



Gratz Insider, April 2015 - Story Continuation

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## **Alumni Spotlight on Nur Munir: A Scholar of Islam and Judaism**

Growing up as a religious Muslim in Indonesia, Nur Munir studied Koran commentary in college. Later, given his skills in Arabic, Munir landed a job in the foreign service and was stationed at a diplomatic post in Egypt.

By the late 1990's, Indonesia was in the throes of political and economic turmoil, which ultimately led to the forced resignation of the country's longtime leader, President Suharto, in May of 1998. Having played a role in the series of events leading up to Suharto's resignation, Munir anticipated retaliation from the ex-president's allies if he returned to Indonesia. As a result, he escaped to the United States, eventually followed by his wife and young child, where he began more-than-a-decade-long effort to obtain political asylum.

While living in the United States, Munir initially planned to earn his doctorate at Temple University in the Department of Religion. Although he was accepted into the doctoral program, he did not have the funds to enroll. Undeterred, he came across a posting at Temple about a scholarship at Hebrew University, which listed mastery of Hebrew as a prerequisite. With his facility for languages and his unrelenting determination, Munir was prepared to take on the challenge of learning Hebrew in order to apply for this scholarship. A Temple professor recommended Gratz College to him for his Hebrew studies.

Realizing that Munir was an exceptionally talented student with a unique background, Adina Johnson, Gratz's director of admissions at the time, suggested that he consider the Gratz master's program in Jewish Studies, in addition to Hebrew classes. With Johnson's assistance, Munir applied for and received a scholarship - and then, proceeded to make Gratz his home for the next four years. Learning Hebrew, Jewish history, rabbinics and modern Jewish thought, Munir excelled in his classes, and is described as being "very talented" by his former Gratz advisor, Professor Davis. By the time Munir graduated with a master's degree in Jewish Studies in 2005, "he had really become part of the Gratz community," says Davis.

While his immigration case continued to plod through the judicial system, Munir applied to the Harvard Divinity School, where he was accepted into the Master of Theological Studies program. The academic success that he demonstrated at Gratz followed at Harvard.

"His professors there were impressed," says Davis. "He did path-breaking work comparing Jewish and Islamic (and also some early Christian) sources."

But one day, just a few months before his graduation from Harvard, Munir did not show up for class - and he did not return the next day or even the next week. In fact, he seemed to have completely vanished from the campus. Weeks later, the Harvard community learned that Munir was being held by

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in a Pennsylvania prison in preparation for deportation after losing the appeal of his political asylum case.

Students and faculty at Harvard rallied around Munir. They sent letters to ICE requesting that his deportation be postponed until he had completed his degree. Munir's case was also reported on in both [The Harvard Crimson](#) and [The Harvard Law Record](#). In addition, Dr. Jonathan Rosenbaum, president of Gratz College at the time, expressed support for Munir's release in a letter to ICE. Ultimately, Munir prevailed, and his deportation was delayed until after he had graduated from Harvard with his master's in Theological Studies.

In 2009, Munir returned to Indonesia, leaving behind his family, which by that time included an American-born child. For four years, he served as a staff advisor in the Indonesian Parliament. He has also been teaching for several years at both the University of Indonesia and President University.

But recently, Munir has been back in the news: this time, in the name of peace and interfaith dialogue. In January, Munir traveled to Israel as part of a delegation of Islamic leaders from Indonesia. The group toured the sights and met with Muslims, Christians and Jews, including former Israeli president Shimon Peres. The trip was organized in memory of Abdurrahman Wahid, a former president of Indonesia who was dedicated to religious tolerance and to the advancement of the Israeli-Indonesian relationship. (Coverage of this trip is available in [The Australian Jewish News](#) and [The Australia/Israel Review](#), as well as on [Australia's ABC Radio National](#).)

"This mission was the first ever of its type," and it took place "despite the absence of diplomatic relations between Indonesia and Israel," says Jeremy Jones of the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC), which arranged the trip in cooperation with the Elijah Interfaith Institute in Jerusalem. Having met Munir at previous interfaith programs in Indonesia, Jones consulted with him on delegate selection for the Israel trip and relied on him for translation support. As a result, Munir assumed an informal leadership role within the group of Indonesian delegates.

From encounters with university students and Palestinian refugees to meetings with prominent figures of different faiths, Munir and the Muslim delegation made the most of their visit to Israel, learning as much as they could in a week's time. Despite their hectic schedule, however, Munir managed to carve out time to reconnect with a former Gratz instructor, Nili Rabinovitz, whom he describes as his "unforgettable Hebrew lecturer."

Although Munir has since returned to his life in Indonesia, Jones believes that he "will continue to have a significant impact on relations between the Jewish and Islamic worlds, and between the world's most populous Muslim nation and the only Jewish State." Gratz College is proud that one of our graduates is using his education to such a worthy end, and we are awaiting Munir's next step on this important journey.