

Sumanto Al Qurtuby, *Saudi Arabia and Indonesian Networks: Migration, Education, and Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2019, x + 243 pp., ISBN: 9781838602208, price USD 103,50 (hardback).

Saudi Arabia does not generally enjoy much sympathy among Western opinion makers, politicians and academic observers, nor does the brand of Islamic doctrine and practice known as Salafism, which is widely considered as the Kingdom's chief ideological export product. Many Indonesian spokespersons for 'moderate' Islam share the disdain for Salafism and hold Saudi influence responsible for the decline of religious tolerance and the rise of assertive religious fundamentalism in the country. This book, written by an outspoken Indonesian proponent of religious tolerance and moderation, argues that things are not as simple as that and offers a more nuanced view of Saudi-Indonesian interactions.

The author is well-placed to do so and can speak with authority due to his unusual academic trajectory. This took him from the study of Islamic law at the UIN of Semarang through sociology of Islam at Salatiga to the United States, where he obtained an MA in conflict and peace studies at Eastern Mennonite University and a doctorate in anthropology at Boston University, and to Saudi Arabia, where for the past five or six years he has been teaching anthropology at a major university. In addition, he has been a vocal participant in inter-religious activism in Indonesia, with a strong media presence and numerous followers. His contacts with his Saudi students, with fellow Indonesians living in Saudi Arabia as students or migrant workers, and with activists of NU background in Java have obviously been valuable sources of information for this book.

The meaning of the Arabian Peninsula to Indonesian Muslims is unlike that of any other country, and over the centuries more Southeast Asians have travelled to Arabia and taken up residence there than anywhere else. Well before the Saudis brought Mecca and Medina under their control, Southeast Asians constituted one of the largest foreign resident communities there, providing an infrastructure for the larger numbers of pilgrims visiting annually and hanging on for some incidental study. The founders of Indonesia's most influential *pesantren*, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, typically had spent years studying in Mecca and sent their sons and favorite students there to do the same. Al Qurtuby traces the history of pilgrimage, study and trade, always closely intertwined, and their impact on the dynamics of Islam in the Archipelago, up to the present day. In six partially overlapping chapters, he discusses diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries, Saudi influences on Indonesian Islam and society, Arabia as the exemplary centre of Islamic learning, Indonesians teaching in Arabia, Indonesian students in

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contemporary Saudi Arabia, and the role of Saudi alumni in Indonesia. His observations on the contemporary scene are, unsurprisingly, the most interesting part of his study.

Saudi Arabia has been a favorite destination of male as well as female labor migration from Indonesia, attractive because of the relatively high wages (compared to other destinations such as Malaysia and Hong Kong) and the possibility of fulfilling religious obligations. Domestic workers have made up the vast majority of these migrants, and the frequent abuse of housemaids by Saudi employers has repeatedly led to mass protests in Indonesia (but to little more than half-hearted and ineffective attempts by the Indonesian government to protect its citizens). Of the male workers in low-skilled jobs, Al Qurtuby mentions specifically the numerous drivers—personal drivers as well as bus and taxi drivers—and he comments on the poor bargaining position of Indonesian workers in general due to their poor language skills and general unpreparedness, compared to workers from other countries. He also hints at the existence of a large pool of unregistered migrants in even more marginalized positions. Current Saudi perceptions of Indonesia tend to be much shaped by these low-skilled workers, although there is also a significant number of highly educated Indonesian expats working as engineers or computer scientists in major companies.

Until a century ago, Indonesian *ulama* (Islamic scholars) were respected members of the religious elite of Mecca and Medina, and Southeast Asians seeking knowledge in the holy cities usually studied with teachers from their own region. After the Saudi conquest, the traditional mode of Islamic learning was gradually marginalized. An Indonesian school of religious studies in Mecca, established in 1934, continued catering to the traditionalists but increasingly had to make concessions to the Saudi religious establishment. Al Qurtuby notes that after the death in 1990 of its long-serving director Shaykh Yasin al-Fadani, held in the highest respect by his colleagues in Indonesia, the school was fully integrated into the Saudi system. Shaykh Yasin had been the last of the great Indonesian *ulama* resident in Mecca. The other traditionalist scholar with numerous Indonesian students, Sayyid Muhammad bin Alwi al-Maliki, died in 2004. He was succeeded by a son who appears to lack the father's charisma. The future of traditionalist learning in the Kingdom looks unpromising.

Meanwhile Saudi Arabia had been expanding its universities and offering scholarships to students from around the world, attracting a different kind of religious students. It was mainly but not exclusively young men from the reformist and puritan end of the religious spectrum who benefited from Saudi Arabia's generous scholarship program. On their return, some of these men

became the pioneers of Indonesia's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (which later morphed into the Islamist party PKS), and others set up networks of Salafi preaching and teaching. This much was well-known and has been documented in a series of dissertations by young Indonesian scholars on the PKS and the Salafi movement and, on the Saudi side, in Michael Farquhar's excellent monograph (2016). Al Qurtuby's book complements these studies nicely in showing that the Indonesian students in Saudi Arabia, as in fact their Saudi peers, are far from homogeneous and do not all return as Salafis or Islamists. There are students in other faculties than Islamic studies, and among graduates from the latter we find progressives as well as conservatives (although not in equal measure). Attempting to account for the divergent responses to study in Saudi Arabia, Al Qurtuby enumerates a number of factors, of which the existence of networks of friendship and social support appears crucial.

The author's observations and analyses are interesting, but would have benefited from better editing of the book. The language does not flow easily, and the English is often awkward, although the intended meaning is clear. The text is, moreover, quite repetitive; many observations and comments appear in several of the chapters. The book's saving grace is in the author's unique experience and access.

*Martin van Bruinessen*

Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

*m.vanbruinessen@uu.nl*

## Reference

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