

Establishment, Roles, and Current Challenges of the Armed Forces Religious Corps (KAGAT)

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ABSTRACT

Establishing the Religious Corps of the Malaysian Armed Forces (KAGAT) in 1985 represented a strategic initiative to institutionalise religious and spiritual guidance within the military. This study examines the historical foundation, strategic roles, and challenges KAGAT faces in fulfilling its mission. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with officers and personnel, analysis of official documents such as PTA, CBQ, PIFA, and DPMKI, and informal observations during program implementations. The findings highlight KAGAT's essential roles in delivering religious education, spiritual counselling, and dakwah, with programs like the Tahsin al-Quran Program and CBQ Module 2 proving effective in improving personnel's religious competence and Quranic literacy. Leadership strategies rooted in prophetic traditions, such as qiamullail and baiah, further reinforce their influence. However, KAGAT faces challenges that include a limited workforce, inadequate contemporary fiqh training, generational shifts in values, and the growing influence of digital culture. These factors necessitate a re-evaluation of current strategies. The study recommends enhancing trainer development with interactive modules, creating specialised content for Muslim converts and younger service members, leveraging digital platforms for dakwah, and aligning all programs with core Islamic leadership values. These initiatives are crucial for ensuring that KAGAT remains a relevant and practical spiritual backbone in the evolving context of the Malaysian Armed Forces.

Keywords: KAGAT, da'wah, leadership, spirituality, military

INTRODUCTION

The Religious Corps of the Armed Forces (KAGAT) is a vital entity within the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), officially established in 1985. Its formation stemmed from realising the need for a dedicated body responsible for coordinating Islamic religious affairs among military personnel (Ghazali, Idris, & Salleh, 2022). In the context of an increasingly complex military environment, spiritual strength is no longer seen as a mere complement to operational readiness but rather as a strategic element that shapes the moral resilience, discipline, and psychological fortitude of service members facing high-risk and demanding missions (Jalal, Ab Ghani, & Ismail, 2021). The daie askari concept promoted by KAGAT reflects its dual role as military personnel and spiritual guides, integrating faith-based ethics into all aspects of military life (Ghazali et al., 2022).

KAGAT's role extends far beyond conventional religious duties. It advises military commanders on Islamic jurisprudence, manages the burial of fallen soldiers in combat zones, and plays a vital role in military operations, peacekeeping missions, and humanitarian efforts. Its leadership framework is rooted in prophetic traditions, with values such as qiamullail, baiah, and strategic consultation being part of the character-building process for KAGAT officers (Azmi & Zaighu, 2021).

However, a more dynamic, responsive, and strategic approach is required due to the quick development of military technology, changing social dynamics within the armed forces, and the rise of new ideological

challenges like radicalism, religious relativism, and secularism (Jalal et al., 2021). The increasing diversity among military personnel, especially with the inclusion of Saudara Muslim, demands tailored and inclusive dakwah modules to ensure practical religious guidance and practice (Yahya, Abidin, & Salleh, 2025). Additionally, the workforce shortage and limited training in contemporary fiqh and dakwah issues challenge KAGAT's ability to maintain operational relevance (Ghazali et al., 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the historical evolution of KAGAT, analyse its present function within the military hierarchy, and pinpoint the current issues that put its efficacy and applicability as the spiritual foundation of the Malaysian Armed Forces to the test. This paper offers insights for strengthening KAGAT's strategic role by aligning it with modern military demands while upholding Islamic values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background and Functions of KAGAT

Early research on KAGAT's role in the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) has focused on the organisation's fundamental goals, essential duties, and benefits for military personnel's spiritual health. The idea of the *daie askari* (military preacher), which is ingrained in KAGAT's organisational structure as a link between operational military requirements and the more general Islamic missionary (dakwah) mission that involves public engagement, was further developed by Ghazali et al. (2022). According to this theory, religious officers play a crucial role in forming the identities of Muslim soldiers, who are not only militarily compliant but also deeply rooted in spiritual principles.

Furthermore, Yahya et al. (2025) discovered that staff members' degree of religious knowledge, particularly that of Muslim converts (*saudara Muslims*), has a significant impact on how they practice Islam. The results emphasise the necessity of more organised and inclusive religious counselling programs that accommodate the MAF's wide range of religious backgrounds. The study highlights the need for KAGAT to create a dakwah methodology that is more approachable, socially relevant, and adapted to the modern realities of military life.

Challenges Faced by KAGAT

Apart from its crucial function of directing the spiritual growth of members of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), the Religious Corps (KAGAT) is confronted with several modern issues that could compromise the efficiency of its execution. The shortage of human resources is one of the main problems. The current number of religious officers cannot meet the operational and training requirements across all levels of military formations and units. This problem was brought to light by Ghazali et al. (2022), who suggested hiring more staff and implementing better training programs to prepare KAGAT for the demands of the modern world.

Moreover, religious outreach strategies and knowledge of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) must be updated by the development of military technology and contemporary warfare. Jalal et al. (2021) include in their journal that KAGAT officers may not be able to provide suitable religious guidance in operational situations in real time if they are not proficient in modern military jurisprudence, or fiqh al-harb.

Furthermore, to prevent them from falling behind in practice, Yahya et al. (2025) also underlined the necessity of offering Muslim brothers with a limited understanding of religion specialised modules. Beyond internal issues, external factors like logistical constraints, dual assignments, and non-religious administrative workloads also affect how well KAGAT performs its primary mission. In order to maintain KAGAT's relevance and efficacy in addressing the realities of modern military service, its structure, functional scope, and institutional capacity must be reevaluated.

Effectiveness of Training, Spiritual Education Programs, Leadership and Dakwah Strategies

While KAGAT remains unique in integrating Islamic teachings within a national military framework, comparisons can be drawn to chaplaincy programs in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where military chaplains are responsible for soldiers' moral and spiritual support. Unlike these models,

KAGAT's approach is rooted in Islamic jurisprudence and prophetic leadership principles, offering a culturally embedded model of military religious leadership. Insights from Indonesia's Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) also demonstrate the significance of Islamic-based training in military professionalism, suggesting potential for regional collaboration and benchmarking.

Studies have emphasised the value of a systematic and well-organised training framework in the context of military personnel's religious education and training. In their study on the Program Tahsin al-Quran (PTA), Ahmad et al. (2021) stressed that the instructors' competence and credibility significantly impact the program's efficacy. This suggests that KAGAT needs to carefully consider the calibre of its instructors and teaching strategies, especially in core initiatives like PTA, which form the cornerstone of enhancing staff members' religious practice.

Similarly, Mohamad et al. (2021) showed how well the CBQ 2 Module worked to improve MAF personnel's ability to read the Quran. This module's success indicates that KAGAT's activities align with the Armed Forces' larger Islamic Spiritual Development Policy. Programs such as CBQ are tools for strengthening spiritual ties within the military ranks and as technical training modules.

Additionally, through their research on the Pendidikan Islam Fardhu Ain (PIFA), Musa et al. (2021) concluded that the quality of training infrastructure, facilitator credibility, and curriculum design are critical to fostering Islamic values. Their results suggest that KAGAT's training programs must be designed and implemented holistically to guarantee participants a more profound spiritual appreciation.

Several researchers have also focused on leadership among KAGAT officers. Azmi & Zaighu (2021) investigated the application of Prophet Muhammad SAW's leadership model in the context of KAGAT, specifically about customs like baiah (oath of loyalty) and qiamullail (night prayers). The study found that a high degree of spiritual integrity among KAGAT leaders positively impacts troop motivation, internal administration, and the efficiency of dakwah delivery.

Moreover, Jalal et al. (2021) analysed the application of wasatiyyah (moderation) as a dakwah approach practised by KAGAT in the challenging environment of military operations. Wasatiyyah, as a balanced, tolerant, and moderate methodology, is viewed as highly suitable for addressing the religious and cultural diversity among military personnel. While effective, the study also identified several limitations, such as time constraints, operational pressures, and limited resources, which may hinder the impact of KAGAT's dakwah efforts if not addressed through appropriate strategic support.

METHODOLOGY

The formation, strategic functions, and present difficulties of the Malaysian Armed Forces' Religious Corps (KAGAT) are examined in this study using a qualitative case study methodology. The case study design is ideal for this research because it allows for a thorough examination of phenomena in their actual context, which facilitates a thorough comprehension of institutional practices, personal experiences, and the application of policies about spiritual leadership in the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF). Three main techniques were used for data collection to guarantee a comprehensive viewpoint: semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and informal observations.

Key informants, such as KAGAT officers, military imams, and staff members working on spiritual development initiatives, participated in semi-structured interviews. This approach yielded rich qualitative insights into field-level challenges, leadership practices, and the efficacy of KAGAT's programs. Document analysis was also done on several important materials, including policy documents like the Islamic Spiritual Human Capital Development Policy (DPMKI) and official training modules like the Pendidikan Islam Fardhu Ain (PIFA), CBQ Module 2, and Program Tahsin al-Quran (PTA). The goal was to understand the guiding principles and strategic framework influencing KAGAT's institutional direction and educational outreach.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of KAGAT officers based on rank, involvement in dakwah programs, years of service, and operational exposure. This selection

strategy aimed to gather insights from those most experienced in implementing KAGAT's spiritual programs across various branches of the Armed Forces.

Furthermore, informal observations were conducted during the implementation of dakwah activities and training sessions. These observations offered practical insights into the delivery and reception of spiritual programs within actual military settings. All collected data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, key issues, and emergent themes related to the roles and challenges of KAGAT. Thematic analysis enabled systematic organisation of findings and a deeper interpretation of how various components influence KAGAT's operational effectiveness. By integrating multiple data sources, this methodology ensured analytical rigour, depth, and triangulation in addressing the research objectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Historical Background and Justification for the Establishment of KAGAT in the Malaysian Armed Forces

Strategic Need for Spiritual Guidance in the Military

The establishment of the Religious Corps of the Malaysian Armed Forces (KAGAT) in 1985 was a strategic move by the Malaysian government to structure military strength that encompasses both physical and spiritual dimensions. In the context of increasingly complex modern military operations, the spiritual strength of military personnel has become a crucial component in balancing physical and mental stress. In line with this, the presence of KAGAT has catalysed shaping soldiers who are not only physically prepared but also emotionally and spiritually resilient.

Spiritual strength is no longer viewed as a mere supplement but as a core component in building moral endurance, self-discipline, and psychological strength among personnel. This is vital in high-risk situations such as warfare, peacekeeping missions, and humanitarian operations. Jalal et al. (2021) highlight that spiritual strength directly contributes to military personnel's emotional resilience and operational efficiency.

Thus, the establishment of KAGAT was not solely to fulfil religious needs but also to act as an official institution coordinating religious affairs within the Armed Forces. KAGAT bridges military requirements and Islamic law, strengthening the Islamic identity within national defence services (Ghazali et al., 2022).

The Concept of Daie Askari and the Role of Religious Officers

The concept of daie askari refers to KAGAT officers who fulfil two leading roles – soldiers and preachers. This reflects that religious officers in the military are not merely tasked with performing religious rituals but also play a strategic role in shaping the identity and character of military personnel. According to Ghazali et al. (2022), this concept is a key foundation in developing human capital in the Armed Forces based on Islamic knowledge and values.

In practice, KAGAT officers serve as religious advisors to operational commanders, manage fiqh-related matters in military contexts, and lead spiritual activities such as sermons, religious talks, night prayers (qiamullail), and more. This approach renders their role more holistic and not limited to ritualistic functions alone.

The existence of daie askari elevates the role of religion within the military structure, where Islamic values become the foundation for discipline, obedience, fighting spirit, and moral integrity of personnel. This enables KAGAT to act as an agent of transformation in shaping a professional and Islamically identified Armed Forces.

Alignment of Islamic Values in Military Operations

KAGAT's role is not confined to educational and preaching activities but also extends to direct involvement in military operations. For example, KAGAT officers manage fallen soldiers' remains in conflict zones, act as religious advisors to commanders, and are involved in humanitarian and peacekeeping missions.

This involvement illustrates how Islamic values are practically aligned within the military context. Operational fiqh advisory, such as rulings on prayer during combat, fasting during missions, and other shariah-related issues in warfare, highlights the need for a dynamic and contextual role of KAGAT. This is consistent with their function as spiritual guides responsive to current realities.

KAGAT's ability to adapt Islamic principles within the military structure demonstrates that religious values are not obstacles to military efficiency but serve as a driving force for integrity, bravery, and sincerity in fulfilling national duties.

Core Roles of KAGAT in Spiritual Development, Education, and Preaching

Effectiveness of Educational Modules such as CBQ, PTA, and PIFA

Educational modules such as CBQ 2, the Program Tahsin al-Quran (PTA), and Pendidikan Islam Fardu Ain (PIFA) are systematic initiatives by KAGAT to strengthen religious knowledge among military personnel. The CBQ 2 module, for example, is specifically designed to enhance Quranic reading skills within the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM). A study by Mohamad et al. (2024) indicated a significant improvement in Quran recitation abilities among personnel through this module, aligning with the goals of the Dasar Pembangunan Modal Insan Ketenteraan Islam (Islamic Military Human Capital Development Policy), which emphasises both spiritual and intellectual growth.

Additionally, the Program Tahsin al-Quran (PTA), conducted at ILMI (the Malaysian Armed Forces Islamic Training Institute), focuses on improving the Quranic reading quality of KAGAT imams. A study by Ahmad et al. (2021) revealed that trainers in PTA play a crucial role in enhancing the work performance of imams once they return to their respective units. This training improves technical recitation skills and nurtures holistic spiritual discipline among participants.

In the context of PIFA, Musa et al. (2021) found that curriculum content, trainers, and training infrastructure are significantly related to internalising Islamic values among Army personnel. This demonstrates that the structured and systematic approach implemented by KAGAT through these modules has a positive impact on instilling religious values, thus shaping soldiers who are not only operationally competent but also spiritually and morally excellent.

The Strategic Leadership of Prophet Muhammad SAW as a Model for KAGAT's Preaching

KAGAT adopts the strategic leadership of Prophet Muhammad SAW as a model in implementing spiritual programs and nurturing military personnel. A study by Azmi & Zaighu (2021) showed that the majority of KAGAT members recognise practices such as qiamullail (night prayers), baiah (oath of allegiance), and musyawarah (consultation) as among the most commonly applied elements by their leaders. These practices strengthen spiritual resilience and increase motivation and a sense of responsibility in carrying out military duties.

Applying Prophet Muhammad's leadership values also demonstrates a comprehensive approach in strategy, planning, and mission execution. KAGAT adapts these leadership methods through internal training, spiritual leadership courses, and the study of the sirah nabawiyyah (prophetic biography) as a framework for character development. These elements have proven effective in shaping personnel who are courageous, patient, and guided by integrity.

Empowering Islamic leadership through KAGAT goes beyond merely honouring the Prophet as a historical icon; it positions him as a practical guide in military operations. The effectiveness of this approach can be seen in the increasingly Shariah-compliant organisational structure of the ATM, where religion serves as a moral foundation and source of inspiration in facing global challenges.

The Wasatiyyah (Moderation) Approach in Military Preaching

KAGAT adopts the wasatiyyah or moderation approach to preach to military personnel from diverse social, educational, and cultural backgrounds. A study by Jalal et al. (2021) highlighted that this approach is well-suited to the complex and demanding military context. Wasatiyyah enables the message of Islam to be conveyed in a moderate, non-extreme, and easily understood manner without compromising the religion's core principles.

Implementing the wasatiyyah approach involves inclusive preaching methods such as public lectures, counselling sessions, digital technologies, and multimedia materials like motivational videos and Islamic infographics (Rosidi et al., 2022). These initiatives make religious outreach more engaging and increase the participation of military members who were previously less exposed to Islamic knowledge. This aligns to transform every soldier into a da'wah agent who can uphold Islamic values within their professional roles.

However, the wasatiyyah approach requires continuous refinement to remain relevant to the social realities of younger personnel. KAGAT must be more proactive in utilising social media, adopting youth-friendly language, and addressing contemporary issues such as religious tolerance, extremism, and moral challenges. This strategy is crucial to ensure that the message of da'wah is not only delivered but truly understood and practised by Armed Forces members.

Contemporary Challenges Faced by KAGAT in the Modern Social and Technological Era

Changing Values of the Younger Generation and the Influence of Social Media

Field observations and interview responses revealed a notable digital gap among older KAGAT officers; many expressed discomfort with platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. This generational divide presents a challenge in ensuring consistent and engaging outreach. Moreover, younger soldiers noted that religious content is often too formal or outdated, suggesting a pressing need for KAGAT to employ content creators or social media-savvy officers to modernise its dakwah strategy. Additionally, digital content that addresses moral challenges relevant to military life needs to be developed, such as ethical dilemmas in combat zones, religious tolerance, and social behaviour within military camps. To do so, KAGAT must collaborate with Islamic content producers and digital marketing experts to ensure that the message of Islam is conveyed creatively and with contemporary appeal.

KAGAT is currently facing significant challenges in understanding and adapting its preaching strategies to align with the thinking patterns of the younger generation of soldiers, who are heavily influenced by social media. Along with technological advancements and unlimited access to information, religious values are increasingly tested by popular culture and foreign ideologies. Therefore, KAGAT's da'wah efforts must be crafted more creatively and contextually so that the Islamic message can effectively compete in the fast-paced digital space.

Conventional methods such as lectures and sermons alone are no longer sufficient to attract the attention of younger personnel. KAGAT must utilise platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to deliver da'wah messages in concise, engaging, and impactful formats. Content such as one-minute reminders, animations, inspirational stories of faithful soldiers, and visual da'wah can effectively transform mindsets.

Beyond that, KAGAT officers also need training in using modern communication technologies and an understanding of youth psychology. This is essential to ensure that da'wah approaches remain fresh and capable of responding to contemporary issues with a clear and wise Islamic perspective.

Manpower Shortages and the Need for Advanced Training

KAGAT is also grappling with a shortage of skilled personnel to carry out its religious education and da'wah responsibilities across all branches of the Malaysian Armed Forces. According to Ghazali et al. (2022), the lack of adequately trained religious officers is one of the primary obstacles to KAGAT's mission effectiveness. High workloads and dual-role appointments often compromise the focus on spiritual development.

Furthermore, KAGAT officers require advanced training in contemporary issues such as the jurisprudence of modern warfare, crisis-based funeral management, interfaith interactions, and ideological challenges like

secularism and liberalism. Without exposure to current knowledge, officers may lag in offering accurate guidance to military personnel in complex situations.

Therefore, it is crucial to establish strategic collaborations between KAGAT, Islamic higher education institutions, and national fatwa bodies to develop a continuous training system. Specialisations in military psychology, digital da'wah communication, and military jurisprudence can further enhance the professionalism of KAGAT religious officers.

The Need for Contextual Modules for Muslim Reverts and Inclusive Preaching

A study by Yahya et al. (2025) highlighted that religious understanding among Muslim reverts (muallaf) in the Armed Forces remains low and affects their daily religious practices. This indicates an urgent need to develop contextual learning modules that are easy to understand and tailored to the cultural challenges and lifestyle of military environments.

Practical da'wah modules for Muslim reverts must consider their diverse backgrounds and the adjustment challenges they face within the strict and demanding military setting. These modules should include basic guidance on faith (aqidah), religious practices (fiqh ibadah), etiquette (adab), as well as practical issues such as modesty in uniform, prayer during movement, and fasting during field training.

Additionally, a motivational and emotionally supportive approach is crucial to ensure that Muslim reverts feel accepted, valued, and guided with compassion. KAGAT should implement a mentor-mentee system between Muslim reverts and senior Muslim personnel to foster a supportive community for their spiritual and moral development within an Islamic framework.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Enhancing the calibre of spiritual programs offered by KAGAT requires improving the training of instructors and imams through engaging and modern modules. Ahmad et al. (2021) state that the proficiency of the Program Tahsin al-Quran's (PTA) trainers is crucial to its success. Therefore, adding field-based simulations, interactive components, and psycho-spiritual techniques to the training program can better prepare teachers to lead sessions that have an impact. These enhancements would bolster their standing as revered spiritual leaders in the military.

Another crucial suggestion is to create modules tailored explicitly for Muslim converts and the younger generation serving in the Malaysian Armed Forces. According to Yahya et al. (2025), Muslim converts' inability to fully practice Islam is frequently hampered by a lack of fundamental religious knowledge. Therefore, creating programs tailored to their sociocultural context is crucial, utilising simplified language, motivational content, and interactive learning. These modules must also cover contemporary worldviews and generational differences to encourage comprehensive spiritual development.

In today's technological environment, maximising social media and digital platforms as instruments for education and dakwah is more crucial than ever. Younger military personnel can no longer be engaged with traditional lectures and static methods. Since many rely on social media as their primary information source, KAGAT should strategically use digital platforms to disseminate moral instruction, Islamic leadership content, and religious messages. In line with the demand for more innovative outreach strategies by Ghazali et al. (2022), this could involve livestreams, brief videos, infographics, and online forums that appeal to contemporary audiences.

Last but not least, maintaining impact requires reevaluating the efficacy of current initiatives and incorporating Islamic leadership principles. Even though initiatives like CBQ, PTA, and PIFA have demonstrated advantages, their long-term efficacy must be assessed in terms of participant comprehension, behavioural modification, and real-world implementation in military settings. Additionally, all KAGAT initiatives must incorporate values like wisdom (hikmah), consistency (istiqamah), sincerity (ikhlas), and trustworthiness (amanah). These values directly impact military morale and the efficacy of religious leadership, as Azmi and Zaighu (2021) showed in their study on spiritual leadership practices.

Several strategic initiatives are imperative to reinforce the institutional framework of KAGAT further. Firstly, the existing training curriculum should undergo periodic revisions to incorporate contemporary modules encompassing digital communication, interfaith military diplomacy, and counter-ideological narratives, thereby equipping officers with the competencies required to address multifaceted modern challenges. Secondly, recruitment parameters should be refined to prioritise candidates with digital dakwah proficiencies, particularly those adept at leveraging social media platforms and resonating with the values and culture of the younger generation. Thirdly, strategic collaborations should be cultivated with Islamic institutions of higher learning and professional digital content developers to co-create dynamic, contextually relevant dakwah materials. Finally, a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework is essential, employing systematic feedback collection, tracer studies, and outcome-based assessments to critically measure the long-term effectiveness of programs like CBQ, PTA, and PIFA within operational military environments.

CONCLUSION

The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) took a calculated step to institutionalise spiritual and religious guidance as a vital component of military power in 1985 with the creation of the Armed Forces Religious Corps (KAGAT). This study shows that the fundamental justification for KAGAT extends beyond religious education. It includes the general goal of fostering a sense of moral fortitude, leadership principles, and psychological toughness in military personnel. Its historical development shows a well-meaning reaction to the increasing recognition that moral clarity, spiritual identity, and inner discipline must coexist with physical preparedness.

In order to improve the spiritual capacity of MAF personnel, KAGAT has been instrumental in the creation and implementation of programs like the Pendidikan Islam Fardhu Ain (PIFA), CBQ Module 2, and the Tahsin al-Quran Program (PTA) over the years. KAGAT remains a pillar of moral strength in peacetime and conflict operations through counselling support, dakwah engagement, and leadership based on prophetic values. However, some obstacles call for structural, methodological, and strategic adjustments due to the rise of new social norms, technological advancements, and changing ideological environments. More creative, inclusive, and forward-thinking methods are required due to the lack of skilled workers, the rise in religious diversity, and the expanding power of digital media.

In conclusion, KAGAT must increase its digital reach, integrate Islamic leadership principles into all facets of its programming, and regularly assess its training models to stay effective and current. Integrating digital dakwah tools, improving instructor development, and creating modules specifically designed for young people and Muslim converts is essential. By adopting these changes, KAGAT will be able to continue serving as the MAF's spiritual core while also motivating a new generation of military members who will be rooted in moral excellence, discipline, and faith.

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