



“The Indigenization and Universalization of Islamic Law in Indonesia”

EU counter-terrorism expert and Professor of Islamic Studies regarding Nahdlatul Ulama’s recontextualization of Islamic law:

“[I]t is possible to understand this process... as the development of a genuine Indonesian school of thought beginning to operate at a global level and claiming Islam as part of the universal values of humanity”

VIENNA, Austria: In July of 2021, one of Europe’s foremost scholars of jihadism and Islamic law published an in-depth analysis of the indigenization of Islam within Indonesia and its recent emergence upon the world stage as the Humanitarian Islam movement. Humanitarian Islam offers a unique, dynamic and universal alternative to the supremacist, political understanding of Islamic law that animates Islamist ideology and has trapped much of the Muslim world in a [cycle](#) of authoritarianism, underdevelopment and violence for centuries.

The 21-page analysis, titled “Fiqh Reconsidered: Indigenization and Universalization of Islamic Law in Indonesia,” was written by Rüdiger Lohlker, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Vienna’s Oriental Institute and a renowned expert on the links between Islamic [theology](#) and Islamist terrorism.

Professor Lohlker’s seminal article was released by leading Dutch academic publisher Brill in a special issue of *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*. Founded in 1683 by Dutch bookseller Jordaan Luchtmans, Brill has long played a key role in the intellectual life of Leiden, the site of the Netherland’s oldest university and one of Europe’s foremost centers of scientific thought. Hugo Grotius, “the father of international law” (1583 – 1645); Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677); Arabist and Islam expert Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857 – 1936); and Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955) are the among many renowned scholars associated with the University of Leiden.

In his article Professor Lohlker examines a process that has been occurring within the territory of modern-day Indonesia for over five centuries, and has now begun to expand worldwide. This three-fold process consists of: (1) [adapting](#) Islamic law (known as *fiqh*) to reflect the civilizational context of the Indonesian Archipelago; (2) systematically articulating a theological rationale for (re)contextualizing Islamic law in accordance with the ever-changing circumstances of life. The world’s largest Muslim organization, Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama, has begun to export this understanding and practice globally in the form of [Humanitarian Islam](#) and its key theological texts (including the [Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam](#) and the [Nusantara Manifesto](#)); and (3) *fiqh* itself is being [universalized](#), as Humanitarian Islam fosters respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being on the basis of a shared humanity, rather than a shared religious, ideological or ethnic (in short, “tribal”) identity.

In his opening remarks Professor Lohlker states that:

Developments in the Islamic world outside of the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region traditionally receive little scientific attention....

Often ignored because of the preoccupation in Europe with the development in the Arab world, Turkey and Iran, the important, paradigmatic case of Islamic law, to be more precise: *fiqh*, in Indonesia, may help to answer the following questions: to what extent can religious freedom, universal human rights and the rule of law be integrated in the legal conceptions of religious traditions? Can religions derive argumentative resources thereof against (renewed) political appropriation? In order to understand *Islam nusantara*, Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, as the living process of adapting to ever-changing circumstances, and not a mere collection of texts dear to any legal historian, there are some crucial texts that we can consult and that will help to conceptualize this living Indonesian Islam. The most important recent document is called the *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam* – however, there are other documents to be discussed.

Professor Lohlker concludes his detailed analysis by stating:

This may be understood as opening a new stage of developing a new *fiqh*, not only adapting to the circumstances of modernity but reclaiming the competence for a new *ijtihad* [independent legal reasoning used to create Islamic law] from movements emerging in the Middle East since the 19th century. The last result of this ongoing process is a short statement called *Nusantara Statement* promulgated by [Nahdlatul Ulama’s 5-million-member young adults organization] *Ansor* at a mass rally on November 22, 2018, on the occasion of the birthday of the prophet (*mawlid*) and attended by the Indonesian president Joko Widodo.

The statement reads:

“We call upon people of goodwill of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus to prevent the political weaponization of Islam, whether by Muslims or non-Muslims, and to curtail the spread of communal hatred by fostering the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.”

Thus, we witness a seemingly technical debate on the methodology of *fiqh* in Indonesia turning into a religio-political statement with a potentially global impact. We may understand this statement as the final proof of indigenization *cum* globalization *cum* universalization of *fiqh* in Indonesia.

Hence, it is possible to understand this process of indigenization as the development of a genuine Indonesian school of thought beginning to operate at a global level and claiming Islam as part of the universal values of humanity and not excluding other Islamic and non-Islamic parts of the global society.

[Read the full text of “Fiqh Reconsidered: Indigenization and Universalization of Islamic Law in Indonesia.”](#)