

# LOCALIZED ISLAMIC CONCEPTS IN DIPLOMACY: THE EXAMPLE OF *SILATURAHMI*

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## Abstrak

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*This article aims to make an addition to the field of diplomacy in Islam. Combining two methodological approaches, those of area studies and those of Islamization of human knowledge, I aim to put forward the idea of including localized Islamic concepts to enhance the discussion about Islamic diplomacy. Silaturahmi as understood and practiced in the region of Nusantara, and especially in Indonesia, serves as an example.*

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## Pendahuluan

Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country in the world. Around 200 Million Muslims form 88% of the country's population. Located between the Indian and Pacific Ocean, the archipelago has been part of important trading routes for centuries, and thus part of translocal networks spanning the Indian Ocean long before the formation of modern nation states (Freitag, 1997; 2010). This resulted in a vibrant culture that accommodates six major religions, nowadays sealed in the national ideology of *Pancasila*, which states the belief in 'the one and only God' (*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*).

In general (For this article, a short introduction to diplomacy should suffice because the focus is on the concept of *silaturahmi*. In a later version of this paper, it is planned to include a detailed discussion on the topic of diplomacy to illustrate further how diplomacy can benefit from localized Islamic concepts like *silaturahmi*.), "diplomacy is a reflection of the values of nations and peoples, their cultural and civilizational specificities, political choices, and their religious precepts and traditions. It is a portrait of the past, a reflection of the present and a vision of the future" (Arshid & Jamsheed, 2017, p. 5616). Furthermore, diplomacy is built around the principles governing the political structure of the state it represents. Diplomacy refers to international relations and how to keep good ties with other states. Therefore, it can be said that diplomacy is similar to *silaturahmi* in the sense that it is concerned about keeping or mending ties. That is why it can be beneficial to take a closer look

at what the concept of *silaturahmi* actually entails and how the socio-religious concept of *silaturahmi* can speak back to the field of diplomacy.

Trained in area studies with focus on Southeast Asia, I learned early to incorporate local concepts in my theoretical and analytical framework. During research for my PhD, local concepts and values became an additional focus. In my research, I make use of different research methods as reflected in the situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) and area studies' specific research methods (Houben, 2017). Taking a view from the inside, emic or local concepts are an important part of Area Studies' findings. These local concepts must be translated and used to analyze and further explain research findings. We can find different localized Islamic concepts in the greater area of Nusantara that are, in the way they are understood and practiced, unique to the area (Seise, 2017 & 2020, unpublished). Some of the most prominent concepts in this regard are *silaturahmi*, *barokah*, (the quest for) harmony and *rasa*.

However, localized Islamic concepts are not only relevant to area studies but can also be applied to other fields of research and studies. What I mean when I use the term "localized Islamic concepts" is the fact that Indonesia, as a majority Muslim country has contributed to the knowledge world (In his keynote speech "Localization" and "Knowledge Worlds" (2011), Liem C. Kelley introduced the term knowledge worlds) of Islam besides the common perception of it being located in the periphery of the Muslim world (Eickelman& Piscatori, 1990).

Following, I will explain how the concept of *silaturahmi* can be applied to diplomacy in the greater Muslim and non-Muslim world. By proposing to include the localized Islamic concept of *silaturahmi* in the field of diplomacy, I join area studies' methodology of using emic concepts with the conceptional framework of the Islamic worldview and the islamization of human sciences. It is in the conceptional framework of the later that scholars have tried to include Islamic concepts in human sciences as well as adapting human sciences to the Islamic worldview. Including Islamic concepts into human sciences is referred to as integration of knowledge and one of the methodologies to contribute to (Islamic) epistemology as understood and developed by different contemporary Muslim scholars closely related to the International Islamic University Malaysia (Bakar 2014; Al-Attas 1999; and others). Integrating Islamic concepts into human sciences as a form of enriching human sciences with religious wisdom and values forms an approach to return knowledge to the realm of values. Here, integration of knowledge differs slightly to what has been referred to as the Islamization of human knowledge as developed by Kamal Hassan, the former rector and emirate Professor

of IIUM. This method aims to ‘purify’ human knowledge from un- Islamic influences or traits that are not in line with the Islamic worldview (Berghout 2009; Berghout 2017; Abu Sulayman 2011). Enrichment with relevant references or concepts from Qur'an and Sunnah forms the second important element used in Hassan's method. Both methods have in common that they aim to de-secularize human sciences and (re)-connect.

### ***Silaturahmi***

(Some people prefer to use *silaturahim* instead of *silaturahmi*. I have found that the concept and practice referred to is the same, which I describe below. However, I noticed that Indonesian Muslims that belong to the Muhammadiyah or different groups related to the Muslim Brotherhood, prefer to use *silaturahim*, while the majority of Indonesian Muslims uses *silaturahmi*) For example:

- “O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person (Adam), and from him (Adam) He created his wife [Hawwa (Eve)], and from them both He created many men and women and fear Allah through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (do not cut the relations of) the wombs (kinship).  
Surely, Allah is Ever an All-Watcher over you.” (Qur'an 4:1)
- “Would you then, if you were given the authority, do mischief in the land, and sever your ties of kinship?” (Qur'an 47:22)
- For example: “Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should be hospitable to his guest; and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should maintain his kinship ties; and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should speak well or remain silent.” (Hadith from the collection of Bukhari).

*Silaturahmi* is a concept based on what Allah and the Prophet Muhammad said about keeping or mending ties between family or kins. There are several verses from the Qur'an that are usually used to explain the concept of *silaturahmi*<sup>4</sup>. And different Hadiths are quoted to underpin the importance of it<sup>5</sup>. However, what I found is that the use of *silaturahmi* as described in this article is unique to Indonesia, and arguably the greater Nusantara region (including Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and Southern Thailand). According to my observations, the concept of *silaturahmi* can be found everywhere among the Indonesian Muslim community and non-Muslim communities in Indonesia. Visiting a friend, family members or a teacher is often referred to as *silaturahmi*, not as *berkunjung* (visit). During my research I found that *silaturahmi* consists of two levels: it is both a practice and an intention

(niat). Without the intention of practicing *silaturahmi*, the act of visiting (this can also include talks on telephone, emails, etc.) is not considered *silaturahmi*. In addition, it always takes into account a person that visits as well a person that receives the visiting party. According to my observations, *silaturahmi* seems to be understood by the majority of Indonesia's Muslims because the word is used on a daily basis, during religious talks, and even during political campaign; e.g. s for the 2014 elections. At this time, a huge political campaign poster next to a traffic light in Yogyakarta read “Keutamaan Silaturahmi“ (the virtues of *silaturahmi*). The poster was put up by the Islamic party PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejaterah) and used a famous Hadith that in Indonesia is usually translated as: “*Silaturahmi* strengthens brotherhood, extends [your] age and increases [your] *rizq* [provision]”. The presidential candidate (and now president) Jokowi (Joko Widodo) also repeatedly used the word *silaturahmi* when referring to his many visits around Indonesia. This use also points to the potential of including *silaturahmi* in the theoretical framework of diplomacy.

My definition of *silaturahmi* in the Indonesian context reads as follows: *Silaturahmi is a religiously motivated form of social interaction (practice) through which consciously or unconsciously translocal relations are maintained on various scales from the local to the global and on different societal levels, including kinship, educational, economic and religious connections. Silaturahmi is also an intention (niat) that can serve as a religious motivator, as well as a reminder, and is mostly, although not exclusively, used by and between Indonesian Muslims.*

One of my main informants, Kyai Abdul Muhamin from the Pesantren Nurul Ummahat, regularly refers to the importance of *silaturahmi* in his religious lectures. For him, *silaturahmi* means “connecting people”, here relating to the Nokia slogan on purpose because according to him, the new electronic media and especially mobile phones have a discouraging influence on people's practice of *silaturahmi*. These media disconnect people, he argued in one of his talks. An important annual religious event that is often connected to *silaturahmi* is *Halal Bi Halal* during the Islamic month of Shawwal (Ind.: *Syawal*) after the end of Ramadan. During *Halal Bi Halal*, also referred to as *Syawalan*, different communities meet, listen to a religious talk, and eat together. This can take place in a village, a neighborhood, or among members of the same political party, religious circle, university, school, etc. One important element of these *Halal Bi Halal* events is to ask each other's forgiveness (with the phrase “*Mohon Maaf Lahir dan Batin*”), and to greet the members of one's community by either shaking or folding hands with/ in front of the other person. Younger people often kiss the hands of their elders (referred to as 'salim' in Indonesian).

*Silaturahmi* is also used for official purposes. For example, the alumni organization FORSILAM (Forum Silaturahmi As-Salam) of the Pesantren As-Salam Al Islami uses *silaturahmi* in her name. The importance to connect former *santri* (students at a pesantren) through this organization in different parts of Indonesia and in other parts of the world is expressed through the localized concept of *silaturahmi*. Another organization, FORPESS (Forum Pondok Pesantren Sumatera Selatan) has a strong focus on connecting different pesantren in South Sumatra through *silaturahmi*. Especially when *silaturahmi* is used for official purposes, as in the example of FORSILAM and FORPESS, I argue, the potential for it to be applied to the conceptional framework of diplomacy and especially an Islamic diplomacy is visible.

Going beyond Indonesia but staying closely connected to the Indonesian context, the Indonesian mosque and the Indonesian Restaurant Nusantara in Berlin, Germany are places where *silaturahmi* is practiced. For example, for Irfan and Ilham, two former Indonesian Master-students, the first place to ‘land’ in Berlin was the Indonesian mosque *Al -Falah*. Because, according to them, practicing *silaturahmi* and meeting other Indonesians, they explained, will surely make their time in Berlin easier and blessed.

The yearly food festival *Sate Somay* organized by the Indonesian mosque in Berlin is an activity where *silaturahmi* plays an extremely important role. As explained to me during a short field research in 2010, the main objective of this annual Indonesian food festival in Berlin is *silaturahmi*. This multi-religious and multi-ethnic event brings together Indonesians and non-Indonesians from all parts of Germany. Everybody can bring family and friends. Profit goes to the maintenance of the Indonesian mosque. Furthermore, one of my informants, mosque committee member at the time, explained to me that *silaturahmi* is one of the main contributions of the Indonesian mosque to the German society. He further explained that *silaturahmi* is used to avoid conflicts and to invite people to get to know Indonesian people and Islam. In this sense, *silaturahmi* is extended beyond Islam and the Muslim community and serves as a localized Islamic concept that has the potential to contribute to a harmonious society. And again, we can see that *silaturahmi*, as understood and practiced by Indonesians, has a diplomatic component attached to it.

Concluding, *silaturahmi* is a concept unique to Indonesia. Although grounded in a Hadith, its practice, use and meaning in everyday language among Indonesian Muslims is unique to Indonesia. It is through *silaturahmi* and its social reality that we understand annual Islamic celebrations like *Syawalan* or *Halal Bi Halal* and ritual feasts (*selamatan*). However, it is also through the social reality of Indonesian societies that are based on the community

rather than the individual that *silaturahmi* has been adapted to the Indonesian context, becoming such an important concept and value for Indonesian Muslims. So, how can the potential to improve these relations because the intention (*niat*) of keeping diplomatic ties has shifted to a religiously motivated intention.

Placing *silaturahmi* in the center of diplomatic relations causes a change in how other states are viewed. Through the concept of *silaturahmi*, state relations will be viewed similar to extended family relations. What does that entail? What is the Islamic and cultural etiquette people are taught in Indonesia to behave towards extended family members? According to my research and long term stay in Indonesia, Indonesian people are taught to show courtesy and friendliness. They are taught to overlook people's faults. When they receive visits from family members, they treat them the best way possible. When they are invited by extended family members, they accept their invitation. During times of grieve, Indonesian people will try to relieve the burden of their family members and entertain them. In case of bad treatment, it is good etiquette to try to overlook the faults of family members and to still treat them nicely. When family members ask for help, Indonesian culture teaches to try and help. When family members break up ties, Islamic teachings remind Indonesian Muslims to mend these ties again. And it is important to note that these cultural and religious teachings and values are usually adhered to because people seek God's pleasure and reward and not because they seek any worldly gains. Again, this illustrates, as I stated in my definition of *silaturahmi*, the religious motivation inherent in the practice of *silaturahmi*.

In this sense, practicing the concept of *silaturahmi* in diplomatic relations has the potential to improve and strengthen relations between states based on the intention to please God and follow the guidelines He has provided for the Muslim community and humanity in general. That is why it is important to note that, as in the use of *silaturahmi* in Indonesia, *silaturahmi* is not limited to Muslims but has the potential to include all of humanity.

Furthermore, an additional advantage of proposing *silaturahmi* to be used as a core concept in Islamic diplomacy, is the fact that it has the potential to uplift the role of Indonesia as a key player among other majority Muslim countries. Historically, the region of Nusantara has been perceived as being located in the periphery of the Muslim world (Eickelman&Pescatori, 1990); reasons of which are diverse. Including a localized Islamic concept that has its origin in Qur'an and Sunnah has the potential, among other things, to contribute to a change of this center-periphery-bias.

## Conclusion

The localized Islamic concept of *silaturahmi* is essential in understanding Muslim identity in Indonesia. Combining two different methodological approaches, those of area studies and those of the Islamization of human knowledge, I argued for including the localized Islamic concept of *silaturahmi*, as practiced in Indonesia, as an essential concept in the framing of Islamic diplomacy. If we aim to build again our Islamic civilization, it is necessary to return to the concepts and ideas introduced to us in Qur'an and Sunnah. It is our task, as academics and Muslim scholars, to revisit these concepts and include them in our modern human sciences, including the field of diplomacy. The localized Islamic concept of *silaturahmi* forms one of these concepts that can enrich our modern human sciences in a positive, thought provoking and substantial way. It is my humble hope that the ideas introduced in this short article can be an inspiration for Muslim academic scholars to develop further the concept of *silaturahmi* for the field of diplomacy and especially Islamic diplomacy.