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ORIENTALIST INFLUENCE AND ITS DECLINE IN INDONESIAN ISLAMIC STUDIES: Tracing Intellectual and Institutional Transformations

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Abstract: It is undeniable that many Orientalist works have hurt Oriental images up to the present time. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the positive contributions of Orientalist scholarship to the advancement of Oriental studies. In the context of Indonesian Islamic studies, both Western researchers (Orientalists) and Indonesian-born Muslim scholars have played a significant role in shaping Islamic educational institutions and influencing individual Muslim scholars. In terms of higher education institutions, all traditional State Islamic institutions (IAINs) and most of the State Islamic Colleges (STAINs) have been transformed into Islamic State Universities. At the individual level, a substantial number of Indonesian-born scholars—many of whom studied under Orientalists in Western universities—have emerged as influential figures, making significant contributions to the development of both Islamic and general academic fields in Indonesia. However, over the past decade or so, such influence has notably declined. By utilizing data from individual initiative research and employing 'loose' text and contextual analysis methods, this article examines the early progress and recent decline of Orientalist influence on Indonesian Islamic studies, and discusses potential future trajectories.

Keywords: Orientalist, Islamic studies, Indonesia

Abstrak: Tidak dapat dipungkiri bahwa beberapa karya orientalis telah memberikan dampak negatif pada citra Timur hingga saat ini. Namun, sama pentingnya untuk mengakui kontribusi positif dari kajian orientalis terhadap

kemajuan studi orientalis. Dalam konteks studi Islam Indonesia, baik peneliti Barat (orientalis) maupun cendekiawan Muslim kelahiran Indonesia telah memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk lembaga pendidikan Islam dan memengaruhi cendekiawan Muslim secara individu. Dalam hal lembaga pendidikan tinggi, semua lembaga pendidikan Islam negeri (IAIN) tradisional dan sebagian besar Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (STAIN) telah berubah menjadi Universitas Islam Negeri. Pada tingkat individu, sejumlah besar cendekiawan kelahiran Indonesia—banyak di antaranya belajar di bawah bimbingan orientalis di universitas-universitas Barat—telah muncul sebagai tokoh berpengaruh, yang memberikan kontribusi signifikan terhadap pengembangan bidang akademik Islam dan umum di Indonesia. Namun, selama sekitar satu dekade terakhir, pengaruh tersebut telah menurun secara signifikan. Dengan menggunakan data dari penelitian inisiatif individu dan menerapkan metode analisis teks dan konteks 'longgar', artikel ini membahas kemajuan awal dan penurunan terkini pengaruh orientalis pada studi Islam Indonesia dan membahas lintasan potensial di masa depan.

Keywords: Orientalis, Studi Islam, Indonesia

Introduction

The development of Islamic studies in Indonesia has been profoundly shaped by Orientalist scholarship, particularly through the influence of Western-educated Indonesian scholars. In the early decades of the field's growth, Orientalist critiques played a vital role in stimulating intellectual renewal, fostering academic rigor, and encouraging self-reflection among Muslim scholars.[1] This period saw the emergence of transformative figures who reformed Islamic higher education, leading to the evolution of Indonesia's Islamic institutions.[2]

However, the global decline of Orientalist academic projects partly influenced by Edward Said's critique has contributed to a parallel decrease in both the quality and enthusiasm for Islamic studies in Indonesia.[3] Where external intellectual challenges once drove Indonesian Muslim scholars, the waning of those critiques has left a void in critical engagement.[4] As a result, Islamic studies in Indonesia face stagnation, with a decline in academic vitality within and beyond Islamic higher education.[5].

Intellectual responses to Orientalism in Indonesia can broadly be categorized into three perspectives: those who embraced Orientalist scholarship, those who rejected it, and those who critically engaged with it.[6] While this debate has shaped much of the intellectual discourse, a more pressing development has been the structural

1 Lafffan, Michael, The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufiji Past. Princeton (NJ) and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011.

2 Included Munawir Sjadzali, Harun Nasution, Mukti Ali, Nurcholish Madjid.

3 Entusiasm here is the driving force to carry out studies in order to create changes that are more objective, positive and academically measurable.

4 Zuhdi, Muhammad Harfin, and Mohamad Abdun Nasir. "Al-Mashlahah and Reinterpretation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Context." Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam 8.3 (2024): 1818-1839.

5 Asyari, Suaidi. Traditionalist vs modernist Islam in Indonesian politics: Muhammadiyah & Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in the Contemporary Indonesian Democratic and Political Landscape. VDM Publishing, 2010.

6 Humaidi, M. Wildan, and Inna Soffika Rahmadanti. "Constitutional Design of State Policy as Guidelines on Indonesia's Presidential System Development Plan." Volksgeist: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum Dan Konstitusi (2023): 61-76.

transformation of Indonesia's Islamic higher education system.[7] The transition of Islamic Institutes (IAINs/STAINs) into State Islamic Universities (UINs) has expanded the academic scope of these institutions, reflecting both internal reform efforts and responses to global educational trends[8]. Alongside these transformations, external powers such as Australia have increasingly framed Indonesian Islam within their national research agendas, further influencing the trajectory of the field. Despite numerous studies on Orientalism's role in Indonesian Islamic studies, previous research has largely overlooked a crucial shift: the recent decline in enthusiasm and critical engagement with Islamic studies in Indonesia. This gap has significant implications for the quality and objectivity of scholarship, particularly among students shaped by the legacies of Orientalist academic frameworks.[9] This article aims to fill that gap by examining these recent shifts and exploring their future trajectories, thereby contributing to a more critical and sustainable development of Indonesian Islamic studies.

Method

This article adopts a conceptual and qualitative descriptive approach,10 Aiming to explore the historical and intellectual shifts in Indonesian Islamic studies.[11] Rather than conducting empirical fieldwork or statistical analysis, the study draws upon a broad range of secondary sources, including historical accounts, academic debates, and documented institutional developments, to critically interpret the evolving role of Orientalist scholarship in Indonesia.12

The analysis is primarily historical-interpretive, synthesizing the works of both Western Orientalists and Indonesian Muslim scholars. It reviews key phases of intellectual exchange, academic cooperation, and institutional reform, with a particular focus on the transformation of State Islamic Institutes (IAIN) into State Islamic Universities (UIN), as well as the long-term impact of international collaborations, such as the McGill-IAIN Project.

This approach employs thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in the discourse surrounding Orientalism, including shifts in motivation, the contestation of knowledge production, and a decline in critical academic engagement. The article also examines how these intellectual shifts correspond with broader socio-political contexts, both in Indonesia and globally.

By synthesizing existing debates and developments, this study aims to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the decline in the influence of Orientalism on Indonesian Islamic studies and its implications for the field's future trajectory.

Conceptualizing Orientalism in the Indonesian Context

Before analyzing the decline of Orientalist influence in Indonesian Islamic studies, it is

[7] Damayanti, Rizki. "The Relevance of Fiqh Siyasah Dauliyah and Religion as Indonesian Soft Power in International Relations." De Jure: Jurnal Hukum dan Syar'iah 15.2 (2023): 343-365.

[8] Asyari Suaidi and MH Abid, "Expanding the Indonesian tarbiyah movement through Ta 'āruf and marriage" Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies, 2016. pp. 337-368.

[9] Danial, Danial, Munadi Usman, and N. Sari Dewi. "The contestation of Islamic legal thought: Dayah's jurists and PTKIN's jurists in responding to global issues." Ijtihad: Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam Dan Kemanusiaan 22.1 (2022): 19-36.

[10] Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches (4th ed.). Sage.

[11] Sunaryo, Agus, and Ahmad Hadidul Fahmi. "Evaluation of the Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah Liberalization: An Examination of the Notion of 'Prioritizing Public Interest over Textual Evidence'." Al-Manahij: Jurnal Kajian Hukum Islam (2024): 1-16.

[12] Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

necessary to clarify the terms "Orientalism" and "Indonesian Islamic Studies" as used in this article. These definitions remain contested due to differing perspectives among Western scholars, Indonesian Muslim scholars educated in Western universities, and those trained exclusively in Indonesia, the Middle East, or other Islamic countries such as Malaysia. Clear conceptual boundaries are essential for analytical consistency throughout the study.

In this article, Orientalists are broadly defined as Western scholars who study, teach, or represent Eastern societies, whether in anthropology, sociology, history, philology, or other related disciplines. Their works and academic institutions are part of what is called Orientalism. Indonesian Muslim scholars who studied in the West are referred to as students of Orientalists, given their intellectual exposure and training by Orientalists.[13] While personal and professional collaborations exist between Indonesian and Western scholars, the term Orientalism remains widely used in Indonesian academia to denote Western scholars of Islam and related fields, despite many Western scholars distancing themselves from this label.

Following Edward Said, an Orientalist is "anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient, and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist in either its specific or its general aspects."[14]. Accordingly, Orientalism refers to any scholarly activity, across disciplines, that defines or represents the Orient through Western frameworks.

The roots of Orientalist scholarship can be traced to the Roman era, evolving over centuries into a distinct intellectual tradition.[15] Its early stages involved the translation of Eastern manuscripts, particularly Hebrew texts. By the 11th century, it focused on practical concerns, such as translating for Crusader prisoners.[16] The term "Orientalism" first appeared in 1638, with milestones such as Alexander Ross's 1649 English translation of the Qur'an.[17] During the colonial expansion, Orientalist institutions became more structured, motivated in part by the need for administrative and political control over Eastern societies. By the 18th and 19th centuries, Oriental studies were institutionalized through the establishment of university chairs and dedicated research centers, such as the University of Glasgow's Chair of Oriental Languages (1709), L'Orientale in Naples (1732), and later, the Institute for Islamic Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. These institutions granted academic authority to Western interpretations of the East, often without substantial input from Eastern scholars.

In the context of this study, Orientalism also includes contemporary scholars in Eastern or Southern countries—such as Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand—who adopt Orientalist analytical frameworks. Indonesian-born scholars who apply these approaches in studying Islam are also part of this broader Orientalist legacy. The responses to Orientalist influence in Indonesian Islamic studies itself have historically been fragmented into three intellectual tendencies: first, those who embrace Orientalist critiques and integrate them into Islamic reform (commonly referred to as Liberal Positivists);

[13] Said, Orientalim, pp. 1, 2 and 3.
[14] Said, Orientalim, p. 8.
[15] Said, Orientalism, p. 8.
[16] See Said, Orientalism, Anouar Abdel-Malek, "Orientalism in crisis", *Diogenes* 44 (Winter 1963), 104-12 and Tobias Hübinette, "Orientalism Past and Present An Introduction to a Postcolonial Critique".
[17] Atiq-ur-Rehman, "Alexander Ross's Translation of The Holy Quran and Analysis of The References, Terms, and Errors in His Rendition," *NUQTAH*, Vol. 3, No. 1: (Jan to June 2023).

second, those who reject Orientalism as a hostile intellectual project against Islam (Conservative Rejectionists); and third, a middle camp of Critical Constructionists who evaluate Orientalist scholarship critically and constructively, recognizing its scholarly contributions while challenging its biases. This intellectual landscape forms the necessary backdrop for analyzing the later decline in Orientalist influence and its consequences for the future of Indonesian Islamic studies.

A Momentous Change

A significant turning point in the development of Orientalism occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, following the publication of Edward Said's influential critique in *Orientalism* (1978). Said's work reframed Orientalism as a form of intellectual domination—a patronizing Western attitude toward non-Western societies, particularly in the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa. As a result, many Western scholars became reluctant to identify with the term "Orientalist," even though they continued to study and represent Eastern subjects. Alternative labels such as "Islamicist" or "Indonesianist" emerged, but these lacked the conceptual power and symbolic significance of Orientalism.

Despite these criticisms, Orientalism did not disappear. [18] Instead, it evolved into various forms: Neo-Orientalism, Colonial Orientalism, Post-Orientalism, and Contemporary Orientalism. At its core, Orientalism remained a mode of interpreting, representing, and often critiquing the East, albeit with shifting motivations and methods.[19] Whether expressed overtly or subtly, Orientalism persisted as part of what can be called the West's **"political unconscious,"** manifesting as both an intellectual interest and a power dynamic.

A notable moment of internal reflection occurred at the 29th International Congress of Orientalists in Paris in 1973, when scholars debated the possibility of abandoning the term "Orientalism" itself. This debate predated Said's critique but reflected a growing discomfort within the field.[20] Even as the terminology shifted, the practice of studying and representing the East—often from a Western perspective—continued, albeit sometimes framed as academic collaboration. These collaborations, however, frequently preserved underlying power imbalances, resembling coordinator–subordinate dynamics.[21]

What changed most after the 1980s was the **method of influence.** While direct colonial domination faded, indirect intellectual influence persisted. In the Middle East, regions such as Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Palestine remained subjects of Western strategic interest. A similar, though less overt, pattern could be observed in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, where scholarly and cultural engagement often reflected broader geopolitical interests.

Said's critique also sparked greater awareness among scholars from Asia and the Middle East, who began to critically assess Orientalist representations. This led to a partial decline in Orientalist projects and

[18] Ali Behdad and Juliet A. Williams, "Neo Orientalism Today, http://www.entekhabi.org/Texts/Neo_Orientalism_Today.htm, accessed on 2 May, 2025.

[19] See, among others, Hamid Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in a Time of Terro*r, Routledge, 2008.

[20] Adam Shatz, "Orientalism,' Then and Now" , https://www.nybooks.com/online/2019/05/20/orientalism-then-and-now/ May 20, 2019, accessed 2nd May 2025.

[21] Twenty-Ninth Congress of Orientalists, Paris, France, July 1973, GBR/1928/NRI/NRI2/1/15. *Needham Research Institute*. https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/21/archival_objects/329311, accessed June 11, 2025.

institutions, with some reducing their activities or shifting their academic focus. However, Orientalism did not vanish; instead, its purpose and presentation evolved. In this article, Orientalism is defined pragmatically: as the various ways in which Western scholars study, interpret, and represent the East, according to the shifting interests and benefits of the West. This includes fields as diverse as politics, religion, culture, economics, and anthropology.

Importantly, Orientalism is not viewed here as inherently harmful. When grounded in factual, field-based scholarship, it can contribute to mutual understanding. However, even objective representations can be perceived by Eastern societies as discrediting or threatening, especially when they highlight social or political weaknesses. In short, Orientalism remains present in contemporary scholarship, but it now faces more complex, vocal resistance. Among its most critical interlocutors are Western scholars who, while continuing similar studies, reject the Orientalist label, rebrand their institutions, and increasingly collaborate with Muslim scholars in shared academic spaces.

Orientalist Influence and the Development of Indonesian Islamic Studies

Like Islamic studies programs in the West, which have evolved in response to shifting geopolitical interests, the study of Indonesian Islam has undergone several key transformations.[22] These changes began during the late Dutch colonial period and continued in the first three decades following Indonesian independence, shaped initially by a small group of Orientalist scholars. From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, the field experienced significant expansion, gaining intellectual confidence and institutional growth. However, in recent years, this growth has stagnated, and the development of Indonesian Islamic studies has plateaued.

Western scholarly interest in Indonesian Islam has fluctuated over time, primarily driven by strategic considerations. Orientalist engagement tends to intensify in regions where Islam is perceived as a challenge to Western political interests, rather than based on Muslim population size. Indonesia, despite being home to the world's largest Muslim population, did not initially attract substantial Orientalist attention after independence, as its Muslim majority was not viewed as a significant geopolitical threat.[23]

However, Indonesia became a site of scholarly interest when it was seen as an opportunity for advancing Western academic, political, or economic agendas. In such cases, Orientalist scholars sought to build knowledge about Indonesia as a foundation for future engagement.

The legacy of Orientalist scholarship in Indonesia dates to the Dutch colonial period, most notably through Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936). A graduate of Leiden University, Hurgronje combined academic Orientalism with colonial administration. His dissertation, Het Mekkaansche Feest on the Hajj pilgrimage, along with his covert immersion in Muslim communities under the name Abdoel Ghaffar, exemplified how Orientalist scholarship intersected with colonial governance. His work, particularly his engagement with Acehnese leaders, became a foundation for early Western contributions to Indonesian Islamic studies.

[22] Muqtedar Khan, "Post-Orientalism and Geopolitics: Three Debates That Inform Islam and U.S. Foreign Policy", *Insight Turkey,* Vol. 22 / No. 2 /, 2020, p. 128.

[23] See Fuad Jabali and Zamhari, Ed. The Modernization of Islam in Indonesia: An Impact Study on the Cooperation between the IAIN and McGill University, Montreal and Jakarta: Indonesia-Canada Islamic Higher Education Project, 2003.

This legacy continued through later figures such as Clifford Geertz, whose typology of santri, abangan, and priyayi in *The Religion of Java* shaped scholarly and political understandings of Indonesian Muslims. Despite the critique,[24] Geertz's work remains a central reference in Indonesian Islamic studies curricula, including courses on Orientalism and Occidentalism at Islamic universities.[25]

In parallel with these Western scholars, a generation of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, many of whom were trained in the West, emerged as critical players in shaping Indonesian Islamic studies. These scholars, often students, colleagues, or collaborators of Orientalists, studied at prominent institutions such as McGill University, Temple University, UCLA, the University of Melbourne, the Australian National University, and universities in Leiden, Bonn, and Paris.[26]

A significant driver of this intellectual exchange was the IAIN Lecturer Nursery Program (*Program Pembibitan Dosen IAIN*) launched in the 1980s. These initiatives systematically selected and prepared promising young lecturers with strong academic and language skills for postgraduate study abroad. The first waves of this sending included notable young intellectuals from IAIN, such as Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid, and Zamakhsyari Dhofier. Harun Nasution had previously been trained in both the Middle East and the West. Their successors received training from native English speakers, such as Robert Kingham from Australia, before being sent abroad.

These Indonesian Orientalist-trained scholars can be grouped into three waves. The first wave, characterized by sporadic and pioneering figures, included notable names such as Munawir Sjadzali, Harun Nasution, Mukti Ali, Nurcholish Madjid, and Azyumardi Azra, many of whom have since passed away but have left significant scholarly legacies. The second wave included senior scholars such as Azhar Arsyad and Abdurrahman Masud, who remain active or have retired. The third wave consists of the current generation, including Kamaruddin Amin, Hamdan Juhanis, Yudian Wahyudi, Sirozi, Asep Saifuddin Jahar, Jamhari, Ali Munhanif, Masdar Hilmy, and Akh. Muzakki, Mujiburrahman, and Suaidi Asyari, many of whom hold leadership roles in Islamic universities.

The Indonesian government's decision to send IAIN lecturers to Western universities reflected its response to three major concerns. First, Western countries—some of them former colonial powers—were not Muslim-majority nations, yet held significant influence in shaping global Islamic discourse. Second, Orientalist scholarship was often criticized for distorting Islam and Muslim societies. Third, partnering with Western academic institutions risked exposing Indonesia's intellectual dependency, yet also offered an opportunity to strengthen its Islamic higher education.

Despite these tensions, the program has successfully produced a generation of globally engaged Muslim scholars who now actively contribute to academic, political, and social debates within Indonesia and beyond.

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[24] See for example, Mark Woodward, "Islamic and Religious Studies Challenges and Opportunities for Twenty-First Century Indonesia", Journal of Indonesian Islam: Islamic and Religious Studies, Volume 03, Number 01, June 2025. pp. 9-10

[25] Clifford Geertz, The Religion of Java, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1976.

[26] Asyari, Suaidi. Traditionalist vs modernist Islam in Indonesian politics: Muhammadiyah & Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in the Contemporary Indonesian Democratic and Political Landscape. VDM Publishing, 2010.

The McGill–IAIN Partnership: Peak Orientalist Influence in Institutional Reform

Among the various collaborations between Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) and Western universities, the partnership between McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies (MIIS) and Indonesia's Islamic higher education system (IAIN/UIN) stands out for its long-term vision, measurable objectives, and profound intellectual impact. Unlike other short-term academic exchanges with Western Europe, North America, or Australia, the McGill–IAIN partnership, which began informally in 1952 after the founding of MIIS by Canadian Orientalist Wilfred Cantwell Smith, was grounded in a shared effort to modernize Islamic studies in Indonesia.

In its early years, the cooperation was sporadic but deliberately directed toward overcoming the intellectual and institutional stagnation of Indonesia's Islamic education sector. A small number of early graduates, notably Harun Nasution, became key figures in reforming Islamic studies in Indonesia. Nasution, who studied at both Al-Azhar University in Cairo and McGill, played a pivotal role in shifting Indonesian Islamic studies from a Middle Eastern religious focus to a broader, Western academic framework.[27] His efforts established graduate programs in IAINs based on the McGill academic structure, marking a pivotal reorientation in Indonesia's Islamic education.

The partnership matured into a formal bilateral cooperation sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). From 1989 onwards, the collaboration expanded through three distinct phases. In Phase I, over 1,500 lecturers and administrative staff from 14 IAINs underwent training in fields ranging from religious studies and education management to gender studies and information systems. This phase marked a large-scale capacity-building effort to modernize Islamic higher education. Many alumni of this program—often humorously referred to as the "McGill Mafia"—later assumed leadership positions in Indonesia's Islamic higher education sector, shaping its academic direction.[28]

Phase II focused on strengthening human resources and institutional capacity at IAIN Jakarta and IAIN Yogyakarta. This involved systematic improvements in teaching quality, research capability, and administrative reforms, with a notable emphasis on gender equity through the creation of women's study centers and management training.

Phase III expanded the scope of Islamic studies by connecting university faculties with grassroots communities. Initiatives such as partnerships between faculties of education and rural primary schools, and collaborations with NGOs in underprivileged areas, expanded Islamic studies beyond traditional religious instruction toward community development and social equity.

Over two decades, more than 1,500 Indonesian academics and administrators received training under McGill's guidance, many of whom went on to become rectors, directors, directors-general, and national policy advisors. Notable alums include Yudian Wahyudi, now head of the Pancasila Ideology Development Agency (BPIP). Other outcomes of the partnership included international academic conferences,

[27] Other prominent figures who were at MIIS in the 50s included Mukti Ali and Mohammad Rasjidi, who both became Ministers of Religious Affairs. In the 1970s, 17 teaching staff from the IAINs came to MIIS on two-year scholarships funded by CIDA and the Hazen Foundation. All returned to senior positions in the Ministry and in the IAINs.

[28] For a comradeship details, see Jabali, Fuad and Zamhari, Ed. The Modernization of Islam in Indonesia: An Impact Study on the Cooperation between the IAIN and McGill University, Montreal and Jakarta: Indonesia-Canada Islamic Higher Education Project, 2003

collaborative research, and the modernization of Islamic higher education infrastructure, such as the digitization of libraries and the expansion of curricula.

Before this collaboration, IAINs faced significant intellectual and institutional limitations. Research outputs were rarely cited in policymaking or public discourse, and academic leadership was weak. Teaching and curriculum development were isolated from broader Indonesian social challenges. Most lecturers lacked doctoral degrees, creating a significant gap between student enrollment and faculty capacity. Islamic studies curricula remained narrowly confined to traditional religious sciences—Sharia, Tarbiyah, and Ushuluddin—without meaningful engagement with the social sciences or natural sciences.

The McGill–IAIN partnership marked the peak period of Orientalist influence in Indonesia, introducing critical academic methodologies, interdisciplinary approaches, and international academic standards to Indonesian Islamic studies. This period fundamentally transformed IAINs from isolated religious institutions into more globally connected Islamic universities.

The Domestic Institutionalization of Critical Islamic Studies

The influence of Orientalist-trained scholars in Indonesia extended beyond teaching and curriculum reform into the creation of independent research centers. These institutions played a critical role in promoting new methodologies and perspectives on Islam, many of which drew from Orientalist academic traditions. Through these centers, Indonesian Islamic studies began to adopt more analytical and interdisciplinary approaches, moving beyond normative religious interpretation.

The connection between these study centers and Orientalist scholarship is evident in several ways: through the educational backgrounds of their founders and directors, the analytical frameworks they applied, the sources of their research funding, and their emphasis on training and academic publishing. These centers became spaces where Orientalist-inspired critical inquiry could be adapted and indigenized within the Indonesian academic context.

One of the earliest and most prominent of these was the Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, established in 1995.[29] PPIM emerged from a recognition that Indonesian Islam was often marginalized in global Islamic studies. Its founders observed that Western scholars paid little attention to Indonesian Islam, viewing it as peripheral compared to the Middle East, North Africa, Iran, or the Indian subcontinent. PPIM sought to fill this gap by producing research that critically examined Indonesian Muslim societies on their terms, while remaining engaged with global academic discourses.

Since its founding, PPIM has expanded its focus to include social, political, and cultural studies, establishing itself as a strategic research hub with both local and international networks. Its publications and collaborations extend across Southeast Asia and beyond, reflecting its role as a bridge between Indonesian Islamic studies and global scholarship.

Following PPIM's example, nearly all State Islamic Universities (UINs) in Indonesia have since established their specialized research centers, addressing a wide range of topics. Many academic departments now publish their journals, featuring research by faculty and postgraduate students. These journals—many of which have received national accreditation, and some are indexed

[29] Lihat lagi data/referensi pertama

internationally through platforms like Scopus—reflect the growing institutionalization of critical Islamic studies within Indonesia.

The establishment of these centers marked a key phase in the domestication of Orientalist-influenced scholarship. While no longer driven by Western institutions, these centers continued to apply analytical frameworks introduced through earlier Orientalist engagement, reflecting an enduring intellectual legacy.

The Transformation of IAIN to UIN: Peak and Decline of Orientalist Influence

The transformation of Indonesia's State Islamic Institutes (IAIN) and Colleges (STAIN) into State Islamic Universities (UINs) represents the peak period of Orientalist influence in Indonesian Islamic education. This institutional reform was closely tied to the intellectual exchanges between Indonesian scholars and Western Orientalist institutions, particularly the collaboration between the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) and McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies (MIIS). Until the late 1990s and early 2000s, the IAINs were constrained by the 1989 Education Law, which limited them to offering instruction in a single field of knowledge.[30] By the 1990s, most IAINs had become similar to American-style Bible colleges, focusing narrowly on sacred texts and religious training while remaining isolated from broader academic and societal debates.

During this period, graduates of IAINs were rarely invited to contribute to national policy discussions on democracy, public health, economic development, science, or technology. Muslim scholars (ulama) were confined mainly to ceremonial roles, such as offering prayers at official events, with their influence limited to religious spaces and Islamic holiday observances.

This intellectual stagnation prompted a small group of reform-minded scholars—including Azyumardi Azra (IAIN Jakarta), Amin Abdullah (IAIN Yogyakarta), Imam Suprayogo (STAIN Malang), and Azhar Arsyad (IAIN Makassar)—to advocate for institutional transformation. Azra articulated the clearest vision for this change, drawing on four key factors.

First, his academic experiences at leading Western universities exposed him to models of higher education that were dynamic, multidisciplinary, and responsive to real-world human challenges. He observed how Islamic study centers in the West, supported by their universities and governments, critically and systematically studied Islam in ways far more rigorous than the narrow perspectives prevalent in Indonesia. Orientalist scholars, though few, often demonstrated a deeper analytical grasp of Islam than the much larger cohort of Indonesian Muslim scholars.

Second, there was growing concern about the limited job prospects for IAIN graduates. As student enrollment increased, career opportunities for Islamic studies alums remained stagnant, creating anxiety among students and the broader Muslim community.

Third, Azra and his colleagues recognized that the dichotomy between religious and general knowledge—long upheld in Indonesia and other Muslim-majority countries—had contributed to the socio-economic and intellectual marginalization of Muslims. This binary understanding, which prioritized religious knowledge solely for spiritual preparation in the afterlife, sidelined

[30] Azyumardi Azra. "From IAIN to UIN: Islamic Studies in Indonesia." In Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad and Patrick Jory, eds., Islamic Studies and Islamic Education in Contemporary Southeast Asia. Yayasan Ilmuwan, Kuala Lumpur: 2011, p. 44.

the study of science, technology, and social sciences relevant to everyday human challenges.

Fourth, there was an urgent need to broaden the study of Islam beyond purely theological perspectives. Without the support of disciplines such as anthropology, history, and the natural sciences, Islamic studies in Indonesia remained disconnected from pressing human issues, including poverty, disease, environmental crises, and crime.

The transformation of IAINs into UINs reflected a culmination of these debates, representing a direct challenge to the long-standing intellectual isolation of Islamic education. Reformers sought to integrate so-called secular sciences—long viewed as irrelevant or incompatible with Islamic education—into the university curriculum. They argued that a holistic understanding of human knowledge was essential for Muslims to make meaningful contributions to society and address contemporary global challenges.

This period marked the high point of Orientalist intellectual influence in Indonesia, as the integration of Western academic models into Islamic universities fundamentally reshaped their structure and purpose. However, as the following sections show, this idealism would later give way to more pragmatic and bureaucratic motivations, contributing to a decline in the critical spirit that initially drove the transformation.

The Decline of Orientalist Influence and the Rise of Pragmatic Transformation

The original motivation behind transforming IAINs (State Islamic Institutes) into UINs (State Islamic Universities) was to dismantle the outdated epistemological dichotomy between religious and general sciences and to open Islamic higher education to broader academic disciplines. To justify these transformations, several IAINs developed new epistemological frameworks, such as IAIN Yogyakarta's "integration-interconnection paradigm," IAIN Surabaya's "Tree of Knowledge (*Pohon Ilmu*)," IAIN Malang's "Ulul Albab," and UIN Jambi's "trans-integration of Knowledge." These paradigms provided the philosophical foundation for expanding into fields such as medicine, psychology, economics, and social sciences.

However, in recent years (particularly during the most recent wave of transformations), this idealism has been diluted, and around 14 IAINs initially transformed into UINs by introducing new faculties aligned with their epistemological frameworks. These included faculties of medicine, science and technology, health sciences, and social sciences. But by 2025, another nine IAIN/STAINs were converted into UINs without introducing such interdisciplinary programs. Instead, the transformation focused primarily on changing institutional status and leadership structures, without expanding into the critical fields envisioned initially.

These transformations were approved under the leadership of Minister of Religious Affairs Prof. Dr. KH. Nasaruddin Umar, with legal and ideal proposals developed earlier during the term of Yaqut Cholil Qaumas, whose political background in the Gerakan Pemuda Ansor (NU's youth wing) shaped a more pragmatic approach. Policy narratives from this period suggest that these transformations served the interests of bureaucracy and politics rather than renewing the intellectual mission of Islamic higher education.[31]

[31] The new State Islamic Universities are UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri (FEBI), UIN Sunan Kudus (FEBI), UIN Madura (FEBI), UIN Jurai Siwo Lampung (FEBI), UIN Palangka Raya (FEBI), UIN Palopo (Sharia Economics), UIN Abdul Muthalib Sangadji Ambon (FEBI), UIN Sultanah Nahrasiyah Lhokseumawe (FEBI), UIN Kiai Ageng Muhammad Besari Ponorogo (FEBI).

Notably, few of the newly transformed UINs opened faculties in science, technology, or other exact sciences; the very disciplines that had justified the transformation of earlier IAINs. Most of the "new" faculties, such as Islamic Economics and Business, had already existed in the prior IAINs. This signals a stagnation in the intellectual reform that initially accompanied the transformation from IAIN to UIN. The Orientalist influence, which once drove the expansion of interdisciplinary learning and critical inquiry, is now barely visible in these more recent changes.

The weakening of Orientalist influence is also evident in the near disappearance of large-scale international collaborations, such as the McGill-IAIN Project. Since the early 2000s, no comparable partnerships with Western institutions have emerged. Consequently, foreign funding, critical intellectual exchanges, and peer academic challenges have declined sharply. Although the Indonesian government has filled the financial gap through domestic funding schemes, such as LPDP, KIP Kuliah, and various MORA scholarships, these programs are managed internally, evaluated domestically, and lack the external intellectual critique that once pushed Indonesian Islamic studies to evolve. While these programs improve access to education, they do not replicate the rigorous cross-cultural academic engagement that Orientalist collaborations once provided.

This situation illustrates the limits of post-Orientalist optimism. As Khan suggests, letting the Orient "speak for itself" may dismantle Orientalism as a discipline, but it also risks diminishing the spirit of critical engagement.[32] Without external critique, there is a tendency for scholars to present only favorable narratives and downplay internal weaknesses. When intellectual discourse becomes self-referential—heard only by fellow Orientals—it risks losing the competitive drive that once fueled improvement. Over time, tolerance for mediocrity increases, and the commitment to objective, critical scholarship declines.

Conclusion

This study examined the historical and intellectual influence of Orientalism on the development of Indonesian Islamic studies, with a particular focus on the changing role of Western-trained scholars and the transformation of Islamic higher education institutions. The findings demonstrate that Orientalist scholarship, although initially tied to colonial interests, made a significant contribution to the intellectual and institutional modernization of Indonesian Islamic studies through academic partnerships, curriculum reform, and capacity building. The McGill–IAIN partnership marked a peak in this influence, fostering interdisciplinary learning and critical engagement.

However, in recent decades, the influence of Orientalism has declined. This is reflected in the shift from idealistic institutional reforms, characterized by the integration of general sciences, toward more pragmatic transformations driven by administrative or political considerations. The absence of sustained international collaboration and critical external perspectives has contributed to a stagnation in the intellectual growth of Indonesian Islamic studies, limiting its ability to address contemporary academic and societal challenges.

The study contributes to the literature by identifying a gap in previous research: the lack of analysis on how the decline of Orientalist engagement correlates with a reduction in academic rigor and enthusiasm

[32] M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Post-Orientalism and Geopolitics: Three Debates that Inform Islam and U.S. Foreign Policy", Insight Turkey, 2020 Vol. 22 / No. 2 / p. 135.

in Indonesian Islamic studies. Addressing this gap, the study argues that maintaining critical dialogue, whether with Orientalist scholars or other global academic communities, remains essential for fostering intellectual vitality and academic excellence in Indonesia's Islamic higher education sector.

Future research could further explore how Indonesian Islamic studies institutions can develop independent critical frameworks without relying solely on external Orientalist engagement, ensuring sustained academic growth rooted in both global and local intellectual traditions.

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