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The Arab Middle East and Religious Authority in Indonesia¹

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Abstract

This publication presents a broad overview of the religious relations between the Arab Middle East and Indonesia over roughly the last five hundred years. It shows that the Middle East has always held and continues to hold an extremely important place in Islamic life in Indonesia, but that, especially since independence, Middle Eastern Islam is being engaged with more critically, and that Salafism and other intolerant and radical forms of Islam from the Middle East are being combatted on an ideological level by propagating the specific Indonesian understanding of Islam, called Islam Nusantara.

Keywords: religious authority; Middle East; Mecca; Indonesia; Islam Nusantara; Arabization

Introduction

The concept of 'Arabization' is increasingly discussed in discourses on Islam in Indonesia. This idea suggests that intolerance and Islamic radicalism are being exported from the Arab Middle East to Indonesia and that consequently the specific tolerant and peaceful character of Islam in Indonesia is being diminished. In this inaugural lecture, I examine the influence of the Arab Middle East on Islam in Indonesia and investigate how religious relations between the Middle East and Indonesia have developed over the centuries. I will end with some comments on the idea of 'Islam Nusantara'.

The Significance of Mecca in Indonesia

First of all, it must be stated that Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula and from there was spread all over the world - Asia, Africa, and Europe. Aside from all kinds of questions about the start of the Islamization process in Southeast Asia

¹ This is the English translation of my inaugural lecture which I gave in Dutch on 20 September 2019 on the occasion of the acceptance of the chair of Islam in Southeast Asia at Leiden University. The acknowledgements in the original lecture have been left out.

(from the end of the 13th century onwards), Islam thus originates from the Middle East, and in various Indonesian Islamic literatures, persons and events from the early Islamic history – which thus took place in the Middle East – play a role.

Furthermore, the ritual obligation of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) is an important aspiration for most Indonesian Muslims. Every year, large numbers of pilgrims from Indonesia go to the Holy City, which involves a huge logistical operation. As is widely known, Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country in the world with more than 225 million Muslims (out of a total population of more than 270 million inhabitants) and more than 220,000 pilgrims came from Indonesia during the last *hajj*.² Moreover, Muslims from all over the world face Mecca during the five daily ritual prayers. For these reasons, Mecca is a spiritual focal point in the lives of all Muslims – whether from Indonesia or other parts of the world.

In addition to this, Mecca has long functioned as the pre-eminent centre for the study of Islam. Many Indonesian pilgrims have stayed behind in Mecca after performing the *hajj* to deepen their knowledge of Islam. We have seen examples of this since the 17th century³ and over time Mecca developed into the main centre for the study of Islam for Indonesian students.

Early Indonesian Islamic Literature

This is not to say that from an early period there were no Islamic intellectual activities in Indonesia itself. Among the oldest surviving examples of this are poems by Hamza Fansuri, who was born in West Sumatra and died in 1527. Hamza wrote mystical Islamic poems in Malay, inspired by the work of the 13th-century Andalusian mystic Ibn ‘Arabi.⁴ Next to a rich Malay production of religious treatises and Islamic literary works, there is also a multifaceted literary tradition in

² Sekretariat Kabinet, “Indonesia Gets Hajj Quota of 221.000 This Year,” Setkab, Accessed August 20, 2019, <https://setkab.go.id/en/indonesia-gets-hajj-quota-of-221000-this-year>.

³ Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern Ulama in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Allen and Unwin, 2004), 43.

⁴ G.W.J. Drewes and L.F. Brakel, *The Poems of Hamza Fansuri*, Dordrecht: Foris, 1986 (*Bibliotheca Indonesica* 26).

other languages of the archipelago, such as Javanese, Acehnese, and Macassarese. These indigenous literary traditions often provide a fascinating picture of how Islamic views and ideas were understood, accepted or rejected in local cultures, but at the same time, show that the authors of these indigenous literatures also had a certain—major or minor—involvement in the cosmopolitan practice of the Islamic sciences in Mecca, which they had acquired either through study in the Middle East or through Islamic texts in Arabic or other languages, circulating in the archipelago.⁵

This meeting between Islam and local cultures in the archipelago is a fascinating topic, but what I am concerned with in this lecture is the connection of local authors with Islamic scholarship in the Middle East. This is where the ideas ultimately came from and here was the main centre for religious authority: when one wanted to know the precise nature of things, one turned to Mecca.

An interesting early example of this orientation towards Mecca is an incident from around 1630. During that period the Sultan of Banten in West Java sent three books to Meccan scholars. These books dealt with certain forms of monistic mysticism, known as Wujudiyah, and which was inspired by the work of the just mentioned Ibn `Arabi. It is clear that these works had caused controversy in Banten and that the sultan expected to end this disagreement by asking and getting an authoritative opinion from Meccan scholars on the matter.⁶

Indonesian Participation in the Study of Islam in Mecca

Around 1850, the advent of steam shipping intensified traffic between Southeast Asia and Mecca and increased numbers of pilgrims and students came from this part of the world to the Holy City. In 1885 the Dutch Islamic scholar Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936) stayed in Mecca under his Islamic name ‘Abd al-Ghaffar, and upon returning to the Netherlands he published an extensive study on

⁵ R. Michael Feener, “Southeast Asian Localisations of Islam and Participation within a Global Umma, c. 1500–1800,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid (Cambridge University Press, 2013), chapter 13, 470–503.

⁶ Drewes and Brakel, *The Poems of Hamza Fansuri*, 11.

Mecca, including an interesting and lively written part about the daily life in the cosmopolitan city of Mecca. Of special significance is the section on the so-called Jawa colony. (The Arabic word *jawa* in this period means Southeast Asia; someone from Southeast Asia is a *jawi*; *jawi* does not mean Javanese; Javanese in Arabic, at this time, is *jawi meriki*). This Jawa colony was the community of people from the Malay-Indonesian archipelago who stayed in Mecca, either as pilgrims, as students, or as teachers. Over time, a completely separate infrastructure was built up, with privately owned houses and buildings for meetings and education.

Numerous Indonesians stayed in Mecca for shorter or longer periods for study, and some even remained active as teachers in Mecca during their entire lives. From this group, returning students brought a constant stream of books, materials and ideas from Mecca to Indonesia and, in this way, Mecca's stature as the centre for Islamic sciences was constantly confirmed and strengthened. Snouck Hurgronje goes so far in his book as to call the Jawa colony "the heart of religious life in the East Indian Archipelago".⁷

Nawawi Banten (1813-1897)

A good example of an Indonesian scholar working in Mecca is Muhammad ibn 'Umar Nawawi al-Bantani al-Jawi, better known as Nawawi Banten. As the name suggests, he was originally from Banten, where he was born in 1813. After an introductory study of Islam with local scholars in Java, he left for Mecca in 1828 to perform the pilgrimage and continue his studies. After three years he returned to his homeland for a short period, but soon left again for Mecca, where he stayed for the rest of his life until his death in 1897.

Within the Jawa colony Nawawi Banten taught in his house to many Jawi students and encouraged them to undertake further studies. Upon their return to Indonesia, many of these students started to teach themselves in the traditional Islamic training boarding schools, known as *pesantrens*. Among his students was

⁷ C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 215-92. Quote on p. 291.

Hasyim Asy'ari (1875–1947), who later became an important religious leader in Indonesia.

Besides teaching, Nawawi was also a prolific author and wrote about the main branches of classical Islamic sciences, such as Ash'arite theology, Shafi'ite jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the Prophetic tradition literature (*hadith*), Arabic grammar, mysticism along the lines of al-Ghazzali, rhetoric, devotional literature and Qur'anic exegesis. In sum, he wrote some 40 books, all in Arabic, all of which appeared in print during his lifetime in Cairo and Mecca. And his works are all present in the splendid collection of Leiden university library.⁸

In accordance with the scholarly practices of his time, all of his books are commentaries on works from the authoritative tradition and therefore often summaries and adaptations of older writings. This kind of scholarship is called *taqlid* and follows the sacred tradition in the field of the Law (Shari'a), the doctrines of the faith and other branches of science as they had developed over the centuries.

Nawawi was thus a product of this tradition which he likewise continued. Through his activities as a teacher and author, Nawawi formed an important link between Mecca and the Malay-Indonesian archipelago for the transmission of the classical Islamic sciences.

Cairo as a Centre for the Study of Islam

Throughout the 19th century, Muslims around the world increasingly came into contact with modern Western civilization with its secularization, technological innovations, and military and economic superiority. For these reasons, Muslims were forced to reflect on the backwardness of the Muslim world compared to the West and this resulted in a reinterpretation of Islam and a renewal of Islamic thinking.

⁸ Alex Soesilo Wijoyo, "Shaykh Nawawi of Banten: Texts, Authority, and the Gloss Tradition." (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York, Columbia University, 1998), 77–88.

Among the vast number of scholars who contributed to this reform were Muhammad ‘Abduh, who died in 1905, and his student Rashid Rida (died 1935), and together they were the key figures in the Cairene reform movement. This movement started around the end of the 19th century and its main characteristic was that it regarded Islam as practiced during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and the first generations after him as the most original and authentic form of Islam, which had not been corrupted by later innovations. This pristine Islam of the “pious ancestors” was considered the most appropriate Islamic response to the challenges of the modern era, and by returning to this pure Islam, Muslims would once again be able to compete with the West.

This pure form of Islam could be determined on the basis of the oldest sources of Islam, namely the Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition literature. The study of these sources was to be carried out in the light of modern knowledge and insights without the burden of the later traditional authorities. This activity of studying the original sources with an independent, fresh perspective is called *ijtihad* and is thus entirely opposed to the *taqlid* which, as we saw earlier, underlines the importance of the tradition. In short, a more modern and more puritan understanding of Islam was propagated, in which especially the traditional interpretation of the Law in the canonical schools of law and traditional customs of folk religion were rejected, and in this way an Islamic response to modern times was formulated.⁹

These ideas were amongst others disseminated through the Egyptian journal *Al-Manar*, which appeared from 1898-1940 under the inspiring leadership of Rashid Rida. This journal was also in circulation in Indonesia and similar journals in the Malay language were also published, such as *Al-Imam* in Singapore and *Al-Munir* in Padang in Western Sumatra.¹⁰ As a result of the awareness of these new ideas next to Mecca and Medina, from the beginning of the 20th century also Cairo, and in

⁹ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*.

particular the famous al-Azhar University, became popular among Indonesians as a centre for the study of Islam.¹¹

The Saudi Conquest of Mecca

Cairo's popularity as a destination for study rose sharply among Indonesians when the Saudis conquered the Arabian Peninsula and Ibn Sa'ud proclaimed himself king of the Hijaz (Western Arabia) in 1925. This made Wahhabism, the ultra-puritan form of Islam favoured by the Saudi royal family, prevalent throughout the Arabian Peninsula, including Mecca and Medina. This interpretation of Islam was rejected by many in Indonesia, due to its prohibition of tomb visits and saint worship, and the associated iconoclasm which destroyed sacred tombs and monuments from the earliest Islamic history.

These political and religious changes in the Arabian Peninsula were a primary reason for the aforementioned Hasyim Asy'ari and others to establish a new Islamic organization in Surabaya in 1926, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which strongly rejected Wahhabism and which had as one of its aims to preserve and protect the Shafi'ite *fiqh* and Ash'arite theology as these had prevailed in Mecca prior to the Saudi takeover.¹² Although the Nahdlatul Ulama thus distanced itself from the Wahhabis on theological grounds, its orientation towards the Middle East, including the use of Arabic, remained strong.

Indonesia: Introduction

When we now direct ourselves to present-day Indonesia, we see that the Nahdlatul Ulama still exists and continues - of course with all kinds of adaptations and modifications - the pre-Wahhabi science tradition in countless *pesantrens* throughout the archipelago. Interestingly, certain textbooks in some *pesantrens* are still the same as more than 100 years ago, such as the work of Nawawi Banten (in

¹¹ Michael Francis Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 127-33.

¹² Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood*, 226-28.

Arabic, by the way). In addition to this, the NU is active in more modern forms of education and in social issues and has a great deal of influence on political and social developments. With an estimated number of followers of at least 40 million people, the NU is one of the largest Islamic organizations in the world.

The intellectual tradition that was inspired by the modernists of Cairo is also continued in Indonesia by other organizations. Foremost among these modernist organizations is the Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912, with an estimated number of nearly 30 million followers. This organization is also active in education and socio-religious activities, and its leaders also play an important social and political role.¹³

Together, the NU and the Muhammadiyah form the mainstream of Indonesian Islam and are seen by researchers and journalists as organizations that, through their tolerant and pluralistic beliefs, have contributed greatly to the formation of civil society in Indonesia, and are to a large extent responsible for the success of the democratization process over the past twenty years.¹⁴

If we now compare the situation of a hundred years ago with that of today, we see a fear of Arabization, as I mentioned in my introduction. The Middle East is no longer seen as the natural place where Islam in its most authoritative and most authentic form is found, but a region where radicalism and intolerance are preached and has reached Indonesia from there.

This nuance in thinking about the Middle East took place in particular after the fall of President Suharto in 1998 when as the result of the liberalization of the

¹³ Martin Van Bruinessen, "Overview of Muslim Organizations, Associations and Movements in Indonesia," in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn"*, ed. Martin Van Bruinessen (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013), 23–24.

¹⁴ Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); M.C. Ricklefs, *History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 341–70; Earlier in 2019 there were even plans to nominate both organizations for the Nobel Peace Prize, see Bambang Muryanto, "UGM to Promote NU, Muhammadiyah for Nobel," *The Jakarta Post*, January 24, 2019. According to this article, this initiative has the full support of Prof. Robert Hefner (Boston University). During my stay in Jakarta in June 2019, it was seriously discussed. See also Nezar Patria, "Face of Indonesian Islam: NU, Muhammadiyah Nominated for Nobel Peace Prize," *The Jakarta Post*, June 21, 2019 and The Jakarta Post, "NU, Muhammadiyah for Nobel, Guardians of Pluralism," *The Jakarta Post*, July 9, 2019.

political system Muslims started to claim political power and, in the most extreme case, even wanted to make Indonesia an Islamic state. These claims were impossible before the fall of Suharto because during his reign, political expressions of Islam were suppressed.

Indonesia before the Fall of Suharto (1998)

This is not to say that before the fall of Suharto, there were no radical Middle Eastern inspired ideas in circulation in Indonesia, such as the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood,¹⁵ and Wahhabism usually referred to as Salafism.¹⁶ This is an interesting and important topic and much can be said about it, but I will confine myself here to the role of the Saudi government in spreading Salafist ideas in the 1980s.

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Saudis wanted to ideologically counter the Iranian assertions to moral leadership in the Islamic world, which were also well received in certain circles in Indonesia. The Saudis responded by generously providing scholarships for study in Saudi Arabia and by making available an abundance of anti-Shi'a propaganda literature and other literature that fought the "threats" to which their own Salafist Islam was exposed: not only Shi'ism but also the Ahmadiyyah, the Bahai, Christian missions, Orientalism and Zionism.¹⁷

Furthermore, from 1981 onwards the Saudi government was active in setting up a centre for the study of Arabic and Islam in Jakarta. This centre was

¹⁵ Ahmad-Norma Permata, "A Study of the Internal Dynamics of the Prosperous Justice Party and Jamaah Tarbiyah," in *Islam, Politics and Change: The Indonesian Experience After the Fall of Suharto*, ed. Kees van Dijk and Nico J.G. Kaptein (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2016), 40–56.

¹⁶ The best books on Salafism in Indonesia are Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2006) and Din Wahid, "Nurturing the Salafi Manhaj: A Study of Salafi Pesantrens in Contemporary Indonesia" (PhD Thesis, Utrecht University, 2014). Both authors were educated in Leiden and Utrecht and obtained their doctoral degrees from Martin van Bruinessen (Utrecht).

¹⁷ Martin Van Bruinessen, "Ghazwul Fikri or Arabization? Indonesian Muslim Responses to Globalization," in *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 73.

named Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies (Ind. *Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab*, abbreviated as LIPIA) and through this institute, which is free of charge for selected Indonesian students, Salafist Islam was and is taught with its associated intolerance towards persons with another opinion and its aversion to democracy.¹⁸

Via LIPIA, but also through all kinds of other initiatives, in Indonesia, next to the more moderate mainstream of Islam, a more radical and intolerant interpretation of Islam became increasingly common and less unusual. As long as the Suharto dictatorship existed, however, there was no place for such ideas in the public space, but at the same time they formed an important undercurrent.

Indonesia after the Fall of Suharto

After the fall of Suharto in 1998 and the advent of democracy with the liberalization of the religious climate, this situation changed, and we have seen that these radical ideas were no longer suppressed by the government and that they started to play an increasingly important role in society.

This new openness after the fall of Suharto thus provided opportunities for radical Muslims to spread their message openly. This is well illustrated by an anecdote about the radical Salafist cleric Abu Bakar Ba'ashir (b. 1938) who is currently serving a prison sentence for setting up a terrorist training camp. Previously convicted of conspiracy against the state during the Suharto regime, he fled to Malaysia in 1985 and returned to Indonesia after the fall of Suharto, when he was no longer in danger as a radical Muslim. As a Salafist he is strongly opposed to democracy - after all, not the people but God is the source of all political power - but after the fall of Suharto he was able to preach in public again and one of his favourite jokes was: "Democracy has been good to me".¹⁹

¹⁸ Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy, and the Quest for Identity in Post-New Order Indonesia*, 47-49; Wahid, "Nurturing the Salafi Manhaj: A Study of Salafi Pesantrens in Contemporary Indonesia," 86-89.

¹⁹ Margaret Scott, "Indonesia: The Saudis Are Coming," *The New York Review of Books*, October 27, 2016.

In this new religious climate, there is thus room for radicalism and intolerance and unfortunately, Indonesia is from time to time shaken by terrorist attacks and other manifestations of radicalism. This hardening of the religious climate has reached several lows, such as in 2017 the controversial conviction for blasphemy of the Christian Chinese candidate for the governorship for Jakarta under pressure from and under the direction of a radical Islamic organization, the Front for the Defence of Islam (Ind. *Front Pembela Islam*).

Islam Nusantara and Its Forerunners: Introduction

To eradicate these Islamically inspired acts of violence, the state is taking direct action through intelligence services, the police and the military, but at the same time there is a growing awareness among the government and NGOs that this is insufficient and that an ideological counterbalance must also be given and an alternative must be offered to potential radicals.

An important initiative in this area was taken in 2015 by the Nahdlatul Ulama by declaring in its national congress that Indonesian Islam has its own national character and is pluralistic, moderate and democratic. The term Islam Nusantara was used as a name for this understanding of Islam. I will go into more detail on this in a moment, but will first mention two previous contributions by individuals who have theorized about the specific character of Islam in Indonesia compared to Middle Eastern Islam.

Islam Nusantara and Its Forerunners: Hasbi Ash Shiddieqy (1904-1975)

The first person I want to mention is Hasbi Ash Shiddieqy (d. 1975). This scholar of Islam was born in 1904 and was a descendant of a well-known family of '*ulama*' in Aceh. He earned his education at modernist institutions in Indonesia, which were based on the ideas of the modernists in Cairo, namely the Irshad and Persis. In 1951 he became a lecturer and later in 1960 dean of the Shari'a Faculty of the Indonesian State Academy of Islamic Studies (Ind. *Institut Agama Islam Negeri*; IAIN) in Yogyakarta, where he began to work on a form of Islamic jurisprudence

(*fiqh*) that transcended the traditional schools of law. He was convinced that many parts of what was considered divine Islamic law in fact reflected specific circumstances in past Arab culture and society and that these, therefore, had no validity for Muslims living under different conditions. As an example of this, he mentioned Arab clothing, Arab cuisine and certain Arab customs concerning personal hygiene. In addition to transcending traditional law schools in this way, Hasbi also took into account the cultural context and the specific circumstances of Indonesian society when establishing Islamic rules and regulations. Hasbi called this form of jurisprudence *Fiqh Indonesia* or Indonesian *fiqh*.

This vision for a national law school is the first self-assured modern agenda for the cultural contextualization of Islam in the newly independent Indonesian nation-state. As such, this marks a turning point in the history of Islam in Indonesia, as this is the first systematic attempt to do justice to the specific character of Indonesian Islam in relation to Islam in the Middle East.²⁰

Islam Nusantara and its forerunners: Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009)

The second person I would like to mention here as an advocate for the specific character of Islam in Indonesia is Abdurrahman Wahid. Born in 1940, Abdurrahman Wahid was one of the most original and high-profile Indonesian scholars of Islam and intellectuals until he died in 2009, achieving his greatest international fame as the fourth President of the Republic of Indonesia from 1999-2001. Wahid came from a well-known '*ulama*' family and played a major role in the NU throughout his working life; from 1984-1999 as chairman, and as such he was one of the country's foremost religious leaders.

In 1983, Wahid introduced the idea of *Pribumisasi Islam* (Indonesian for the indigenization of Islam) and in 1989 he published an essay with the same title. A central idea in this essay is that the way in which Islam manifests itself in Indonesia is an authentic form of Islam, which is not inferior to other forms of Islam, as for

²⁰ R. Michael Feener, *Muslim Legal Thought in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 56-59.

example practised in the Middle East or as propagated by the modernists in Indonesia. He emphasized the universality of Islam, which in his view implied that there is no obligation to follow Arab culture. He considered what he called “Arabization” a threat to other cultures, and as an example of such a threat to Indonesian culture he mentioned the use of the Arabic language and suggested that Arabic words should no longer be used when there is a good Indonesian equivalent available. For example, instead of the Arabic word *ikhwan* (literally brothers), the Indonesian *saudara-saudara* was to be used; instead of *salat* (ritual prayer) the Indonesian *sembahyang*, and so on.

Another important point in his view of *pribumisasi* was the notion of nationalism. Wahid fully subscribed to the national Indonesian state ideology of Pancasila, which offers space in the religious field to followers of non-Islamic religions, such as Christianity and Hinduism, in order to participate in an equal way in Indonesian society alongside the Muslim majority of the population. Wahid regarded the Pancasila as a good compromise between universal Islamic values and Indonesian culture, and throughout his life has worked hard to uphold this state ideology with its inherent religious pluralism.

Finally, Wahid stressed in the notion of *pribumisasi*, that in the development and elaboration of Islamic law, the local custom (*adat or `urf*) should be an important source, in order not to lose sight of the relevance and applicability of the Shari`a in the Indonesian context.²¹

Wahid promoted these ideas at a time when, as I have mentioned earlier, the Saudi government in Indonesia was spreading the Wahhabi state interpretation of Islam with its rejection of pluralism and democracy.

²¹ Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Defining Indonesian Islam: An Examination of the Construction of the National Islamic Identity of Traditionalist and Modernist Muslims,” in *Islam in Indonesia: Contrasting Images and Interpretations*, ed. Jajat Burhanuddin and Kees van Dijk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 27–34; See for the discussed essay Abdurrahman Wahid, “Pribumisasi Islam,” in *Islam Nusantara: Dari Usul Fiqh Hingga Konsep Historis*, ed. Akhmad Sahal and Munawir Aziz (Bandung: Mizan, 2015).

Islam Nusantara

As mentioned, at present the most influential contribution to the formulation of the specific character of Indonesian Islam is the concept of Islam Nusantara. The term Islam Nusantara has been around for some time and has been used in various ways. In a more neutral sense, it has been used as a geographical term: Islam Nusantara is Islam *in* Nusantara, meaning the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago or, more broadly, maritime Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the southern parts of Thailand and the Philippines.

Since the 33rd Congress of the Nahdlatul Ulama, held in Jombang in East Java in 2015, this organisation has appropriated the term and has the term acquired a strong ideological connotation. Islam Nusantara is seen as a form of Islam with its own Indonesian character, characterized by tolerance towards people with different views, pluralism, and peacefulness, and which strongly rejects radical and fanatical expressions of Islam. When, despite this peaceful variety of Islam, expressions of religious radicalism occur, these are not indigenous Indonesian, but come from outside, meaning from the Middle East, and in particular from Saudi Arabia with its variety of ultra-orthodox Wahhabi Salafism.²²

Since Indonesian Islam has been framed in this way, criticisms of Islam Nusantara have also emerged. In the first place, there is, as may be expected, criticism from the Salafist group. They believe that there is only one universal Islam, with their own interpretation as the only correct one. This criticism can also be heard within circles of the Nahdlatul Ulama itself. This faction within NU maintains that the NU belongs to the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama`a* (*aswaja* in Indonesian), “the People of the Path of the Prophet and the Community”, which term is used to denote universal Islamic orthodoxy. According to them, this universal Islam can be applied everywhere and there is no need to Indonesianise it.

²² Mustofa Bisri, “Sambutan: Islam Nusantara, Makhluq Apakah Itu?,” in *Islam Nusantara: Dari Usul Fiqh Hingga Konsep Historis*, ed. Akhmad Sahal and Munawir Aziz (Bandung: Mizan, 2015). See also Martin Van Bruinessen, “Genealogies of Islamic Radicalism in Post-Suharto Indonesia. Southeast Asian Research,” *Southeast Asian Research* 10, no. 2 (2002): 117–54, which points to the indigenous roots of much radicalism after the fall of Suharto.

This opinion brings this faction within the NU close to the Salafist hardliners and there are known cases where both groups have worked together.²³

Despite this criticism, Islam Nusantara is an important ideology as it has also been embraced in government circles as a cultural and ideological alternative to radicalism. Through the words of President Joko Widodo, the government has repeatedly endorsed the idea of Islam Nusantara and various government agencies, in particular the Ministry of Religious Affairs, have incorporated the concept into their policies.²⁴

Conclusion

In summary, we can say that in Indonesia for a long time Mecca was taken for granted as the norm in religious matters and that the Holy City was rightly called the heart of Islamic life in the archipelago in the late 19th century. From the beginning of the 20th century, Cairo has been added as another centre.

However, we see that quite soon after independence, this orientation towards the Middle East has declined and that with increasing self-confidence the uniqueness of Islam in the young nation-state of Indonesia is emphasized and theoretically underpinned and that the religious authority of Middle Eastern authorities and institutions no longer has the monopoly.

After the fall of Suharto in 1998, the imported intolerant and radical forms of Islam from the Middle East emerged for the first time in the public space, as these were no longer suppressed by the regime. And we have seen that the own specific character of Indonesian Islam increasingly became used and is being used as an ideological counterweight, with as its last variety Islam Nusantara.

²³ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Islam Nusantara as A Promosing Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism*, Trends in Southeast Asia 21 (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 16–18. Also from a academic point of view, there are some criticisms to be made about the concept of Islam Nusantara. In some publications it is seen as an adequate historical description of the development of Islam in Indonesia. However, when we delve into this history, we see that—as in other parts of the world—there are also plenty of examples to be found of Islamically inspired acts of violence that disprove the claimed nonviolent nature of Islam Nusantara.

²⁴ Burhani, *Islam Nusantara*, 25; Nasaruddin Umar, *Islam Nusantara: Jalan Panjang Moderasi Beragama Di Indonesia* (Jakarta: PT Elex Media Komputindo, 2019), 109–10.

My overview of nearly 500 years of Middle Eastern influence in Indonesia and the responses to this are, of course, oversimplified and schematic, but they also show that the Middle East has always held and continues to hold an extremely important place in Islamic life in Indonesia. However, we see that Middle Eastern Islam is being engaged with critically and is no longer followed blindly and that Salafism and other intolerant and radical forms of Islam are being rejected by the vast majority of the population.

We have seen an increase in radicalism and intolerance over the last twenty years, but to end this lecture somewhat positively, I would like to say that I think that the attempts to combat radicalism through Islam Nusantara, among others, are promising because the government, sometimes under the name of Islam Washatiyya (moderate Islam), strongly supports it. Of course, I do not expect that radicals will convert to Islam Nusantara in large crowds, but I do expect that Islam Nusantara as an instrument of soft power and as a counter-narrative will limit the emergence of younger radicals.

Good education can also play a role in combating intolerance and radicalism, and I am delighted that Leiden University has played an important role in this for decades by training Indonesian students in Islamic Studies and in various other MA and PhD programs.

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