Since the Iranian revolution of 1978-79, Indonesia’s Shi'i minority has grown. An increasing number of Indonesian students pursue their Islamic studies in the hawza 'ilmiyya of Qum, the most prominent centre of Shi'i Islamic education in the world. A Qum education enhances the reputations of Indonesian Shi'i ustads (religious teachers) within their Shi'i community. They play an important role in da'wa (Islamic propagation), educational and cultural activities.

Increase of Indonesian students in Qum

It is unclear exactly when Indonesian students began to pursue Islamic education in Qum, but it is known that some did so several years before the Iranian revolution. Ali Ridho Al-Habsyi, son of Muhammad Al-Habsyi and grandson of Habib Ali Kwitang of Jakarta, studied in Qum in 1974. Six graduates of the Pesantren Al-Khatib at Palu, Central Sulawesi, followed over the next two years. In September 1976, Umar Shahah, an Arab descendant from Palembang, South Sumatra, and today a famous Shi'i ustadh, came to Qum and, he says, studied alongside seven other Indonesian students (Umar Shaha, interview 9/1/2005). In his fieldwork in 1975, Fischer also noted the presence of Indonesian students in Qum; among foreign students, including those from Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Lebanon, Tanzania, Turkey, Negeria and Kashmir, Indonesians numbered the fewest. (Fischer 1980: 78).

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, interaction between its government and Indonesian Shi'i ulama has intensified. The victory of Ayatollah Al-Habsyi in 1954, Umar Al-Habsyi's father, was responsible for selecting candidates for study at hawza 'ilmiyya in Qum and other cities in Iran. Many were graduates of YATI and other educational institutions and most have become important Shi'i ustads in Indonesia.

Thus the number of Indonesian students studying in Qum has increased significantly. By 1990, fifty Indonesian students had reportedly completed their studies or were still studying in Qum. Ten years later the number of Qum graduates in Indonesia was more than a hundred. In 2005, fifty Indonesian students were selected to continue their studies in Qum (Ali 2002: 201-204), and in 2004, I was informed, ninety more students were selected.

In addition to the growing interest of Indonesian students to study in Iran, the Iranian government, through its International Center for Islamic Studies (Markaz Jahan-i-Usame Islamie: ICIS), has stepped up efforts to attract international students. Since 1994 ICIS has been under the supervision of the office of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution headed by the Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who also appointed its director.

The educational system of hawza 'ilmiyya

There are two educational systems at the hawza 'ilmiyya in Qum: the traditional system, which is the most famous and influential, and the modern system. The traditional system's curriculum includes both transmitted and intellectual religious sciences. Each subject has its own standard texts (Nasr 1987: 165-182), which are studied in halalat (study circles) under an ayatollah's supervision. The educational programme is composed of three levels: majalladat (preliminary), surus (external) and dar al-ikhtiyar (graduation class) or dar al-ikhtyar (graduation research) (Mommen 1983: 17). The three levels are to be completed by every mujtahid, a religious scholar who has achieved the level of competence necessary to make religious decisions based on reason from the principal sources of Islam. When a student receives the ijaza (license) that makes him a mujtahid, the honorific title ayatollah ‘ja’fet Allah, ‘sign of God’ is usually bestowed upon him. An ayatollah recognised as a marjal al-tasalif, meaning an authoritative source in matters of Islamic law, usually receives the title ayatollah al-i’zma (grand ayatollah). The common title of an aspiring mujtahid is hujjat al-Islam (proof of Islam). The structure of Shi'i ulama is pyramidal; those of the highest level, the grand ayatollah, are the fewest in number. The traditional system of education is extremely important in Shi'i society, given the major role of marjal al-tasalif throughout history.

The modern madrasa system is a transformation of the classical system, adopting the modern system of education in terms of grading, curriculum, classroom learning and rules. Non-traditional madrasas ‘are set up to serve needs not supplied by the traditional system’ (Fischer 1980: 81). The curriculum consists of religious and secular sciences presented through a slightly simplified version of traditional study courses. Unlike the traditional system, the modern madrasa system is not intended to train students to become mujtahids, but rather to become Islamic scholars and missionaries. This innovative type of education has provided an alternative for students who, for whatever reason, cannot follow the traditional system in the hawza 'ilmiyya. International students, including Indonesian students, are provided with this modern type of programme.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has made educational innovations in Qum’s hawza 'ilmiyya through the above-mentioned ICIS, which coordinates programmes for foreign students, assigns students to madrasas, and monitors their needs within the framework of disseminating Islamic knowledge and teachings globally. ICIS has organised innovative programmes based on the modern madrasa system for internationals students. The Madrasa Imam Khomeini, for example, offers programmes based on grade systems that include undergraduate and graduate levels, which mirrors the tertiary education of the modern educational system. Such innovation takes Qum’s hawza 'ilmiyya a step closer to becoming a leading international centre of Islamic learning.

Every year an ICIS representative conducts a selection process at such Islamic institutions as the International Cultural Centre of Jakarta and the Muthahhari Foundation in Bandung. In addition to aademic achievement, Arabic is requisite, as it is an international language for Islamic learning and the language of instruction at certain madrasas in Qum. At the same time, upon their arrival in Iran, Indonesian students are also required to follow a six-month training programme in Persian, the language of instruction at most Qum’s Islamic educational institutions.

Educational institutions attended by Indonesian students

Both educational systems have been attended by Indonesian students. The first group of Indonesian students were enrolled at Dar al-Tabligh al-Islami in 1965, founded by Ayatollah Muhammad Kazim Shar'atmadji (1904-1978) as an institution of Islamic learning. Dar al-Tabligh was known for its foreign students and for arranging their visas and residence permits. It organised a five-year programme with a credit system (Fischer 1980: 85) and a curriculum that included both religious knowledge and secular sciences such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, mathematics and English. The language of instruction was Arabic. Thus, its educational system was modern; it did not follow the traditional system of learning, even though it was strongly entrenched in the traditional hawza system (Umar Shahah, interview 9/1/2005). After the dissolution of Dar al-Tabligh in 1981, owing to its leader’s opposition to the concept of alwaf al-’jhah (‘mandate of the juriats’) implemented by Khomeini, Madrasa Hujjatiyya began to provide the same programme for foreign students. Since 1982 nearly all Indonesian students who have come to Iran attended Madrasa Hujjatiyya, including Syamsuri, a famous Shi'i ustadh Husein Shahal, who was trans-ferred to this madrasa after he had studied for two years at the Dar al-Tabligh. Unlike Dar al-Tabligh, the Madrasa Hujjatiyya follows the traditional system of education generally used in the hawza 'ilmiyya. The majority of Indonesian students who become Shi'i ustads only completed the preliminary level.

Recently, along with the educational reform in Qum, a large number of Indonesian students have registered at the Madrasa Imam Khomeini, which provides a modern system of education for Indonesian students. They can pursue undergraduate or graduate programmes and choose a specialisation.

Early Qum alumni, such as Umar Shaha hab and Husein Shahal, have become very prominent Shi'i figures and have contributed to the development of Islamic education and culture in Indonesia. Given ongoing educational innovations in Qum and Indonesians’ growing interest in them, Qum alumni might very well influence the future development of Islamic discourse in Indonesia.

Notes
1 Habib Al Al-Habbi (1870-1987) known as Ali Kentic was the founder of the famous Majlis ‘I’tibar (meeting place of education and da’wa) in Kencat located in Jakarta. He was regarded as a Shi‘i (friend of God) and his grave became a pilgrimage site for the people of Jakarta. After his founder died, the Majlis ‘I’tibar was led by his son Muhammad (1913-1995), who was close to the then President Suharto and GOLKAR political circles. Today it is under the leadership of Muham- mad’s son, Abdurrahman, Ali Kentic’s broth- er. Ali Ridho’s sister, Farida Al-Habbi is a famous Shi‘i figure who runs some Islamic foundations in Jakarta, including Al-Balit.

References
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