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Peaceful Entry, Tolerant Mentality: The Perception of the Citizens of the Muslim World on Indonesian Islam

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Abstract

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population. Yet, it is also the youngest major Islamic civilization, the farthest from the historical centers of the Muslim world. It is often perceived as the least authoritative in matters of Islamic knowledge and practice. The flow of religious information and scholarly authority in the global Islamic ecumene has historically moved from the center—the Arab heartlands, Persia, and Anatolia—toward the periphery, with remarkably little reciprocal knowledge flowing in the opposite direction. This article examines how citizens of four Muslim-majority nations—Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, and Turkey—perceive Indonesian Islam. Drawing on interview data with scholars, educators, analysts, and informed citizens from these four countries, they uncover the perceptions of the citizens of the centers of the Islamic world on Indonesian Islam: the historically peaceful arrival of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago through commerce and Sufism rather than military conquest and the resulting contemporary character of moderation, tolerance, and pluralism. The respondents' answers are substantially accurate, though not detailed. This article is intended to provide a view on the patterns and characters of Islam that developed in the world outside the Middle East, such as Indonesia.

Keywords: Indonesian Islam, muslim world, center-periphery, peaceful Islamization

Abstrak

Indonesia adalah negara dengan populasi Muslim terbesar di dunia, namun juga merupakan Kawasan Islam termuda dan paling jauh dari pusat peradaban dunia Islam. Karena itu, Indonesia kerap dianggap kurang otoritatif dalam hal pengetahuan dan praktik keislaman. Secara historis, arus informasi dan otoritas keagamaan bergerak dari pusat (Timur Tengah, Persia, Anatolia) ke pinggiran, tanpa aliran balik yang berarti. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana warga dari empat negara mayoritas Muslim—Iran, Pakistan, Mesir, dan Turki—memandang Islam di Indonesia. Berdasarkan wawancara dengan cendekiawan, pendidik, analis, dan warga terpelajar dari keempat negara—yang dilakukan peneliti Indonesia dalam bahasa Persia, Urdu, Arab, dan Turki—studi ini mengungkap bagaimana pandangan warga pusat dunia Islam terhadap Islam di Indonesia. Jawaban para responden dinilai cukup akurat meski tidak mendetail bahwa Islam hadir ke Indonesia secaar damai, dan melahirkan karakter Islam Indonesia yang toleran. Artikel ini berkontrubis untuk memberikan pandangan atas corak dan karakter keislaman yang berkembang di dunia luar Timur Tengah seperti Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: Islam Indonesian, muslim dunia, pusat-pinggiran, Islamisasi damai

Introduction

Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, home to approximately 229 million Muslims—nearly one-seventh of the global Islamic population (Center 2015). Yet for much of the modern period, this demographic reality has not translated into commensurate recognition within the broader Islamic world. Scholars and custodians of Islamic civilization have long tended to privilege the Middle East, particularly the Arab heartlands of the Hejaz, as the normative center of Islamic thought and practice. Southeast Asia—and Indonesia in particular—has occupied a peripheral position in this geography of religious authority, despite its extraordinary contribution to the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural diversity of the Islamic tradition (Rawanitas et al. 2025).

This peripherality reflects several interrelated factors. Indonesian Islam is, in a meaningful sense, the youngest among the major Islamic civilizations. While the Arab heartlands received the Prophetic message in the seventh century, and Persia, Anatolia, and the Indian subcontinent were substantially Islamized by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the process of Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago did not begin in earnest until the thirteenth century and was not consolidated until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Prastyo 2022). Indonesia is also the farthest major Muslim society from the geographical center of the Islamic world. Separated from the Arabian Peninsula by thousands of miles of ocean and land, the archipelago has historically stood at the outermost edge of the *Dar al-Islam*—a position that has carried consequences for how Indonesian Islam is perceived in terms of authority, authenticity, and orthodoxy. The combination of geographical distance and relative historical youth has meant that Indonesian Islam is often perceived, within the normative hierarchies of the Muslim world, as the least authoritative of the major Islamic traditions—a perception that persists despite the demographic weight of the Indonesian Muslim community and the richness of its intellectual and spiritual heritage.

The consequences of this positioning are not merely symbolic. In the global ecology of Islamic knowledge production, the flow of information has been overwhelmingly unidirectional: from the center to the periphery. Indonesian Muslims have, for centuries, traveled to the Hejaz, Cairo, and other centers of Islamic learning to acquire religious knowledge and scholarly credentials, and the intellectual and spiritual authority of these centers continues to shape Indonesian Islamic discourse in profound ways (Azra 2004; Rawanitas et al. 2025). Indonesians study at al-Azhar in Cairo, at the Islamic universities of

Medina and Mecca, at Qom in Iran, and at seminaries in Pakistan and Turkey. They consume religious scholarship produced in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, and they orient their theological and jurisprudential debates with reference to the canonical authorities of the classical Islamic tradition. Yet the reverse flow of information is remarkably thin. Very little of what the citizens of the Islamic heartlands—Iran, the Arab world, Turkey, and Pakistan—know about Islam concerns Indonesia. The intellectual traffic, like the older patterns of trade and pilgrimage, has been largely one-way (Ahmad 2024).

This asymmetry of knowledge raises important questions. What do the citizens of these older and more centrally positioned Muslim societies actually know or believe about Indonesian Islam? What images, narratives, and evaluative judgments do they hold regarding the Islamic experience of the world's largest Muslim-majority nation? These questions are not merely curiosities; they bear on broader issues of Islamic self-understanding, inter-civilizational perception, and the normative geography of authority within the global Muslim community. If Indonesian Islam is indeed as peripheral in the consciousness of the Islamic heartlands as the existing patterns of knowledge production suggest, then any perceptions that do exist take on heightened significance as indicators of how the broader Muslim world positions Indonesia within its conceptual map of the Dar al-Islam.

The study of Islam in Southeast Asia has a distinguished scholarly genealogy, yet it has been shaped—and in important respects constrained—by a persistent center-periphery dynamic that mirrors the broader geography of authority within the global Islamic world. The overwhelming majority of scholarly and intellectual inquiry has focused on understanding how the periphery receives, adapts, and responds to influences emanating from the center. The earliest modern scholarship on Indonesian Islam was produced largely within the colonial knowledge apparatus, with Dutch Orientalists such as Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje documenting the religious practices and institutional structures of the Muslim communities of the Netherlands East Indies (Hurgronje 1931). William Roff's study of Malay nationalism traced the intellectual genealogy of reformist ideas from Cairo and Mecca to the Malay world (Roff 1967); Michael Laffan's work on the 'makings of Indonesian Islam' examined how Orientalist categories and Middle Eastern intellectual currents shaped the very self-understanding of Southeast Asian Muslims (Laffan 2011).

The foundational works on the Islamization of Southeast Asia—by Drewes, Johns, Riddell, and others—are essentially accounts of how Islam traveled from the Middle East and South Asia to the archipelago, through what vectors, and with what transformations along the way (Hanafi et al. 2023). Azyumardi Azra's landmark study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholarly networks between the Haramayn and the Malay-Indonesian world is perhaps the most sophisticated expression of this paradigm: it documents in meticulous detail how Indonesian 'ulama' traveled to Mecca and Medina to study, absorbed the reformist currents circulating there, and carried these intellectual influences back to the archipelago, generating networks of transmission that shaped the character of Indonesian Islam for centuries (Humaidi et al. 2024). Azra's achievement is immense, yet the analytical frame remains one of reception, the center generates knowledge and authority; the periphery receives and adapts it. Directionality is taken for granted as a structural feature of the Islamic knowledge economy rather than being subjected to critical interrogation (Mukhibat et al. 2024).

A second major strand of the literature has focused on the internal dynamics of Indonesian Islam itself. This strand, represented by the work of Hefner, Nakamura, Bush, van Bruinessen, and others, has produced an extraordinarily rich body of scholarship documenting the distinctive character of Indonesian Islamic life, from the mass organizations of NU and Muhammadiyah to the pesantren educational system to the complex negotiations between Islam and the Indonesian state (Fealy and Funston 2023). A related body of work has examined the challenges to Indonesian Islamic moderation posed by conservative and radical movements, documenting the influence of transnational Salafi and jihadist networks on segments of the Indonesian Muslim community. This literature, while invaluable, is primarily addressed to an audience seeking to understand Indonesia from within or from the perspective of external—typically Western—observers. It does not ask what the Muslim world itself makes of Indonesian Islam (Tsauro and Taufiq 2023).

A third strand of scholarship has examined the concept of Islam Nusantara and its promotion as a model of moderate, culturally embedded Islamic practice with potential relevance for other Muslim societies. This body of work—much of it produced by Indonesian scholars associated with NU—has articulated a programmatic vision of Indonesian Islam that is simultaneously rooted in local cultural traditions and responsive to the universal principles of the Islamic faith (Pribadi 2022). The international promotion of Islam Nusantara, particularly

since NU's 33rd National Congress in 2015, has generated considerable interest and some controversy, both within Indonesia and beyond. Yet even this literature, for all its global ambition, remains largely a projection outward from Indonesia: it articulates what Indonesian Islam offers to the world without systematically investigating whether or how the world has received these offerings (Arifianto 2024a).

What is conspicuously absent from this otherwise rich body of scholarship is a systematic investigation of how Indonesian Islam is perceived by citizens of other Muslim-majority nations—particularly those nations that occupy the historical and geographical center of the Islamic world. A small number of studies have touched on this question tangentially. Giora Eliraz's work on the Middle Eastern dimension of Indonesian Islam examines historical Arab perceptions of Indonesian religious life, but from a documentary-historical rather than an empirical-perceptual perspective (Eliraz 2004). Chiara Formichi has explored how Indonesian political Islam has been narrated and renarrated in both domestic and international contexts (Morgan 2021). Yet no existing study has undertaken a direct, empirical investigation of what ordinary citizens and scholars in the heartland societies of the Islamic world—Iran, Egypt, Pakistan, and Turkey—actually know, believe, and think about Indonesian Islam. The question itself has barely been posed, let alone systematically addressed.

This lacuna is not merely a gap in the literature; it reflects and reproduces the very center-periphery asymmetry that structures the global Islamic knowledge economy. So long as scholarly inquiry moves exclusively from center to periphery—asking how Indonesians receive Middle Eastern influences, or how Indonesian Islam compares with heartland norms—the periphery remains an object of study rather than a subject whose reception by the center is itself worthy of investigation. The present study seeks to reverse this direction of inquiry. By asking what Iranians, Pakistanis, Egyptians, and Turks perceive of Indonesian Islam, it treats the center's perceptions as the object of analysis, thereby disrupting the customary flow of Islamic knowledge production and opening a new line of inquiry within the comparative study of global Islam (Rodriguez Espinosa et al. 2022).

In doing so, this study contributes to a broader epistemological project: the decentering of the Arab-Middle Eastern heartlands as the exclusive locus of legitimate Islamic self-understanding, and the recognition that the periphery—in this case, Southeast Asia—is not merely a passive recipient of central norms but a distinctive civilization whose image in the minds of heartland Muslims is

itself a significant datum for understanding the contemporary Islamic world. The perceptions documented in the sections that follow are, in this sense, doubly revealing: they tell us something about Indonesian Islam and about the perceptual and normative horizons of the Muslim heartlands themselves.

This article addresses these questions through an analysis of interview data gathered from scholars, researchers, educators, and informed citizens in Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, and Turkey. The research was designed specifically to reverse the customary direction of inquiry—to investigate not what Indonesians think about the Islamic heartlands, but what the citizens of those heartlands think about Indonesian Islam. The analysis reveals two dominant and interlocking perceptual pillars that consistently structure how informants from these four nations understand Indonesian Islam: first, a historical narrative centered on the peaceful and non-coercive entry of Islam into the Indonesian archipelago; and second, a characterization of contemporary Indonesian Muslim society as distinctively moderate, tolerant, and pluralistic. Together, these perceptions position Indonesia as what might be called a 'third way' within global Islam—a model of Muslim piety and communal life that diverges from both the theocratic state model associated with Iran and the radical fragmentation associated with parts of Pakistan and Egypt.

Understanding how Indonesian Islam is perceived from within the wider Muslim world requires moving beyond intra-Indonesian debates toward a comparative, dialogical frame. The four countries selected for this study—Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Pakistan—represent distinct centers of Islamic intellectual authority, each anchoring a particular historical trajectory: Ottoman-Republican modernism, Arab Sunni scholarship at al-Azhar, Twelver Shi'i revolutionary thought, and South Asian reformism. Drawing on Eisenstadt's notion of multiple modernities and Hefner's argument that Indonesia constitutes a distinct "civil Islamic" trajectory, the study treats these four locations as evaluative vantage points from which the Southeast Asian Muslim experience is read, judged, and at times contested. The selection deliberately bypasses Western or non-Muslim observers, foregrounding instead a horizontal conversation among Muslim-majority societies. This positioning resonates with Wolters's logic of localization: Indonesian Islam becomes legible only when situated within the wider field of Islamic interpretive traditions that travel, settle, and transform across regional boundaries. It should be noted at the outset that the perceptions recorded in this study are not necessarily accurate representations of historical or sociological reality.

Indonesian Islam is, in fact, a richly diverse and internally contested field, and scholarly accounts have documented the presence of conservative, puritanical, and even radical currents alongside the dominant moderate mainstream (Bruinessen 2002). The primary purpose of this article is not to evaluate the accuracy of informants' perceptions but rather to analyze their content, internal structure, and broader significance as a form of cross-cultural Islamic discourse—to understand what function these perceptions perform and what they reveal about the place of Indonesia within the normative geography of global Islam.

The data analyzed in this article derive from a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with citizens of the four Muslim-majority countries named above. Fieldwork was carried out on site in each country by Indonesian researchers, with interviews conducted in the respondent′s own language—Turkish, Arabic, Persian, or Urdu—in order to minimize translational distortion and encourage candid expression. Informants were drawn from universities and academic networks through purposive and snowball sampling, yielding twenty-six respondents in total: five in Turkey (three students, two professors), ten in Egypt (seven students, three professors), five in Iran (two students, three professors), and six in Pakistan (four students, two professors). The pool includes academic specialists in Southeast Asian studies, Islamic educators, policy analysts, and educated lay citizens with a general awareness of the wider Muslim world. Following Geertz′s interpretivist tradition of thick description, the design prioritizes depth of perception over statistical representativeness, aiming to map the narratives and evaluative judgments through which engaged citizens read the Indonesian Islamic experience.

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The Historical Narrative: A Peaceful Entry

Perhaps the most foundational and consistently expressed perception among informants across all four countries is the belief that Islam arrived in the Indonesian archipelago through peaceful means—through trade, cultural contact, and Sufi spiritual influence—rather than through military conquest or coercive political power. This historical narrative constitutes what might be called the foundational 'origin myth' of Indonesian Islam in the perceptual repertoire of informants, functioning as the bedrock explanation for what they understand as the distinctively moderate and tolerant character of Indonesian Muslim society today.

This narrative of peaceful entry has deep roots in both popular and scholarly accounts of Islamization in Southeast Asia. Historians of the region have long debated the precise mechanisms, timing, and regional variations in the process of Islamization, but a broad scholarly consensus has emerged that, at least in comparison with the forcible conversions associated with the early Islamic conquests in the Middle East and Central Asia, the process of Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago was relatively gradual and non-coercive. Scholars such as Anthony Reid have emphasized the role of commerce in creating the conditions for religious conversion, arguing that Muslim merchants who dominated the lucrative spice and textile trades provided the primary social network through which Islamic practice and belief spread through the archipelago from approximately the thirteenth century onward (Rawanitas et al. 2025).

The influence of Sufi orders, or *tariqat*, has been equally emphasized by A.H. Johns, who argued that the mystical, accommodating, and spiritually flexible character of Sufi Islam was particularly well-suited to the religious and cultural landscape of a region already deeply shaped by Hindu-Buddhist thought and indigenous animist traditions (Zuhri et al. 2023). Among the informants in this study, this historical narrative is reproduced with remarkable consistency and becomes a key explanatory framework for understanding the present character of Indonesian Islam. Mahmoodreza Esfandiar, an Iranian specialist in Southeast Asian Islamic history and author of an academic study of Islam in Southeast Asia published in Persian by SAMT—the Iranian state university press—articulates the core argument with clarity:

> *One of the important issues regarding the entry of Islam into Indonesia and Southeast Asia lies in its relatively peaceful character, without war, even if there were frictions and conflicts in certain cases—but religion was not the driving factor. This differs from the spread of Islam in other regions, particularly the Middle East, which occurred through war (Esfandiar, 23 July, 2024).*

This comparative dimension—the explicit contrast between the peaceful Islamization of Southeast Asia and the military conquests of the early Islamic centuries in the heartlands—appears repeatedly across informants' accounts and is central to the perceptual logic at work. Indonesian Islam is understood as distinctively peaceful precisely because it is understood as the product of a history without conquest. The historical origin functions as a determinant of religious character: a faith spread through commerce and mysticism naturally produces a community defined by openness, accommodation, and tolerance.

Mohammad Fahmi, an Egyptian postgraduate student at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, identifies a further mechanism underlying the peaceful entry of Islam into the archipelago: intermarriage between Middle Eastern traders and preachers and the local population—most consequentially with members of the royal courts—which transformed kinship into a vehicle of mass Islamization.

> *Middle Eastern traders and preachers who arrived in the archipelago were welcomed hospitably by local communities. Many married local women, and it was through these unions that Islam gradually disseminated. When such marriages extended into the aristocracy, the new faith penetrated the royal courts as well, eventually giving rise to the formation of Islamic kingdoms (Fahmi, 28 August, 2024.)*

This dual emphasis on commerce and Sufism is also evident among informants from Pakistan. Amir Hasan identifies the same two foundational factors: 'the arrival of Muslim merchants who came to Indonesia to trade with the community there' and 'the coming of Sufi figures from India who also intended to spread Islam there (Hasan 2024, 2 August).' The specific identification of Indian Sufi figures—rather than Arab missionaries or military commanders—is significant: it positions Indonesian Islam within a South and Southeast Asian Sufi tradition characterized by syncretism, cultural adaptation, and mystical flexibility rather than strict legal orthodoxy. It is notable that Pakistani informants' accounts of the Islamization of Indonesia implicitly contrast with their awareness of more conflict-laden processes of Islamization elsewhere. References to the role of Muslim military figures in bringing Islam to Afghanistan or other regions are made not to describe Indonesian history but to

illustrate what the Indonesian case is not—to define Indonesian Islam by contrast and negation. The peaceful entry narrative thus functions as a double act: it explains Indonesian Islam positively, in terms of its origins, while simultaneously distancing it from the legacies of conquest and coercion that informants associate with other chapters of Islamic history.

This chain of historical reasoning—whatever its relationship to the complex realities of Indonesian religious history—structures informants' perceptions in important and consistent ways. The logic is essentially one of historical causation: because Islam arrived peacefully, Indonesian Muslims are peaceful. Because Sufism was the primary vector of Islamization, Indonesian Islam retains a mystical, accommodating, and culturally adaptive quality. Because commerce rather than conquest established the initial Muslim communities, Indonesian Muslims are oriented toward exchange, openness, and practical coexistence rather than doctrinal exclusivism. This origin-determines-character logic, once established, provides the scaffolding for informants' accounts of contemporary Indonesian Muslim society.

The Contemporary Reality: Moderation And Tolerance

If the historical narrative of peaceful entry constitutes the explanatory foundation, the dominant characterization of contemporary Indonesian Muslim society is one of moderation, tolerance, and harmonious coexistence across religious and cultural boundaries. This characterization is expressed with remarkable consistency across informants from all four countries, though with varying emphases and points of comparison depending on each informant's particular national and cultural context. The concept of moderation—*wasatiyyah* in classical Arabic Islamic discourse or moderation in contemporary Indonesian Islamic policy language—is central to how informants describe Indonesian Muslims. Indonesian Muslims are consistently characterized as peaceful, far from extremism and terrorism in their religious practice—a description that implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, contrasts with the situation informants observe or experience in their own countries. The Pakistani educator Abdur Rasid al-Bukhari is particularly direct on this point:

> *They are very peaceful and far from extremism and terrorism in their religion. This is thanks to the role of two organizations—Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah—which invite Muslim society in Indonesia to practice Islam peacefully, far from extremism and terrorism. I hope*

> *this approach can be implemented in Muslim society in Pakistan as well (al-Bukhari 2024, 29 August).*

Al-Bukhari's concluding wish—that NU and Muhammadiyah's approach be replicated in Pakistan—is a particularly revealing indicator of the aspirational and normative dimensions of the Indonesian model, as perceived in a country where religious extremism and sectarian violence have posed profound challenges to social order and democratic stability. Indonesia functions, in this framing, not merely as an object of academic interest but as a normative exemplar: a living demonstration that Islam and peaceful modernity are compatible.

The Turkish scholar Tufan Kutay Boran, who earned his doctoral degree from Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, offers a nuanced comparative analysis drawn from firsthand experience of Indonesian society. He identifies a notably relaxed attitude toward religion among Indonesian Muslims, one he finds analogous to the disposition of many Turks, and attributes this quality to a broader Indonesian cultural temperament oriented toward harmony rather than confrontation.

> *One of my closest friends here is non-Muslim, of Chinese-Indonesian descent, and I regard him almost as a sibling. Our bond has never been organized around religious difference. Having lived in Jogja, I have come to recognize something in the Javanese mentality—a quiet insistence on hospitality and politeness, a habit of keeping strong emotions private—that cultivates tolerance and discourages judging others by their faith or background. I find this trait genuinely beautiful, especially when I compare it with the sometimes-stricter attitudes in my own Turkish environment (Boran, 2024).*

This Indonesian cultural dimension is significant in several respects. Clifford Geertz's classic ethnographic work documented the complex layering of Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, and indigenous animist elements that constitute much of the archipelago's spiritual world, in which apparently contradictory religious influences coexist and interpenetrate rather than compete for exclusive dominance (Prastyo, 2022; Jayadi and Ridho, 2024). Subsequent scholars, including Mark Woodward, have refined and critiqued Geertz's formulations while affirming the core insight: Indonesian and Southeast Asian religious cultures are characterized by a profound orientation toward synthesis and harmony, a disposition to integrate rather than to exclude. This orientation finds regionally specific expression in idioms such as Javanese *rukun*, *Minangkabau mufakat*, Balinese menyama braya, and Bugis sipakatau. Its reach extends

beyond domestic life, musyawarah-mufakat has become the operative grammar of ASEAN diplomacy, anchoring the bloc's non-interventionist and non-majoritarian approach to regional politics (Fuadi, Faishol, Rifa'i, Triana, & Ibrahim, 2024).

Kutay Boran further observes that this tolerance extends beyond intra-Muslim relations to encompass adherents of all religions practiced in the country. He notes that this tolerance is evident in how readily Indonesians embrace individuals of different faiths, citing his own Indonesian friendship circles, which include many Chinese Indonesian Christians—a fact he presents as illustrative of the genuine, lived quality of religious harmony in Indonesia (Boran 2024, 2 September). This observation—that religious tolerance in Indonesia is not merely rhetorical but is enacted in the fabric of everyday social relations, in friendships, neighborhoods, and shared civic life—is a recurring theme in informants' accounts and is understood as qualitatively different from the formal pluralism of many Western liberal democracies.

The cultural underpinnings of Indonesian tolerance are further reinforced by informants' observations that Indonesian Muslims have developed a distinctive capacity to integrate local cultural traditions with Islamic practice, rather than insisting on displacing local culture by a universalized Islamic norm. This integrative approach—which scholars have described as simultaneously the Islamization of culture and the culturalization of Islam—is understood by informants as a key factor in Indonesian society's social stability and communal harmony (Arifianto 2024b). Rather than experiencing the tensions between Islamic universalism and local particularity that have generated conflict in many other Muslim-majority contexts, Indonesian Islam, in informants' perception, has achieved a productive synthesis in which local cultural forms are both preserved and sanctified through their integration with Islamic practice. This synthesis, in informants' understanding, is not a dilution of Islam but its enrichment: an expression of Islam's capacity for what scholars of Islamic civilization have called its inculturative genius.

Institutional Anchors: Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah

A striking feature of informants' accounts is the prominent and consistent role attributed to organized Islamic civil society—specifically the two great mass organizations of Indonesian Islam, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah—in generating, sustaining, and reproducing the moderate and tolerant character of Indonesian Muslim society. Informants understand these

organizations as the primary institutional vehicles through which the values of moderation and tolerance are transmitted across generations and maintained as the normative orientation of Indonesian Muslim life.

Nahdlatul Ulama, founded in 1926 by Hasyim Asy'ari and other traditionalist ulama of East Java, has historically been associated with the defense of traditional Sunni Islamic practice and the accommodation of local cultural traditions within an Islamic framework. Its theological orientation, rooted in the classical Sunni jurisprudential tradition of the madhab system and deeply shaped by the Sufi currents of the Javanese *pesantren* educational world, has generated a form of Islamic practice that is simultaneously orthodox in its doctrinal commitments and flexible in its cultural expressions. NU's explicit institutional commitment to Islam Nusantara—a concept elaborated by its leading scholars and formally endorsed at its 33rd National Congress in 2015—represents the most fully articulated institutional expression of the historically grounded and culturally embedded form of Indonesian Islam that many informants identify as the defining characteristic of the country's Islamic life (Wahid 2015).

Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta, has historically represented a modernist, reformist current within Indonesian Islam, seeking to purify Islamic practice of what it considered syncretic accretions while simultaneously engaging vigorously with modernity through the establishment of schools, hospitals, universities, and other social service institutions. Although Muhammadiyah's theological orientation differs in important respects from NU's traditionalism—being more influenced by the reformist currents of the Arab Islamic world—it has remained firmly committed to a democratic, pluralist, and non-violent approach to Islamic life in Indonesia. The complementarity and occasional tension between these two organizational giants have generated a dynamic and resilient Islamic civil society that has, particularly since the 1998 democratic transition, played a crucial role in shaping the terms of public religious discourse in Indonesia (Burhani 2021).

The combined membership of NU and Muhammadiyah is estimated at over one hundred million people, making them arguably the largest Islamic civil society organizations in the world (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2020; Jufri 2022). Their institutional presence extends from the national capital to the archipelago's most remote villages through dense networks of schools, mosques, charitable organizations, and community associations. The *pesantren* system associated with NU—a network of several thousand traditional Islamic boarding schools scattered across Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and beyond—has been

identified by scholars as a particularly crucial site for the reproduction of the moderate Islamic values that characterize Indonesian Islam. It is within the *pesantren* that the classical Sunni tradition of ethical and jurisprudential moderation is transmitted, generation after generation, in a form that is simultaneously rooted in the great texts of Islamic civilization and responsive to the living cultural world of Indonesian Muslim society (Faisal et al. 2022).

For informants from other Muslim-majority nations, the existence and vitality of these organizations represent a crucial point of contrast with their own societies. Al-Bukhari's explicit wish that NU and Muhammadiyah's approach might be replicated in Pakistan reflects a widely shared perception that the absence of comparably influential moderate Islamic civil society organizations has contributed to Pakistan's vulnerability to extremist influence (Sebastian et al. 2021). The institutional infrastructure of Indonesian Islamic moderation—the *pesantren* networks, the university systems, the mass organizations—is understood as a crucial, and perhaps insufficiently appreciated, dimension of what makes Indonesia's moderate Islamic character durable and reproducible rather than merely contingent on individual leadership or favorable circumstances (Burhanuddin and Ilmi 2023).

Assessing the Perceptions: Historical Accuracy and Its Limits

As noted in the methodological section, this research was not designed to test the factual accuracy of respondents' perceptions. The aim was to uncover what citizens of older and more centrally positioned Muslim societies believe about Indonesian Islam—a question whose significance lies in the perceptions themselves, regardless of their correspondence with historical and sociological reality. Normally, information within the global Islamic ecumene flows in one direction: from the center to the periphery. Indonesian Muslims are overwhelmingly the recipients of Islamic knowledge produced elsewhere, and it is exceedingly rare for the reverse to occur. The mere fact that respondents in Tehran, Cairo, Lahore, and Istanbul possess any coherent image of Indonesian Islam is itself noteworthy.

Yet it is a remarkable and analytically significant feature of the data that the respondents' perceptions are substantially accurate—accurate in their broad contours, even if they lack the granularity and nuance that a specialist account would demand. The two pillars of perception identified in this study—the peaceful entry of Islam and the tolerant character of Indonesian Muslim society—are not myths or misapprehensions; they correspond, in their essential

outlines, to well-established features of Indonesian Islamic history and contemporary social life. This section examines this correspondence in detail, drawing on the scholarly literature to demonstrate how respondents' impressionistic accounts reflect genuine historical and sociological realities.

Regarding the first pillar—the peaceful arrival of Islam—the historical record substantially supports the respondents' characterization, though with important qualifications. The dominant scholarly consensus holds that Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago was primarily a gradual, commercial, and culturally mediated process, in which conversion to Islam was typically voluntary rather than coerced. The earliest evidence of Muslim communities in the archipelago comes from northern Sumatra, where the tombstone of Sultan Malik al-Salih of Pasai, dated to 1297, attests to the existence of an Islamized polity by the late thirteenth century (Faisal et al. 2022). From these coastal trading entrepots, Islam spread gradually through the maritime networks of the Malay world, carried by merchants, itinerant scholars, and Sufi mystics rather than by armies of conquest.

The role of trade was indeed central. The conversion of port rulers to Islam was often closely linked to the commercial advantages of entering the vast Muslim trading network that stretched from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea (Rawanitas et al. 2025). Conversion brought access to credit networks, trading partnerships, and the cultural prestige associated with membership in the cosmopolitan Islamic world. The commercial motive did not make conversion any less sincere, but it does confirm the respondents' intuition that trade was a primary vector of Islamization. The Sufi dimension is equally well-attested. A.H. Johns's pioneering work established that wandering Sufi mystics, many of them associated with the great tariqat orders such as the Qadiriyya and the Shattariyya, played a crucial role in making Islam intelligible and attractive to populations accustomed to the mystical and ritual dimensions of Hindu-Buddhist religiosity (Aljunied 2024).

The *Wali Sanga*—the legendary Nine Saints of Java—epitomize this tradition in Indonesian popular memory, representing a model of Islamization through cultural engagement, spiritual charisma, and accommodation to local traditions rather than through the imposition of foreign norms by force. The qualifications that a specialist would add to this picture do not fundamentally undermine the respondents' characterization but rather add necessary complexity. Scholars have noted that the process of Islamization was not entirely free of coercion. The fall of the Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit empire in the late

fifteenth century and the rise of the Islamic Sultanate of Demak involved military conflict, and in certain regions—particularly in the eastern Indonesian archipelago—local resistance to Islamization produced episodes of violence (Aljunied 2025). The Acehnese sultans of northern Sumatra waged campaigns of territorial expansion that carried an Islamic dimension, and the political and military power of coastal Muslim sultanates accelerated the Islamization of certain inland Javanese communities. Yet even these qualifications tend to confirm the respondents' broad characterization rather than refute it: the dominant pattern of Islamization in the archipelago was indeed more peaceful and gradual than the comparable processes in the Middle East, Central Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, even if it was not entirely without friction or conflict.

Regarding the second pillar—the tolerant character of Indonesian Muslim society—the respondents' perceptions again align substantially with the scholarly record, though with important caveats once more. The tradition of inter-religious tolerance in Indonesia is genuine, deep-rooted, and institutionally supported. Indonesia's national ideology of Pancasila, with its first principle of *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa* (belief in the one and only God), establishes a framework of religious pluralism that recognizes multiple faiths—Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—as legitimate expressions of religious belief within the national community (Raharjo Jati and Halimatusa'diah 2023). This constitutional framework, forged in the crucible of the independence struggle and the deliberations of the constitutional committee in 1945, represents a deliberate rejection of the theocratic state model in favor of a religiously informed but non-sectarian polity.

At the level of everyday social practice, inter-religious tolerance in Indonesia has been documented by numerous scholars. Jeremy Menchik's work on what he calls the 'pluralist tradition' in Indonesian Islam demonstrates that both NU and Muhammadiyah have, through their educational institutions and communal practices, actively cultivated norms of inter-religious respect and cooperation (Menchik 2019). The practice of mutual assistance during religious festivals—where Muslims help Christian neighbors during Christmas celebrations and Christians reciprocate during Eid al-Fitr—has been widely documented as a lived expression of Indonesian religious harmony. Interfaith marriage, while legally regulated and sometimes socially contentious, occurs with sufficient frequency to indicate a society in which religious boundaries, though real, are not impermeable barriers to social intimacy (Marhumah et al. 2025).

The qualifications here are, however, more substantial than in the case of the peaceful entry narrative. Indonesia's record of inter-religious tolerance is punctuated by episodes of serious religious and communal violence. The anti-Chinese riots of 1998, the sectarian conflicts in Ambon and Poso between 1999 and 2002, the church bombings orchestrated by Jemaah Islamiyah, and the persistent persecution of the Ahmadiyya minority are all part of the Indonesian record and cannot be wished away by narratives of harmony and tolerance (Zuhri et al. 2023). The rise of Islamic vigilante groups such as the Islamic Brotherhood Front (Front Pembela Islam) and the politically charged blasphemy case against the former governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), in 2016–2017 demonstrated that the forces of religious intolerance retain significant mobilizational capacity in Indonesian society (Tsauro and Taufiq 2023). Respondents' perceptions, while capturing a genuine dominant tendency in Indonesian Islamic culture, do not capture these countervailing realities.

At least two possible explanations account for why respondents lack a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Indonesian Islamic realities. First, as van Bruinessen (van Bruinessen 2015), Alatas (Alatas 2021), and Slama (2020) demonstrate, the structure of information exchange within the Muslim world tends to operate asymmetrically—flowing predominantly from the center (the Middle East) to the periphery (Southeast Asia) rather than in reverse. Consequently, while Indonesian Muslims possess substantial knowledge of Middle Eastern Islam, Muslims in Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Pakistan remain comparatively uninformed about Indonesia's Islamic traditions, scholarly debates, and civil society. This structural asymmetry is not accidental but reflects a persistent center-periphery hierarchy in which peripheral actors orient themselves upward toward authoritative sources, while center actors perceive little need to look outward. Second, as several respondents themselves acknowledged, there is a tangible scarcity of accessible information about Indonesian Islam in their native languages—Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Urdu. Addressing this deficit requires more sustained and strategic effort from the Indonesian government and its cultural and religious diplomacy institutions.

What this assessment reveals are that respondents' perceptions are accurate at the level of the dominant pattern but not at the level of exception and complexity. They correctly identify the broad tendency—peaceful Islamization and a culture of inter-religious tolerance—while lacking the detailed knowledge to account for the significant exceptions, tensions, and ongoing contestations that complicate the simple narrative. Their perception function, in other words,

as what we might call “accurate generalizations”: claims that capture the central tendency of a complex phenomenon without acknowledging its variance. For citizens of distant Muslim societies, operating with limited information and relying largely on broad cultural impressions, this level of accuracy is itself noteworthy—and suggests that the general character of Indonesian Islam has indeed registered, however impressionistically, in the consciousness of the broader Muslim world.

Conclusion

This article has examined how citizens of four Muslim-majority nations—Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, and Turkey—perceive Indonesian Islam and has identified two dominant and mutually reinforcing perceptual pillars: the historical narrative of Islam’s peaceful entry into the Indonesian archipelago and the characterization of contemporary Indonesian Muslim society as moderate, tolerant, and pluralistic. These perceptions are remarkably consistent across national contexts, suggesting a broadly shared image of Indonesian Islam among educated publics in the Islamic heartlands.

The significance of these findings operates on multiple levels. At the most immediate level, they fill a gap in the existing literature by documenting, for the first time in a systematic way, what citizens of other Muslim-majority nations actually know and believe about Indonesian Islam. Given the well-documented asymmetry in the flow of Islamic knowledge—in which information moves overwhelmingly from the center to the periphery—any coherent image of Indonesian Islam held by citizens of the heartland societies is analytically valuable. The finding that such images exist and are broadly consistent and substantively accurate suggests that the informational asymmetry, while real, has not entirely prevented the formation of meaningful cross-cultural perceptions within the global Muslim community.

At a deeper level, these perceptions reveal something important about the normative geography of the contemporary Islamic world. By consistently positioning Indonesia as a model of peaceful, tolerant, and culturally grounded Islamic practice, respondents from Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, and Turkey are implicitly articulating a critique of certain features of their own societies—the theocratic rigidities, sectarian conflicts, and political instabilities that have characterized aspects of Islamic life in the heartlands. Indonesia functions, in these accounts, not merely as a distant curiosity but as a normative reference point: a demonstration that Islam can sustain a society characterized by

moderation, pluralism, and democratic governance. The repeated invocation of NU and Muhammadiyah as institutional anchors of this moderation suggests an implicit recognition that civil society—rather than the state—may be the most effective institutional vehicle for sustaining moderate Islamic values over time.

The finding that respondents' perceptions are accurate at the level of broad generalization, even if they lack the detail and nuance that a specialist account would provide, carries its own implications. It suggests that the dominant character of Indonesian Islam—its orientation toward moderation, tolerance, and cultural synthesis—has registered in the broader Muslim world, even among those with limited direct exposure to Indonesian society. This is, in a sense, a vindication of the scholarly argument that Indonesian Islam possesses a distinctive and recognizable character within global Islam—a character that is evident even at a distance and through the fog of limited information. At the same time, the absence of awareness of the significant countervailing tendencies within Indonesian Islam—the conservative and radical currents, the episodes of communal violence, the persistent challenges to religious freedom—suggests that the image of Indonesian Islam held by outsiders is simplified and idealized, lacking the internal complexity and tension that characterize any living religious tradition.

Finally, these findings carry implications for the ongoing project of articulating Indonesian Islam's place within the global Islamic world. The concept of Islam Nusantara, which has received considerable institutional support from NU and has been promoted internationally as a model of culturally rooted Islamic moderation, finds in these perceptions a form of external validation. If even citizens of the Islamic heartlands—operating with limited information and viewing Indonesia from the greatest possible cultural and geographical distance—identify the same core features that Islam Nusantara seeks to articulate and promote, then this suggests that the concept captures something genuinely distinctive and recognizable about the Indonesian Islamic experience. Whether this recognition will translate into deeper engagement, mutual learning, and a genuine rebalancing of the relationship between center and periphery in the global Islamic ecumene remains, for now, an open question and a worthy aspiration.

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