

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## Saudi Strategies for Religious Influence and Soft Power in Indonesia

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### Key Points

- Saudi Arabia's push for religious influence in Indonesia has primarily taken shape through educational facilities, which remain the key source of influence today.
- Evidence of Saudi influence can also be seen through a trend of the "Arabisation" of Islam in Indonesia, as well as pressure on the Indonesian Government to maintain its *haji* quota.
- Indonesian Muslim groups that object to the Salafist doctrine will continue to act as a brake on Saudi religious influence. Pancasila and, more broadly, nationalism, could also be used by those seeking to limit Saudi influence in the future.
- The long-term implications are less clear, but it is likely that Indonesia will continue to see elements of its own society continue to push for the adoption of more conservative policies and practices.

### Summary

Saudi Arabia has a long history of exporting its brand of Islam across the globe as a tool of religious soft power influence and as a means to counter the influence of its rival, Iran. Indonesia, a country which contains the largest Muslim population in the world, has been at the receiving end of that influence for decades. This paper examines the origins of Saudi

religious influence in Indonesia, the obstacles to that influence and identifies some of the implications that it may have for Indonesian society in the long-term future.

## Analysis

### ***Historical Saudi Religious Influence***

Saudi Arabia's efforts to increase its religious influence in Indonesia coincided with an Islamic revival throughout South-East Asia in the late 1970s. After experiencing a surge of economic growth following the 1973 oil crisis, Saudi Arabia, spurred on by competing interests with Iran after 1979, used its oil wealth to set up religious institutions, universities and scholarships across the globe. In Indonesia today, the most prominent of those institutions include *Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Bahasa Arab* (LIPIA), a Jakarta branch of the *Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University*, and *Dewan Da'wah Islamiyah Indonesia* (DDII), a *da'wah* (proselytising) council.

Part of LIPIA's role in Indonesia has been to promote the Saudi interpretation of Islam (a brand of Salafism) that is, at times, opposed to traditional Indonesian cultural values. LIPIA also plays a role in sending Indonesian students from its own university and also other universities to Riyadh through scholarship grants, which serve to further reinforce that Saudi interpretation. According to Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Rice University, Fred von der Mehden, returning Indonesians who have graduated from Saudi universities make up the [core of the effort](#) to expand the Saudi interpretation of Islam in Indonesia.

Muhammad Rizieq Shihab is a notable example of the potential impact of LIPIA in Indonesia, although his example also showcases some of its limitations. Following Arabic classes taken at LIPIA, Rizieq continued studying at King Saud University on a Saudi Government scholarship, graduating around 1994. After returning to Indonesia, he founded *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI), a conservative Islamic group which had the initial aim of securing the implementation of sharia law across Indonesia. FPI has since broadened its agenda and has frequently mobilised campaigns and sometimes violent protests targeted at social ills and government policies that it considers anti-Muslim. At its core, however, the ideology of FPI is not grounded in Salafism, an ideology Rizieq has publicly criticised in the past, even despite his studies at King Saud University. That said, through its activism, FPI does [prefer](#) working with prominent Salafi figures and groups in pursuing its activist agenda. As a result, FPI has formed tenuous alliances with Salafi groups when their political interests coincide.

The DDII was founded in 1967 by Mohammad Natsir and soon became the primary representative of Saudi-sponsored Islam in Indonesia and a major recipient of Saudi funds, alongside LIPIA.<sup>1</sup> Directing its appeals more towards a poorer and less-educated social base,<sup>2</sup> DDII advocated a conservative stance towards social issues and became a strong critic of the Suharto "New Order" Government. In addition, leaders of the DDII frequently took an anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Qurtuby, S. A., 'Saudi Arabia and Indonesian Networks: Migration, Education, and Islam', I. B. Tauris, 2019, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Paris, J., 'The Politics of Post-Suharto Indonesia', Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1999, p. 48.

Western stance on foreign policy issues.<sup>3</sup> With views that were more closely in line with the Saudi regime than the Indonesian Government at the time, the leaders of the DDII had little issue with associating themselves with Saudi Arabia. That was also partly done as a protective measure due to the pressure placed on religious minority groups by the Suharto regime. According to Fred von der Mehden, the late Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Rice University, the strong anti-Shi'a, anti-Christian, and anti-Ahmadiyah sentiments of DDII at the time fitted neatly into the Saudi agenda of countering Shi'ism and allowed the organisation to greatly benefit from Saudi aid.

### ***Religious Influence Today in Indonesia***

Today, the Saudi Government still holds a strong interest in exerting influence over the world's largest Muslim population, and with many educational establishments already in place, the Saudi Government needs only to maintain their funding and operations. That influence has been further extended by encouraging graduates to engage in the political sphere. Consequently, as noted by Carolyn Nash [writing for the Middle East Institute](#), there exists a Saudi-educated Muslim élite who engage in Indonesian politics to promote religious protectionism and hardline Islamic orthodoxy.

Indirect influences could also be seen in the apparent trend of the "Arabisation" of Islam within Indonesia, which may hold links to Saudi influence. The Arabisation of Islam stems from a belief that Islam as it is seen in the Arab world is a "purer" form of the religion. Given that the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina, are located in Saudi Arabia, many Muslims are inclined give substantial weight to the Saudi teachings as the "purer" interpretation of Islam. As a result, many observers have noted a growing shift to more conservative Islam, in the direction of Saudi-taught Salafism, even as far back as [fifteen years ago](#). That rise, however, usually occurs in more isolated clusters or groups, where Salafi teachers can have significant impact through personal influence. Batam, a city in the Riau Islands, is an example of such a cluster, where the rise of Salafism has seen *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) and also radio stations spread the Salafi ideology. The rise of Salafism in that city is possibly due to its close proximity to both Singapore and Malaysia, making it a [convenient hub](#) for a Salafist network that crosses those borders. Beyond those small clusters, however, it is difficult to pinpoint direct Saudi religious influence as the driving force behind conservative trends in Indonesia.

The Saudi Government also holds a direct line of influence over the Indonesian Government's broader foreign policy decisions where those could have an impact on Saudi Arabia and its interests. That has been achieved through the significance of the annual *hajj* pilgrimage made by Muslims from around the world to the holy Saudi city of Mecca, and which puts pressure on the Indonesian Government to maintain a positive relationship with Saudi Arabia. The Indonesian Government often [lobbies](#) the Saudi Government to increase the quota for the number of Indonesians who can attend the pilgrimage. The weight of responsibility that the Indonesian Government has to carry to ensure that its citizens can attend was felt when the decision to cancel the 2020 hajj due to COVID-19 concerns fuelled

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<sup>3</sup> Emmerson, D.K., 'Indonesia Beyond Suharto: Polity, Economy, Society, Transition' M. E. Sharpe, 1999, p. 227.

some anti-government sentiments. Jeopardising the relationship with Saudi Arabia could potentially see Indonesia's hajj quota reduced or make it difficult for Indonesian citizens to attend. A diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which began in 2017, had long-lasting [repercussions](#) for the ability of Qatari citizens to attend the hajj. As the government of the world's most-populous Muslim country, it is in the best interests of the Indonesian Government to maintain the diplomatic relationship with Saudi Arabia, as undermining the ability of Indonesians to attend the hajj could amount to political suicide.

### ***Impediments to Saudi Religious Influence***

While Saudi Arabia's strategies to exert its influence over Indonesia can largely be seen as successful, there are a number of impediments to its soft power. Salafism faces strong opposition from other major Muslim groups in Indonesia, such as Nahdatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. According to Ahmad Syarif Syechbubakr, a senior analyst at Bowergroup Asia, the NU, which contains some Sufi elements, has a [long-standing dispute](#) with Salafist groups, and has taken the lead role in an anti-intolerance campaign which seeks to undermine the influence of Salafism in Indonesia. That strong opposition has also led to NU preachers describing Salafis as being 'lower than animals' and as "'*Khawarij*" ("renegades"), who are devoted to prayer and fasting, but who brainwash young people, filling their minds with hatred for genuine Islam'.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, there have been frequent occasions when Salafi preachers have been prevented from speaking by NU's paramilitary youth wing.

The Indonesian Government has also tried to lessen the impact of foreign influences by strengthening its own core identity through Pancasila and nationalism. Pancasila (which translates as "five principles") is the official Indonesian philosophy instated by founding President Sukarno and is based on five principles: belief in one God, just and civilised humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy based on wisdom, and social justice for all Indonesians. Many of the more conservative Islamic groups see Pancasila as too secular and a watering down of Islamic principles, especially as it blocks any nationwide implementation of Sharia law. In 2017, the Indonesian Government banned conservative Islamic group *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Party of Liberation) for breaching the third principle of Pancasila. That ban followed instructions from President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo to 'review all mass organisations to identify those with values that contradict the Pancasila, or the unity of the state' and comments that he would he will *gebuk* (thump) those who seek to threaten Pancasila or the constitution. While *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is not a vehicle for Saudi ideology and is itself critical of Salafism, the use of Pancasila to implement that ban means that Salafi organisations need to be careful to respect Pancasila and avoid publicly denouncing those principles. Since elements of Pancasila run contrary to the ideology of Salafism, it could be seen as a tool to inhibit Saudi influence by limiting many of the more hardline Saudi-educated preachers and speakers.

Nationalism, as a tool against foreign influence, was also highlighted in 2017. Indonesia's Defence Minister at the time, Ryamizard Ryacudu, announced that the *Bela Negara* (Defend the Country) programme would be the priority of the Ministry of Defence for that year and it

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<sup>4</sup> Umar, M.S. and Woodward, M., 'The Izala Effect: Unintended Consequences of Salafi Radicalism in Indonesia and Nigeria', *Contemporary Islam*, 2020, p. 15.

has since remained on the radar for the Indonesian Government. The aims of *Bela Negara* are to recruit a civilian force of one hundred million people under a nationalist banner and establish a united Indonesian identity defined by values such as nationalism, patriotism and a willingness to sacrifice for the country. The programme is comprised of a number of steps, the third of which is the “action” movement, which is subdivided into non-military and military threats. Included under [non-military threats](#) are: ‘unchecked population growth, public health, natural disasters, agrarian conflict and resource exploitation, energy scarcity, and ideologies contrary to Pancasila.’

While the Saudi brand of Salafism may run contrary to Pancasila, the ideologies that have been focussed on under the programme, however, have primarily been communism and LGBT groups. Using *Bela Negara* to put pressure on Salafi preachers seems unlikely to eventuate in the near future, since the Indonesian National Armed Forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*; TNI), in its mission to expand domestic influence, will try to keep most religious organisations onside. An example of that mindset could be seen in 2017 when Lieutenant-Colonel Czi Ubaidillah was stripped of his post after holding a training session between TNI and the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*; FPI), only to be later [defended](#) by the Defence Minister, who reiterated that the FPI also has a responsibility to defend Indonesia. That said, the TNI, being primarily made up of secular nationalists, has traditionally been distrustful of political Islam.<sup>5</sup> So, in the long-term future, it is possible that it could be used as a tool against more extreme Salafi movements, provided that they present an unquestionable threat to Pancasila.

The very nature of the Salafist movement also presents challenges to its influence in Indonesia. Instead of being a unified front of Saudi-led influence, the Salafi movement is somewhat scattered and divided along ideological lines and generational gaps. Primarily, the movement is divided between those who are politically active and the purists who avoid politics, with a third division comprising those who allow for rebellion against a Muslim government by violent means. A report from the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict identified generational gaps when examining the growing influence of Salafism in Muslim Mindanao:

Many of the older Salafi clerics, including those in positions of authority within BARMM, do not fit the stereotype of ideological zealots. Their long political struggle produced a pragmatism that is not only political, toward the central government, but also religious. Some have taken positions that would be anathema to Salafis elsewhere, for example in support of reproductive healthcare and contraception. At the same time, many younger Muslims, brought up in the smart phone era with access to online Islamic teachings, are becoming more knowledgeable, more observant and more socially conservative than their parents.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rabasa, A. and Haseman, J., ‘Inside the TNI: Career Patterns, Factionalism, and Military Cohesion’, in *The Military and Democracy in Indonesia: Challenges, Politics, and Power*, 2002, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> ‘The Growing Influence of Salafism in Muslim Mindanao’, Institute for Policy Analysis and Conflict, *IPAC Report No 61*, January 2020, p. 1.

That same divide likely exists in Indonesia, too, where Muslim youth have become a target audience for online preaching by influential clerics. Those preachers, such as Ustad Abdul Somad, have amassed millions of followers online and have inspired a [new wave of piety](#) among Indonesian youth.

### ***Implications for Indonesia***

With pressure on the Indonesian Government to maintain the relationship, the Saudi Government could undertake more direct approaches to any involvement in Indonesia's internal affairs. A glimpse of that approach could be seen in 2018, during a "212 Action" rally held in Jakarta commemorating the second anniversary of the jailing of Chinese-Christian Jakarta Governor, Basuki Tjahaja "Ahok" Purnama. Hours after the rally took place, the Saudi Ambassador to Indonesia, Osama bin Mohammed Al-Shuaibi, posted photos of the crowds on Twitter. He added a caption that falsely claimed that the rally was in response to a video of a flag with Islamic text being burned, which went viral in October. The tweet, which was later removed, also described the group responsible, a youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), as a heretical organisation. While there is no evidence that the ambassador was acting in the interests of the Saudi Government, a foreign ambassador discrediting Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation should be especially concerning for the Indonesian Government.

The potential wider implications of Saudi influence on Indonesian society are somewhat unclear. The obvious concern is that the Wahhabist branch of Salafism, which has been actively promoted by Saudi Arabia, is the same branch of Islam that underpins the ideology of many extremist groups in South-East Asia and the Middle East. Due to that connection, there are concerns that Saudi religious influence in Indonesia could have devastating consequences. Indonesians who deeply subscribe to more conservative beliefs could end up less tolerant of the views of others, something that could be particularly problematic in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society such as Indonesia. They may come to hold grievances and frustrations at what they might see as an anti-Islamic government, which could lead to violent political uprisings. Such individuals could also be more vulnerable to recruitment tactics from extremist groups in the Middle East or within the local region, further undermining Indonesian national security. That concern, while it holds some merit, may be too simplistic, and does not take into account the multitude of factors that may push individuals towards extremism.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia itself has undertaken some quite remarkable reforms under the *Vision 2030* programme, which was implemented by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and which most recently saw [flogging abolished](#) as a form of punishment. Whether that could have an impact on its religious "exports" is yet to be seen, but it does suggest that some of the more conservative elements of Saudi influence could be reduced over the longer term.

A more certain outcome of Saudi influence is a gradual shift towards conservatism throughout Indonesian society. Even if the reform agenda of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed continues, the views held by Saudi-educated Indonesians will likely remain significantly more conservative than the traditional Indonesian view for some time. As long as Saudi-educated élites continue to engage in the Indonesian political sphere, that

conservative trend will likely continue. That conservative push, however, may be unpredictable and will not conform totally to the Salafi ideology. There are no direct linkages between conservative trends and Salafi ideology in Indonesia, beyond the fact that Salafism is generally seen as more conservative than traditional Indonesian Islamic beliefs. Rizieq, who has pushed for conservative ideals while simultaneously rejecting Salafism, is an example of that. Some areas, such as Batam, as mentioned above, will always be more susceptible to Saudi religious influence than other regions. So, while religious beliefs in those areas could shift towards Salafism, it is unlikely that conservative trends in Indonesia as a whole will lead to any kind of nationwide embrace of Salafism in the future.

### ***Uncertain Future***

The potential implications of Saudi Arabia's influence in Indonesia, while visible, will remain difficult to predict. Any wave of Salafi influence in Indonesia should not be seen as a united front. Instead, fractures and divisions along ideological and generational lines within the Salafi community mean the implications of that influence could be scattered and unpredictable. The Indonesian Government will likely continue to be wary of that influence and challenge it indirectly through the promotion of its own brand of Islam and strengthening the core identity of the country. That could, however, have unfortunate implications for its own citizens, especially those in marginal groups who are perceived to be deviating from presumed societal norms.

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