems across all communities and institutions, whether public, private, or communal. Priorities should include improving teacher training, fostering public–private partnerships, and expanding systems for sharing updated curricula and teaching strategies nationwide. Building the capacity of educators and education officers and fostering positive classroom environments are also vital. Teachers with limited experience in religious instruction require assistance in adapting foreign curriculum models to suit the needs and learning abilities of Khmer Muslim students. Despite the growth of Khmer Islamic schools and some curriculum adjustments, these challenges persist. Weak governance, inadequate teacher training, and limited professional development continue to affect learning outcomes. The lack of regular evaluation, poor digital integration, and outdated infrastructure further undermine the effectiveness of IRE.[42]

40. Al-Ashraf, *New Horizons in Muslim Education*, 92–93.
41. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 99.
42. *Education Congress: The Education, Youth and Sport Performance in the Academic Year 2021–2022 and Goals for the Academic Year 2022–2023* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS), 2023), 208, https://moeys.gov.kh/storage/uploads/documents//67872083e6f02.pdf.

In conclusion, although international organisations and benefactors have helped establish vocational training programmes in some areas, there remains a pressing need for standardised training in teacher education and school management. Such programmes are crucial for producing qualified personnel and improving the design of literacy programmes.[43] To ensure that teaching and learning objectives are fully achieved, and to meet the requirements of the MoEYS strategic plan, the IRE curriculum must be reorganised, unified, and reformed across Khmer Islamic schools.[44] A consistent implementation framework, guided by Islamic educational philosophy and its clearly defined student competencies, should underpin future restructuring of IRE in the community.[45]

Discussion

Since 2000, Cambodia's IRE systems have expanded significantly, with many private and independent schools emerging. These institutions employ diverse curricula that combine secular and religious education, resulting in greater access but inconsistent implementation. While some follow structured Malaysian curricula supported by organisations such as JAKIM and JAIS, others funded by Arab networks emphasise Arabic and traditional Islamic studies but lack uniformity. A small number adopt Singaporean curricula, incorporating life skills and moral education alongside multilingual instruction. Despite these varied curriculum approaches and innovations, several major challenges persist. One of the most pressing issues is the lack of standardisation in IRE across Khmer Islamic schools. Curriculum content differs greatly depending on institutional leadership, resulting in uneven instructional quality and inconsistent learning depth. This inconsistency is compounded by the shortage of qualified teachers. Many schools do not employ professionally trained educators; in some cases, teachers are only high school graduates, while others are overseas graduates who have never received training in teaching practices suitable for the Cambodian context. Such limitations undermine the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Weak governance and the absence of a coherent institutional vision further impede progress. The decentralised nature of many schools restricts oversight, quality control, and proper alignment of curricula with clear educational goals and syllabus design. Numerous institutions operate without formal recognition or regulation from either national or religious authorities. In addition, there is a significant gap in structured teacher training and ongoing professional

43. Interview with a CAMTA representative, 2025; and Interview with the Mufti of Cambodia and several school directors, 2025.

44. *Education Congress*, 208.

45. *Training Tools for Curriculum Development: Prototype of a National Curriculum Framework* (Geneva: UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2017), 13, http://www.ibe.unesco.org.

development, particularly in rural areas. Most educators lack the skills to apply modern teaching techniques, utilise digital tools, or adapt lessons to achieve clearly defined learning outcomes for diverse learners. The absence of systematic curriculum review is another challenge. Few schools regularly assess or update their programmes, leading to outdated content that does not reflect students' needs or current educational standards. Infrastructure deficiencies also hinder the learning environment, as many schools lack basic facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and digital classrooms, often operating in prayer spaces or private homes. Language and cultural barriers exacerbate the problem, with much of the learning material available only in Arabic or other foreign languages and limited translation into the local context, making it difficult for students to fully engage with the material.

Finally, while some progress has been made in integrating life skills and digital literacy into the curriculum, instruction in these areas remains inconsistent and inadequate. This leaves students underprepared for the demands of the modern workforce, particularly in relation to ICT and other twenty-first-century competencies. Thus, the Khmer IRE sector faces significant challenges that may threaten its long-term sustainability and social cohesion. A key concern is educational inequality, whereby wealthier schools—often supported by Arab donors or other international networks—are able to provide superior facilities and teaching environments, while disadvantaged students, particularly orphans and those in rural areas, attend under-resourced schools with limited learning opportunities. Another pressing issue is the potential erosion of cultural heritage, as some religious schools prioritise Arabic, Malay, and Islamic studies while neglecting the Khmer language and Cambodian cultural traditions. This approach risks disconnecting students from their national identity and limiting their future employment prospects. Nevertheless, the recent introduction of the Cham language into certain programmes represents a positive step towards preserving cultural heritage and promoting greater inclusivity within Islamic education.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Despite the proliferation of Khmer Islamic schools, the development of a unified curriculum framework remains limited, leaving the community's educational system to face significant systemic challenges. To improve the quality of IRE and align it with regional standards of the MoEYS of Cambodia and other Southeast Asian nations, key measures should be implemented to address both aspects of the IRE's superstructure and infrastructure. To enhance the quality of today's Khmer IRE systems and promote expertise in school leadership and administration at the school level, it is important to organise regular seminars, workshops, conferences, and training programmes, on either a semester

or a yearly basis, for relevant school stakeholders in both urban and rural areas. Schools should also implement monthly or semester-based professional development initiatives to improve teaching effectiveness, particularly focusing on integrating technological skills for religious Muslim educators.

Additionally, facilitating domestic and international exchange programmes for both administrative and teaching staff can strengthen school governance and support the adoption of modern, relevant curricula. Expanding vocational training centres in both rural and urban regions is crucial to equipping students with practical skills. Moreover, constructing schools with updated facilities, such as advanced classrooms, libraries, computer laboratories, and science laboratories, will support better student learning. It is also necessary to obtain approval from the MoEYS in Cambodia to allow Islamic organisations to establish more higher educational institutions that offer religious programmes. Incorporating additional extracurricular activities, such as life skills, environmental projects, community service and charity work, and fieldwork into the curriculum will help create cleaner, greener schools and foster well-rounded Muslim students. Lastly, establishing a curriculum evaluation and accreditation system to conduct annual reviews will help ensure continuous improvement in both school programmes and student performance.

Given the small number of participants involved in this research study, further research is strongly encouraged. Future studies could implement these strategies in more diverse contexts, with larger participant groups. There is a need for more research on related topics, such as student learning outcomes and academic achievement. Further studies could focus on analysing and comparing the effectiveness of different curriculum models used in Khmer Islamic schools. This would help determine which curricula best support student performance in the local context and how those models can be harmonised for consistency. In brief, to improve the quality of Khmer IRE systems in light of Islamic educational philosophy, it is essential to establish a centralised Islamic education board responsible for unifying curricula, educator training, and assessment standards. The development of textbooks that integrate Islamic teachings with Cambodian cultural values is also crucial. Additionally, all Islamic schools should be subject to accreditation and regular oversight by national educational authorities. Integrating civic and intercultural studies into the curriculum can foster national cohesion, while promoting collaboration among schools will help bridge ideological differences and raise overall educational standards.

References

Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid. "Globalization of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia." In *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*, edited by K. Miichi and O. Farouk. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137436818_2.

Akrim, A., Rudi Hasrian Setiawan, Selamat Selamat, and Nurman Ginting. "Transformation of Islamic Education Curriculum Development Policy in the National Education System." *Cypriot Journal of Educational Science* 17, no. 7 (2022): 2538–2552. https://doi.org/10.18844/cjes.v17i7.7685.

Aimah, Siti. "The Role of Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Shaping Students' Morals and Ethics at Junior High School." *Afkarina: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 8, no. 2 (2023): 101–110. https://doi.org/10.33650/afkarina.v8i2.9396.

Al-Ashraf, Syed Ali. *New Horizons in Muslim Education*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985.

Basri, Hasan. "Integrating Islamic Values into Modern Educational Curricula: Challenges and Opportunities." *Join: Journal of Social Science* 1, no. 5 (2024): 303–317.

Cambodia Education Review. Phnom Penh: MoEYS, 2021. https://cer.dopomoeys.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Dec_11_Final_Rith_CER_Volume4_N1.pdf.

Cambodian Muslim Teachers Association (CAMTA). "Congress on Islamic Education in Cambodia," March 5–6, 2024. Phnom Penh, 2024.

Cambodian Primary Education Curriculum Framework. Phnom Penh: MoEYS, 2020. https://moeys.gov.kh/en.

Census for All Religions in the Kingdom of Cambodia, 2023. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Cults and Religion, 2023.

Creswell, J. W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014.

Creswell, John W., and Timothy C. Guetterman. *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. 6th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2018.

Curriculum Development and Implementation Guidelines. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS), 2020.

Curriculum Guide for Religious Education in Secondary Schools. Phnom Penh: MoEYS, 2021. https://moeys.gov.kh/storage/uploads/documents//67871e3d79210.pdf.

Dewantara, Jagad Aditya. "From Place of Attachment to Sense of Belonging: Promoting Good Citizenship through Civic Education." *Jurnal Civics: Media Kajian Kewarganegaraan* 20, no. 1 (2023): i–iv. https://doi.org/10.21831/jc.v20i1.58843.

Documentation from Riyard International School (RIS). Phnom Penh, 2024.

Duryat, H. Masduki. *Paradigma Pendidikan Islam: Upaya Penguatan Pendidikan Agama Islam di Institusi yang Bermutu dan Berdaya Saing*. Bandung: Penerbit Alfabeta, 2021.

Education Congress: The Education, Youth and Sport Performance in the Academic Year 2021–2022 and Goals for the Academic Year 2022–2023. Phnom Penh: MoEYS, 2023. https://moeys.gov.kh/storage/uploads/documents//67872083e6f02.pdf.

Education Curriculum Framework. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS), 2015. https://moeys.gov.kh/storage/uploads/documents/65bcc1a4d6ae8.pdf.

Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023. Phnom Penh: MoEYS, 2020. http://cdc-crdb.gov.kh/en/twg-jmi/sector_strategy/ESP2019-2023_EN.pdf.

Education Strategic Plan 2024–2028. Phnom Penh: MoEYS, 2024. https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/cambodia_ESP_2024_2028_Eng.pdf.

Eng, Kok-Thay. *From the Khmer Rouge to Hambali: Cham Identities in the Global Age*. Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2014.

Heng, Kimkong, and Koemhong Sol. "Cambodia's Education System: Development and Persistent Challenges." In *Innovations and Challenges in Cambodian Education: Youth's Perspectives*, edited by Kimkong Heng, Koemhong Sol, Sopheap Kaing, and Sereyrath Em, 1–19. Phnom Penh: Cambodian Education Forum, 2023. https://cefcambodia.com/2023/09/18/cambodias-education-system-new-developments-and-persistent-challenges/.

Higher Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Cambodia (HICIRAC). *Khmer Islam Population in Cambodia*. Cambodia: Khmer Islam Census Office, 2020.

_____. *Curriculum Framework*. Cambodia: Department of Education, 2023–2024.

Jalaluddin. *Teologi Pendidikan Islam*. Jakarta: Rajawali Press, 2002.

Masriah, Try, Ajizah Wafik, and Mahwiyah. "Islamic Education Curriculum Development." *Amandemen: Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Studies* 1, no. 1 (2023): 15–21. https://doi.org/10.61166/amd.v1i1.3.

Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Rijalullah, Muhammad, Imam Tabroni, Dede Ahmad Fathoni, and Ananta Putri Anggraini. "Islamic Education: A Deep Look at Educational Goals in the Digital Age." *L'Geneus: The Journal Language Generations of Intellectual Society* 11, no. 3 (2022): 78–83. https://doi.org/10.35335/geneus.v11i3.3460.

Riyard International School (RIS). "Course Syllabus 2024." Unpublished internal document. Phnom Penh, 2024.

Sanaky, Oleh Hujair AH. "Paradigma Bahru Pendidikan Islam: Sebuah Upaya Menuju Pendidikan yang Memberdayakan." *JPI FIAI Jurusan Tarbiyah* 8, no. 6 (2003): 5–15.

Sholichah, Aas Siti. "Teori-teori Pendidikan dalam Al-Qur'an." *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 1 (2018): 23–46. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/267897122.pdf.

Sman, Norany. "Current Trends in Education System in Cambodian Muslim Community." *Kesturi (ASASI)* 31, no. 1–2 (2021): 35–57.

Suparlan. "Pendidikan Anak dalam Perspektif Islam." *PENSA* 2, no. 3 (2020): 249–261. https://doi.org/10.36088/pensa.v2i3.949.

Training Tools for Curriculum Development: Prototype of a National Curriculum Framework. Geneva: UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2017. http://www.ibe.unesco.org.