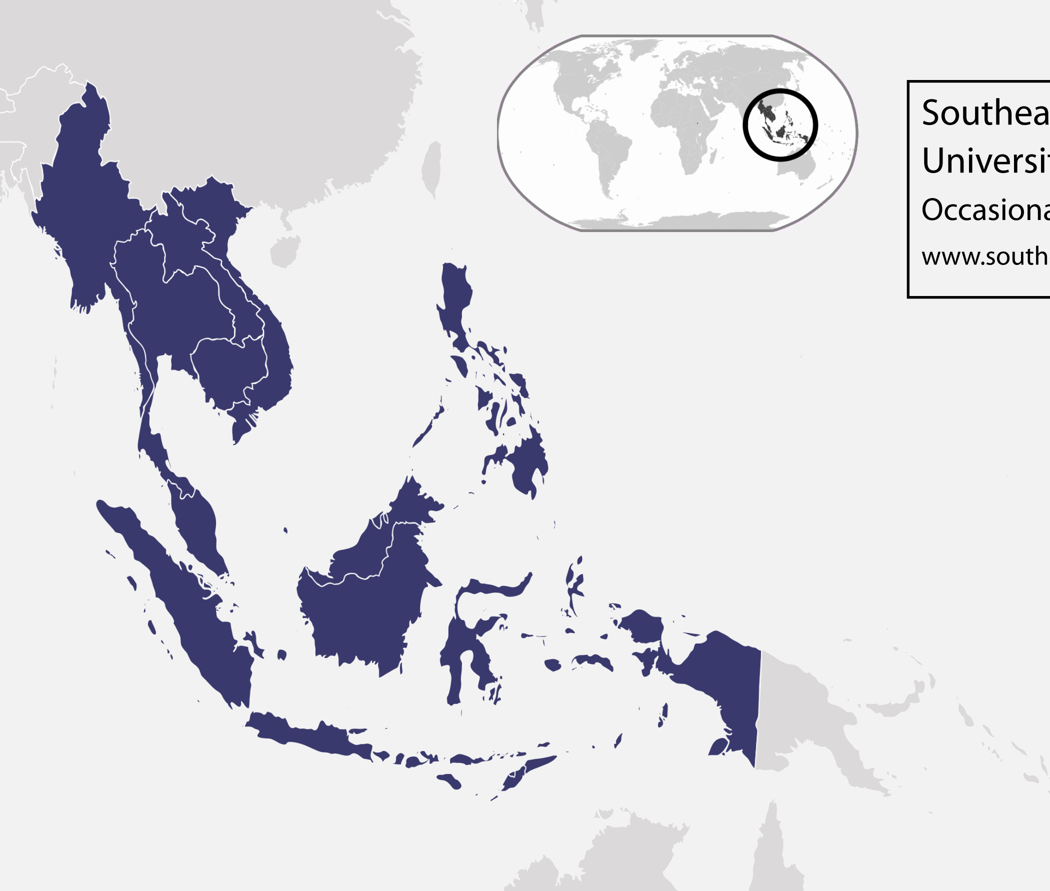

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The Meanings of Moderate Islam in Indonesia: Alignments and Dealignments of Azharites

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Abstract

In our contemporary world, cultural orientation and the dynamics of alignments and dealignments arise from the intersubjective level of transcultural encounters and social imaginaries. Yet this does not automatically lead to fluidity and cosmopolitanism. The current paper focuses on the cultural and religious orientations of Azharites (graduates of al-Azhar University in Egypt). The central question revolves around the identifications Azharites promote and how they are connected with Indonesian students' social lives in Cairo. The paper argues that moderate Islam is in the minds and hearts of most Indonesian Azharites, a fact that corresponds to the concept of 'Islam Nusantara' as recently promoted by the Indonesian government. Yet, the meaning of moderacy needs to be reflected upon, as it refers to a middle way that excludes not only Islamism/radicalism but also secularism/ liberalism/the political left. The authors suggest that Indonesian students in Cairo, following this middle way and mainly socializing with like-minded Indonesian friends, are not sufficiently prepared to engage in critical dialogues with Others.

Key words

Azharites, Indonesia, Islam, Moderacy, Transcultural Encounters

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Introduction

'Azharite' does not refer to a hitherto unknown ethnic group – rather, Azharite is the designation for a graduate from Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. For centuries, Indonesian students have undertaken 'academic pilgrimages' to this highly prestigious university. After their return to Indonesia, these new Azharites exercise considerable influence on the ways Islam is perceived, practiced and developed. Word-views, basic values, morality and related cultural attitudes and practices are strongly connected to the recent religionification – particularly the Islamization – of Indonesia; it seems that an orientation towards the Middle East has been gathering importance since the 1980s, especially in the aftermath of the rising popularity of the Salafi movement. Yet this orientation contains both admiration and rejection (Lücking 2014) and the Middle East or the 'Arab World' is not monolithic. In this paper, the authors will ask which religious identifications Azharites promote and what Indonesians actually make of transcultural encounters with and in the Middle East. Finally, the relationship to social alignments, dealignments and frictions will be detailed.

The focus of this paper is on Indonesian alumni from al-Azhar University in Cairo, which can be regarded as the global authority for Sunni Islam (Bano/ Sakurai 2015; cf. also Abaza 1994; 2003). We draw on the University of Freiburg's well-established model of tandem research by combining two authors' positionalities and perspectives (cf. Schlehe/Hidayah 2014). Eva Nisa is an Azharite herself, having received her bachelor's degree from al-Azhar, and can therefore be regarded as an insider. But lately she has also been conducting systematic research on the role of Azharites in spreading a moderate version of Islam in Indonesia. Hence, she combines an insider's view with her scholarly perspective. Since 2014, she has held 20 interviews on the present topic in Jakarta, a few of them together with Judith Schlehe in March of 2015. Schlehe's position is clearly that of an outsider, in spite of 30 years of professional and personal experience in Indonesia. Since 2014, she has been conducting fieldwork with alumni from the Middle East, by visiting Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Madura and Lombok. Also notable is the fieldwork she conducted with Indonesian students in Cairo in December 2014.

The relevance of this topic lies in the widespread assumption that the Islamization happening in Indonesia has been heavily influenced by alumni from Middle Eastern universities. Yet there are different, and at times conflicting, directions or versions of Islam being propagated by different groups. Roughly speaking, the main difference arises from a moderate tendency from Egypt and a more fundamentalist, Salafi-Wahabi style from Saudi Arabia. The former, namely the moderate version of Islam, is widely regarded as playing a significant role in countering radicalization in the country (Jum'ah 2012). It fits well with the vision of the Indonesian government and the self-understanding of the most influential socio-religious organizations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah (cf. Mukhsin et al. 2008).

In the following article, we will describe the religious and intellectual orientations of Azharites and subsequently elaborate on social and cultural aspects before reflecting in the conclusion on the dynamics of alignments and dealignments.

Wasatiyya (Moderacy) of al-Azhar

The Azharites' understandings of Islam have been influenced through the way they have been educated by al-Azhar. Throughout its history,[1] al-Azhar has strived to demonstrate its moderate position by emphasising all four Sunni madhāhib (schools of Islam). Al-Azhar recognises pluralism in religious thought and presents itself globally as the guardian of a "tolerant" Islam, offering a "middle way" (Bano 2015: 73). During an interview by al-Masry al-Youm, al-Azhar's Rector Dr. Ahmad Thayyib, said "We do not antagonise anyone, but we do criticise ideas that deviate from tolerant and moderate Islam."

Throughout Indonesian history, the position of the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, has been significant in the process of religious transformation (cf. Roff 1970; Laffan 2004; Bowen 2008; Tagliacozzo 2009). Saudi *ulama* (religious scholars) have long been the source of references for *fatwa* (non-binding legal opinions) in Indonesia (see Kaptein 2004: 124-5). This led many Indonesians to pursue Islamic education in Saudi Arabia, especially in the nineteenth century. In addition to Saudi Arabia, al-Azhar in Egypt has held a significant position in colouring the dynamics of Islam in Indonesia since the twentieth century (see van Bruinessen 2012: 132).

At present, Azharites far outnumber Indonesian graduates from universities of other Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Sudan.[2] According to many Indonesian Muslims, al-Azhar can be considered more moderate than Saudi Arabian universities. This moderacy is widely known in the Muslim world. Maged for example, states that al-Azhar has been known as, "...a bastion of moderate Islam in the Sunni world..." (2012: 69). Moderacy/*wasatiya/wasatiyya/wasathiyya*) is mostly seen as going hand-in-hand with *tawazun* (equilibrium, balance) and *tasamuh* (tolerance, flexiblitiy) (Sahal/Aziz 2015: 10).

Little, however, has been said on the meanings of al-Azhar's moderacy and how this moderate viewpoint and mission has shaped the lives and religious orientations of its alumni. The role of Azharites in spurring moderate Islam in Indonesia has been emphasized by the Grand Syeikh of al-Azhar, due to Indonesia's position as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. Indonesia is furthermore expected to be the model for the development of moderate Islam that co-exists harmoniously with other religions, acculturates local traditions and is compatible with democracy (Ubaid/Bakir 2015: Sahal/Aziz 2015). Due to the violence and war between Muslims in the Middle East, Indonesians also feel the need to "export" their moderate version of Islam to this region (Muhajir 2015: 68).

The image of al-Azhar as spreading moderate Islam has been supported by graduates around the world, especially after the establishment of the World Association for al-Azhar Graduates (Al-Râbithah al-Âlamiyyah li Khirrîjî al-Azhar) in Cairo in 2006. The association is aimed at strengthening the network between al-Azhar and its alumni, with the mission of supporting the role of al-Azhar in spreading its moderate (*wasatiyya*) approach to Islam.

[1] Al-Azhar was founded as a mosque and centre for religious studies in the year 970. Since 1961, it has been a state university, including secular faculties and faculties for women.

[2] According to the Indonesian Embassy in Cairo, there are currently 3,500 Indonesian students in Egypt, most of them enrolled in religious subjects at al-Azhar. According to UNESCO statistics, the respective number of Indonesian students in Saudi Arabia is 1,220 and according to the Indonesian Student Association (PPI), there were 284 in Sudan and much less in Yemen, Tunisia and Iran in 2013. It should be mentioned that these numbers do not necessarily reflect students' choices or desires. In contrast to Egypt, Saudi Arabia strictly limits the number of foreign students. It is, however, said that they would especially welcome young candidates who come from remote areas where there has not yet been a Salafi-oriented religious leader.

Al-Azhar between Conservatism and Secularism

It is noteworthy that among the Azharite *ulama*, there are also conservative circles and Islamist tendencies which, according to Zeghal (1999), have been socially and politically visible since the 1980s (ibid.: 380). Take for example the presence of Azharite *ulama* in the circle of the Muslim Brotherhood (*ikhwanul muslimin*). The Muslim Brotherhood, which was established in 1928, has even criticised al-Azhar and some of its mainstream *ulama* for their weakness in the face of the government (Zeghal 1999: 372), especially in the 1960s during the Nasserist regime. It must be mentioned that al-Azhar became a state university in 1961, meaning that it was tightly connected with Mubarak – and at present depends on Al-Sisi.

Parallel to their opposition to Islamists, especially to militant ones, al-Azhar also has a strong position against secularists and leftists. This can be seen from the fact that *ulama* of Al-Azhar declare that some secular intellectuals are apostates. For example, in 1992, Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali designated secularist political writer Faraj Fauda as an apostate because of his criticism of the involvement of religion in politics. This ended in his murder by underground Islamist group Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (see Barraclough 1998: 241). Azharite ulama founded the Front of al-Azhar Ulama (Jabhat Ulama al-Azhar) in 1946, and used the group to voice criticisms of secularists, such as Farag Fuda, Taha Husayn, Hasan Hanafi and Ahmad Muhammad Khalaf Allah (Zeghal 1999: 390; Ismail 1999: 39–40). The Front was revived by Shaykh Azhar himself at the time of Gad al-Haqq in 1992 to save Islam from secularism; their first battle was against the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 (Zeghal 1999: 390).[3]

Wasatiyya Azharites

The way that the majority of Azharites understand Wasatiyya al-Azhar can be seen from the ideological position of the Indonesian branch of Ikatan Alumni al-Azhar Internasional or IAAI (the World Association for al-Azhar Graduates). The IAAI, founded in 2010, is regarded as al-Azhar's formal representation of its objective of orientating its alumni to spread moderate Islam in Indonesia. The secretary general of IAAI, Dr. Muchlis M. Hanafi, published a book on moderate Islam in 2013 titled 'Moderasi Islam: Menangkal Radikalisasi Berbasis Agama' (The Moderate Islam: Warding Religion-Based Radicalisation). In the book, Hanafi argues that *wasatiyya al-Islam* is based on the characteristics of Muslims mentioned in QS al-Baqarah [2]: 143:

> Thus, have We made of you an Ummat justly balanced [*ummatan wasatan*], that ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves; and We appointed the Qibla to which thou wast used, only to test those who followed the Messenger from those who would turn on their heels (From the Faith) ...[4]

The term *ummatan wasatan* is key in this context. According to Hanafi, this term means "middle", "moderate", "justice" and "the best". Therefore, *wasatiyya* here refers to the opposition of both radicalism but also liberalism (Hanafi 2013: viii, ix). His statement represents an approach al-Azhar uses to interact with both militant Islamists and secularists. Abdullah Hakam Shah, a lecturer at Al-Azhar University in Indonesia, argued:

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[3] The front also participated in accusing a Cairo University Professor, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, of apostasy (Zeghal 1999: 391).

[4] The translation of the Qur'an used in this paper belongs to Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

> *Wasatiyya* al-Azhar has shaped not only my thought but also my personality. *Wasatiyya* al-Azhar is *attajawur bayna syayayni aw aktar ma'a tamaayyuziha*. This refers to how we can live harmoniously between two or more views, attitudes, beliefs, and lifestyles. How we can interact actively and how we preserve our own choice.[5]

Although many Azharites agree that al-Azhar has played a significant role in introducing them to the moderacy of Islam, especially through its moderate theological inclination (Ash-'arite), some of them have different religious and intellectual orientations, ranging from militant to liberal.

There are indeed some Azharites with more conservative understandings of Islam, but they should not be confused with terrorists. Most of these Azharites are associated with the Azharite *ulama* that are active in the Muslim Brotherhood and those with Salafi tendencies. Some of these Azharites are also active in an Islamist party in Indonesia, the Prosperous Justice Party or PKS.[6]

On the other hand, some Azharites have swung in the opposite direction, becoming secularists. Their presence cannot be separated from the presence of the *ulama* in Egypt with similar tendencies of liberalism. Azharites have also been associated with the most liberal Islamic forum in Indonesia, the Jaringan Islam Liberal (Liberal Islam Network) founded in 2002. The birth of these liberal Azharites in Indonesia is related to the atmosphere of *wasatiyya* al-Azhar. The mainstream Azharite *ulama*, which have been active in responding to the presence of liberal Muslim thinkers, never use the violent approach of radical militants. Rather, they respond to critics using an intellectual approach and many mainstream Azharite *ulama* still maintain a good attitude toward them. In addition to this, Indonesian Azharites who have liberal religious orientations also feel grateful for the Egyptian intellectual atmosphere where they can gain access to significant pieces of literature, especially second-hand books at relatively low costs. The intellectual and religious orientations of Azharites in Indonesia mirror the phenomena and contestations surrounding al-Azhar and Azharite *ulama*. Similarly, these orientations demonstrate how Indonesian younger Muslim generations are active agents in pursuing diverse voices of Islam.

This leads us to the next question: how do Indonesian students actually make use of transcultural experiences at the al-Azhar University?

Everyday life of Indonesian students in Cairo

"*Al-'Ilm nûr*" (knowledge is light or *ilmu adalah cahaya*) is an important motto for the 3,500 Indonesians currently enrolled at al-Azhar University in Cairo, most of whom are studying religious subjects. But what kind of knowledge? Knowledge is not only acquired in the university setting but also beyond. Field research in Cairo revealed that the everyday lifeworld of these students is heavily shaped by exclusive social organizations for Indonesians only. The students engage in relational realignments aimed at the construction of a "safe" intellectual, religious and social environment based on Indonesian friends.

[5] Interview with Abdullah Hakam Shah at al-Azhar University in Indonesia, 12 May 2015.

[6] It is widely known that the Prosperous Justice Party has been inspired by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood (see also Machmudi 2008: 30).

There are 17 regional organizations plus many more student,[7] alumni and religious organizations. Some of them own entire buildings; others have nothing more than a rented apartment. Yet they all provide space for lessons on religion and language, organize lectures and discussions, and host football games and music events. The groups publish magazines and some of them run very professional websites.[8] They offer opportunities for informal hangouts where students can meet up, chat, work, play on their computers and even stay overnight. Apart from doing every manner of work to make money,[9] the vast majority of Indonesian students spend a considerable part of their time at the organizations' headquarters. According to a survey conducted by an Indonesian study group in 2014, only 37% of Indonesian students in Cairo say they attend classes at university often, 46% sometimes and 17% never. Interestingly, the religious engagement seems to be relatively limited as well. The survey found that only 18% of the 218 respondents regularly attended Quranic recitation lessons (*talaqqi*), 53% did sometimes and 29% never did (Nahdlatul Ulama Research Center 2014).

For these students, practicing an Islamized modern lifestyle in Cairo obviously does not necessarily mean that they take academic and religious duties too seriously. Nor do they embrace the local culture or engage thoroughly with people from different backgrounds. Rather, many of them remain in an Indonesian socio-cultural 'bubble'. This contrasts with the normative vision of al-Azhar as propagating a tolerant and moderate Islam that enforces dialogue with others (*"Islam yang toleran, Islam yang moderat, Islam yang menjunjung dialog dengan yang lain"*). Even the officials in the Indonesian embassy in Cairo worry about the "exclusivity" of the Indonesian students. When confronted with these worries, the students claim that in fact there is some interaction; it is just overlooked by the officials because it is based on trivial matters. For instance, Indonesian students play football with students from other Asian or African countries. Yet when it comes to Egyptians the students say that the interaction is limited for two main reasons: firstly for political reasons, because the Indonesians don't want to be seen as being involved in anti-government or revolutionary movements. Especially after Al-Sisi took over the leadership of Egypt, they do not want to risk having friends whose ideology may be monitored by the government, like anyone belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. Secondly, the weak economy in Egypt generates a high level of criminality. Every student can – and likes to – recount stories about thieves and betrayals. Additionally, the cultural distance (*"kita berjarak"*) is emphasized as a legitimation for avoiding personal relations. This may also be related to social factors, as many Egyptian Azhar students come from rural Egypt (*baladi*) and a relatively lower middle-class background; many Indonesian students feel superior to them. This demonstrates that Indonesian students keep a distance from Egyptian culture, something that is clearly related to the fact that they only mainly mingle with other Indonesians during their stay in Egypt. Therefore, despite Indonesian Azharites' admiration of al-Azhar moderacy, the same admiration does not exist at the level of cultural orientation.

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[7] Many of which are under the umbrella of the Indonesian Student Association in Egypt (Perhimpunan Pelajar Indonesia, PPI).

[8] See, for instance, the website of students from Aceh (Keluarga Mahasiswa Aceh (KMA) Mesir): http://www.kmamesir.org/.

[9] This is a crucial part of the Indonesian students' everyday lives in Cairo. Most of them do not get a scholarship but are self-funded and/or supported by Egyptian philanthropic organizations. Therefore, they guide Indonesian tourists in Cairo or Indonesian pilgrims in Mecca, prepare and sell Indonesian food, or work selling clothing, airline tickets, or other similar items.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, there is also a minority[10] of Indonesian students in Egypt who receive scholarships from certain conservative *syekhs* (or, in some cases, from Kuwait) and join exclusive international groups in the countryside or in cities such as Mansoura, Tanta and Alexandria. These students appreciate the close personal contact with their *syekhs* (*Syeikh, Shaikh*; Islamic leaders); it creates a learning environment that is very different to courses at al-Azhar University, which are often attended by hundreds of students. One of these students also said that it is simply cheaper to live in the countryside, especially as accommodation, food and a good library are provided by the *syekh*. Men and women are strictly separated in these communities and the latter wear a *niqab* or *burqa* (veil covering the face and the whole body).[11] Amongst these students are several groups who follow a *tarbiyah* (education, upbringing) closely related to the Muslim Brotherhood (see above) and many who vote for PKS (the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party). A few of them have to be categorized as radical.[12] They remain enrolled at al-Azhar in Cairo,[13] but because class attendance is not compulsory, they only go to university at the end of each semester for the final exams.[14] One of them explained: “What is important is that we are present for the exam. We answer exactly what has been dictated, that’s it, we can get good grades.”[15] It has to be stressed though, that the vast majority of Indonesian students do not have any contact with these groups that they often categorize in general as “radicals”.

Thus, we must wonder how prominent al-Azhar’s influence on the students actually is. As Bano and Sakurai put it “...not all students enrolled in a university absorb the ideas and attitudes associated with the institution. Many students use their education at these universities to advance material rather than religious interests” (Bano, Sakurai 2015: 6).
‘Material interests’ in the case of Indonesian students in Cairo would reflect their high level of involvement in various jobs. But it may also be added that some Indonesians use their time in Egypt to advance religious interests and activities that deviate from the main mission of al-Azhar. Furthermore, and in respect to the vast majority of Indonesian students in Cairo, the question arises as to what they learn from the Arab world when they

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[10] Informants’ estimates of their number varied between 200 and 700. Most of them stem from Indonesian Salafi *pesantren* – boarding schools. They may also be in contact with Turkish teachers.

[11] One example is Sheikh Mustofa Al-Adawi who had 62 Indonesian students in 2014 as well as additional students from Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Maghreb and the local community. They focus on the study of the *hadiths* (the narration of words, deeds or approvals of the Prophet Muḥammad) The centre is well equipped with computers and Sheikh Mustofa presents himself on Youtube, but what is propagated is a very purist variant of Islam as practiced in Mauretania, which is consequently designated as the centre of Islamic knowledge. A different example is Sheikh Ala in Alexandria who attracts mainly Asian students (Malaysians, Indonesians, Thais, Chinese) and African students from Nigeria, Tanzania and Tunisia. As the number of Indonesians is very small in Alexandria and the sheikh encourages them to do so, the international students communicate much more than the ones in Cairo. They emphasize that they can learn much more about classical texts in the Mosque and from Sheikh Ala than they could ever learn at a university. But simultaneously and in contrast to the first example, they stick to an Indonesian style of Islamic clothing and emphasize that Islam should go hand-in-hand with Indonesian local cultures.

[12] There is only one well documented case where an Indonesian student from the Caironese al-Azhar Secondary School joined ISIS and became a suicide bomber (Kompas.com 2014).

[13] Since the revolution, Indonesian students have no longer been allowed to enroll at Al-Azhar branches outside Cairo.

[14] As one of these students put it: “*Azhar alhamdulillah masih mendukung bahwa ilmu tidak hanya di bangku kuliah*” (Thanks God, Azhar still supports [the belief] that knowledge is not only acquired in seats in the classroom).

[15] “*Yang penting waktu ujian kita hadir. Kita menjawab dengan tepat sesuai dengan yang di diktat, sudah, kita bisa dapatkan nilai tinggi*”.

spend so much time in like-minded Indonesian-only circles? What about actual experiences of tolerance and pluralism?

Cultural imaginaries of Azharites in Indonesia: Islam Nusantara revisited

Based on field research on epistemic effects, social thought and actual practices of al-Azhar alumni in Indonesia it can be confirmed that – when asked – they identify with a moderate version of Islam based on modernity, tolerance and pluralism (although this does not necessarily include gender equality; take for example the fact that women are obviously underrepresented in the majority of alumni organizations). It thus follows that President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) referred to the concept of Islam Nusantara (Archipelagic Islam) in June 2015 in cultural terms (*"Islam yang ramah, anti radikal, inklusif dan toleran", "Islam kita adalah Islam Nusantara, Islam yang penuh sopan santun, Islam yang penuh tata krama"* – a friendly, anti-radical, inclusive, tolerant Islam full of politeness) in contrast to 'Islam Arab' (Affan 2015). The concept of Islam Nusantara has become very prominent lately, especially as it was promoted by Indonesia's largest Muslim organization NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) in 2015 as a way to reconcile Islam with local cultures (Sahal/Aziz 2015), a genuine basic principle of NU from its very beginning. Islam Nusantara can be regarded as a particular appropriation and reconfiguration of *wasatiyya* Islam. Moderacy is connected to *al-wâqi'iyyah*, a realistic attitude that takes not only text but also context into account. Most often the Wali Songo, the nine legendary figures who brought Islam to the archipelago, are mentioned as positive examples. The first of these, Sunan Kalijaga, is famous for his tolerance and for having spread Islam by connecting it to diverse local cultures, using cultural devices such as *wayang* (shadow play). Islam Nusantara is therefore understood as "the Islamic understanding and practice in the archipelago as an effect of the dialectics between written Islamic law and local realities and cultures."[16] (Muhajir 2015: 67).

Nonetheless, in religious terms and public discourse, the Middle East is strongly associated with the Holy Land (*tanah suci*), the centre – or at least the place of origin – of Islam; alumni derive considerable blessings (*barakah*) and social prestige from having studied there – at least in rural and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) contexts.[17] This, in turn, often secures them influential positions in politics and business (at least in Madura and Lombok, it does not necessarily hold true for Java). On the other hand, in the urban academic contexts of Jakarta and Yogyakarta (including State Islamic Universities) we came across more critical voices claiming that nowadays, Islamic education in Indonesia (and in the West) is of higher academic quality than at al-Azhar where students mainly learn to memorize the holy books.[18]

Interestingly enough, almost all alumni clearly differentiate between culture and religion of the Middle East or the 'Arab World.' Whereas religious centrality in the area is admired, its people and everyday culture are discussed rather critically. Although Egyptians have been experienced as hospital and generous people by many students who have received scholarships and all kinds of support from them, the Indonesian Azharites mainly remember them as *keras, kasar* (rude, harsh, impolite) and *kurang bersih* (less clean) and their

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[16] "*paham dan praktik keislaman di bumi Nusantara sebagai hasil dialektika antara teks syariat dengan realitas dan budaya setempat.*"

[17] Anyone who graduated in the Middle East is expected to be able to spread Islamic knowledge, even if he or she – which is in rare exceptions the case – has studied a secular discipline.

[18] For a contradicting voice, recommending Saudi Arabia as a destination for learning, see Masrul (2015).

society is seen as being out of order and oppressive, especially when it comes to gender roles. This distanciation has manifest effects on cooperation structures. There are virtually no personal relations and only very few professional ones between Indonesians (who may have been living in the Middle East for up to ten years) and Egyptians or Saudi Arabians.[19]

Interestingly enough though, a similar strategy of dealignment can be found in relation to fundamentalists and radicals. Discursively, they are present because our Azharite interview partners frequently mentioned alumni from Saudi Arabia as being Salafi, narrow-minded, radical, dangerous, etc. But almost nobody knew one personally and there are hardly any discussions and debates between these groups. Thus, as often in the social world and not only in Indonesia, the politics of difference leads to an attitude of avoidance and tolerance can lead to non-communication.

Conclusion

On a conceptual level, the religious identifications promoted by the majority of Indonesian Azharites clearly reflect the mainstream moderate mission of al-Azhar. This includes alignments between Islam and local cultures, as expressed in the concept of Islam Nusantara. At the same time, the propagated 'middle path' excludes all 'extremes.' Moderacy in Indonesia means, as explained above, to navigate one's modern lifestyle between two categories which are similarly rejected and sometimes even conflated: conservatism, Salafism-Wahabism, Islamism and radicalism on the one hand and secularism, liberalism and the political left (and sometimes Judaism) on the other hand.

Turning to the social level, in accordance with the notion of a moderate version of Islam based on 'modernity, tolerance and pluralism' could be expected to inspire those living abroad to foster curiosity and openness towards other people, other cultures and different ways of thinking. But transcultural encounters do not automatically create transnational social alignments, cosmopolitan cultural orientations and boundary transgressions. Most Indonesian students in Cairo tend to socialise with like-minded friends with whom they share a national and ethnic background as well as an ideological orientation, thereby avoiding the Other and the new.

Concerning the dynamics and contingency of alignments and dealignments, both dimensions, the conceptual and the social, are interrelated. Yet, for the development of an open, pluralistic society, it would be beneficial to create more space for conceptual inclusion as well as engagement and critical dialogues with Others. This could eventually lead to a new understanding of moderacy.

[19] Although, once more, there is a slight gender difference: I met several female Indonesian al-Azhar alumni who recounted that they had had some personal connections to Egyptian girlfriends when they were at university and whom they had visited at home as well. The friendships only dissolved after they left or the friend was married. Men, on the other hand, talked only of very superficial contacts to Egyptian students, whom they had only met occasionally in cafes.

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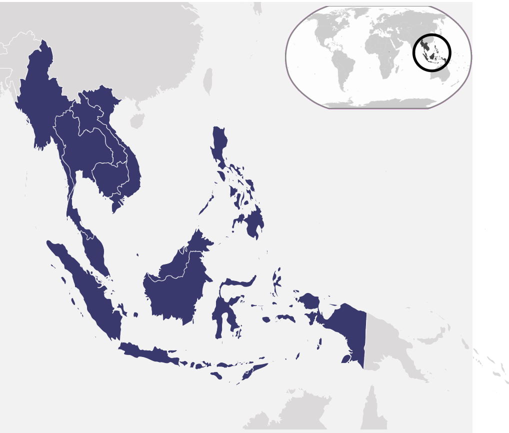

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