

The Basic Concept of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Thoughts Influenced by the Middle Eastern Islamic Renewal Movement

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the basic concepts of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's (1868–1923) thought and its relationship to the ideas of the Islamic renewal (tajdīd) movement that developed in the Middle East in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly the thought of Muhammad Abduh. Using a qualitative-historical approach (library research), a search of primary and secondary sources reveals that Ahmad Dahlan's key concepts—emphasis on the Qur'an and Hadith, encouragement of ijtihad and rejection of blind taqlīd, educational modernization, and the formation of social institutions—have a strong intellectual correlation with Middle Eastern renewal discourse, but have undergone a process of socio-cultural adaptation in the Indonesian archipelago. The implications of this study emphasize the role of literature, journals, and intellectual networks as channels for the transfer of ideas and recommend micro-historical studies to trace the routes of influence in more detail.

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INTRODUCTION

KH. Ahmad Dahlan is known as the founder of Muhammadiyah (November 18, 1912) and a pioneer of Islamic reform in Indonesia, emphasizing the purification of religious practices and the modernization of education. Several studies place his thought within the tajdīd tradition pioneered by Middle Eastern figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Their ideas on rationality, a return to the Qur'an and Hadith, and the importance of modern education spread throughout the Indonesian archipelago through various intellectual channels. This study attempts to map the main aspects of Ahmad Dahlan's thought and the mechanisms of his influence from the Middle East to the local Indonesian context.

The development of Islamic thought in Indonesia cannot be separated from the influence of the currents of Islamic reform that occurred in the Islamic world, particularly in the Middle East, in the 19th century. One of the central figures who brought this spirit of renewal to Indonesia was Kyai Haji Ahmad Dahlan (1868–1923), the founder of the Muhammadiyah organization. Through his socio-religious ideas and movements, Ahmad Dahlan sought to combine authentic Islamic values with the spirit of modernity and rationality developing in the global Islamic world. The literature on the relationship between Middle Eastern renewal movements and Islamic reformism in the Indonesian archipelago is relatively rich. Studies demonstrate the influence of Abduh and reformist periodicals (e.g., al-Manar, al-Imam) on the discourse of renewal in Indonesia, as well as the role of universities, magazines, and students returning from overseas studies as intermediaries of ideas. Specifically for Ahmad Dahlan, historical studies and educational analysis emphasize the transformation from the Islamic boarding school system to the formal Muhammadiyah school system as concrete evidence of educational modernization inspired by the idea of tajdid (reform). Recent studies (2018–2025) emphasize thematic correlations and the transmission of ideas through literature and intellectual

networks. KH. Ahmad Dahlan was born in Yogyakarta and grew up in a traditional religious environment. However, after performing the Hajj and living in Mecca for several years in the late 19th century, he began interacting with various discourses of Islamic reform. At that time, Mecca was a center of Muslim intellectual gatherings from various regions, including Egypt, Turkey, and India. Through contact with scholars and reading from figures such as Muhammad Abduh and Rasyid Ridha, Ahmad Dahlan began to understand the importance of *tajdid* (renewal) in religious life. Reform movements in the Middle East emphasized three main points: the purification of faith, the rationalization of Islamic teachings, and educational reform.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative-historical method (library research). The main steps include selecting and collecting primary documents (biographies, Muhammadiyah archives if available, writings of the founder and early followers) and secondary sources (journal articles, theses, books, and relevant online publications from 2010–2025). The analysis was conducted descriptively and comparatively to identify the basic concepts of Ahmad Dahlan's thought and examine evidence of intellectual influence from Middle Eastern reform movements. Validity was enhanced through source triangulation (comparison of various historical and analytical studies).

RESULT

A. Basic Concepts of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's Thought

Based on document analysis, the dominant central concepts include:

- (1) The return to reference to the Qur'an and Hadith. Ahmad Dahlan emphasized a literal and contextual reading of the texts as the basis for worship and legal practices, and criticized practices deemed heretical without a basis in the texts.
- (2) The encouragement of *ijtihad* and the rejection of blind *taqlid*. He encouraged the community to think rationally and reinterpret the law when the context changed—in line with Abduh's reformist spirit.
- (3) Modernization of education. The establishment of Muhammadiyah schools that combined religious and general knowledge was the most concrete manifestation of reformist thinking that adopted a modern formal education model.
- (4) Social organizations and charities. The establishment of integrated institutions (education, health, and *da'wah*) reflects a practical orientation towards social reform and public service.

B. Evidence of the Influence of Middle Eastern Reform Movements

The analysis reveals several lines of evidence: thematic similarities between the ideas of Abduh and Ahmad Dahlan (rationality, *ijtihad*, education); the existence of reformist literature and journals circulating in the archipelago; and historical research that identifies indirect intellectual connections through libraries, translations, and alumni of Middle Eastern studies. However, this influence was generally mediated, with ideas filtered and adapted to local Javanese conditions and the colonial context of the Dutch East Indies.

One of the most powerful influences of Islamic reform movements in the Middle East was the spirit of purifying the faith. Figures such as Muhammad Abduh called for Muslims to return to the primary sources of religion, namely the Quran and Sunnah, and to abandon practices lacking a strong theological foundation. Ahmad Dahlan adopted this principle in the Indonesian context. He rejected the superstitious, heretical practices (TBC) prevalent in Javanese Muslim society at the time. Through his religious studies and preaching, Dahlan sought to raise awareness that Islam is a rational, dynamic, and rational religion.

Another inspiration from the reform movement in the Middle East was the reform of the Islamic education system. Muhammad Abduh in Egypt developed an educational model that combined

religious and modern sciences at Al-Azhar University. Ahmad Dahlan later translated this idea by establishing Muhammadiyah schools that integrated religious and general knowledge. Education, according to Ahmad Dahlan, is a means of liberating humanity from ignorance and backwardness. Through education, Muslims are expected to be able to compete and contribute to national development.

Synthesis and Contextualization of Thought: What distinguished Ahmad Dahlan from other Middle Eastern reformers was his ability to adapt reformist ideas to the context of Indonesian society. He did not reject tradition entirely, but rather selected and adapted them to align with pure Islamic teachings and the spirit of modernity. Thus, Ahmad Dahlan created a model of Islamic renewal that was distinctly Indonesian: an Islam that was oriented toward progress, rational, and open, yet rooted in the values of monotheism and morality.

The results confirm that Ahmad Dahlan's thought did not emerge in a vacuum; it existed within the intellectual orbit of global *tajdid*, encompassing the ideas of Muhammad Abduh and his associates. However, it is important to note that Ahmad Dahlan formulated these ideas into concrete institutional strategies (schools, charitable organizations) that responded to local social and political realities. Thus, the relationship between Middle Eastern renewal and Indonesian reformism is dialogical—transnational inspiration meets local needs, giving rise to a distinctly Indonesian form of renewal (locality within modernity). This finding is consistent with previous studies that position Muhammadiyah as a modernist-*tajdid* movement connected to a broader intellectual network.

DISCUSSION

This study concludes that the basic concepts of KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought, emphasizing the Qur'an and Hadith, *ijtihad*, educational modernization, and social institutions, have intellectual roots traceable to the ideas of Islamic renewal in the Middle East, particularly Muhammad Abduh. The transfer of ideas occurred through literature, journals, and intellectual networks, but underwent local adaptations, resulting in institutional and practical forms of renewal in Indonesia. Recommendations for further research include a micro-historical study of correspondence archives, early Muhammadiyah library collections, and a comparative study of the intellectual networks between Muhammadiyah, Persis, and al-Irsyad. KH. Ahmad Dahlan's thought represents a creative synthesis of the Islamic traditions of the Indonesian archipelago and the ideas of Islamic renewal in the Middle East. Through the principles of purifying faith, rationalizing teachings, educational reform, and social activism, he successfully laid the foundation for the emergence of a progressive and contextual Islam. The influence of Middle Eastern renewal movements is clearly visible in the intellectual spirit and social practices of Muhammadiyah, which remains a major force in the development of Islamic society in Indonesia. The main limitations of this research are its reliance on online literature and limited access to primary archives (personal correspondence or rare manuscripts) that could provide stronger direct evidence of the pathways of influence. Therefore, fieldwork and archival research are highly recommended.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that KH. Ahmad Dahlan's reformist thought was built on four interrelated pillars: (1) a return to the Qur'an and Hadith as primary references for religious life, (2) the encouragement of *ijtihad* and resistance to blind *taqlid*, (3) the modernization of education through an integrated school system that combined religious and general sciences, and (4) the institutionalization of social service through organized *da'wah*, charity, and public welfare programs. These concepts did not emerge in isolation. Rather, they can be situated within the broader 19th-century *tajdid* current associated with Middle Eastern reformism, especially the intellectual orientation of Muhammad Abduh and his reformist milieu. The evidence identified in this research points to thematic convergence, shared reform agendas, and the circulation of reformist texts and periodicals that shaped

the renewal discourse in the Indonesian archipelago. However, the influence was not direct imitation. It was mediated through literature, students and scholars connected to Middle Eastern learning environments, and the broader intellectual networks of the late Dutch East Indies. Most importantly, KH. Ahmad Dahlan translated transnational ideas into practical institutional strategies suited to local Javanese religious culture and colonial socio-political conditions. Therefore, the relationship between Middle Eastern renewal and Indonesian reformism is best understood as dialogical: global inspiration met local needs, producing a distinct Indonesian model of modernist Islam, oriented toward rationality, progress, and social transformation, while remaining anchored in monotheism and moral discipline. Future research should prioritize archival and micro-historical work to trace more direct pathways of transmission and influence.

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