



IU BLOOMINGTON

# EMERGING AREAS OF RESEARCH

## Abstract Template -- Due June 30, 2017

Title of initiative to be proposed:

The Crisis of Religious Authority in Islam

Name of lead PI, with title, department/school:

Ron Sela, Director, Islamic Studies Program; Associate Professor, Central Eurasian & International Studies; School of Global & International Studies

Key team member names and departments/schools (up to 10 names):

Asma Afsaruddin, Near Eastern Languages & Cultures, SGIS; Asaad Alsaleh, NELC, SGIS; Beth Buggenhagen, Anthropology, COLL; Hussein Banai, International Studies, SGIS; Devin DeWeese, Central Eurasian Studies, SGIS; Seema Golestaneh, CEUS, SGIS; John Hanson, History/African Studies, COLL/SGIS; Nur Amali Ibrahim, International Studies/Religious Studies, SGIS/COLL; Nazif Shahrani, Anthropology/NELC/CEUS, COLL/SGIS; Winnifred Sullivan, Religious Studies, COLL; Timothy Waters, LAW



Description of area to be proposed. What constitutes this area of research or creative activity as emerging? (Word limit=500)

The crisis of religious authority in Islam, manifested in the fragmentation, plurality and exclusivity of religious authority, has been among the most fiercely contested phenomena among Muslims in both Muslim-minority and –majority societies. Despite its significant implications for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, implications that range from the ability to perform mundane religious activities to embracing radicalized positions or even religious terrorism, this subject also has been among the least studied in the West. Recognizing and decoding this complex topic has proven particularly confusing for outside observers and policy makers who are often assigned to identify concrete leaders or leaderships and distinct sources of inspiration for particular types of religious or religion-sanctioned behavior. But in recent decades, it seems, such observers (academics and professionals) typically come up short. Perceptions of a crisis of religious authority in Islam have been exacerbated by intensifying (and often unsuccessful) efforts by anxious religious functionaries, judges and other 'ulamā' – widely regarded as the guardians, transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge, doctrine and law – to regulate Islam in a religious climate that many 'ulamā' characterize in terms of *fawḍā*, that is, chaos or anarchy. It appears that there is a wide agreement about the existence of a "crisis," but the roots of the crisis, or suggested avenues for its analysis, are typically attributed to alleged challenges that Muslims face in coping with modernity in a post-colonial world, or to a more general identity crisis in a global age. This identity crisis, it is claimed, has also led to confusion, self-doubt, and breakdown of the sense of community, the weakening of states and nations, radicalization, and to anti-establishment sentiments.

In this initiative, we propose to create an original, pragmatic and multi-lingual framework for analyzing the causes, spectra, and consequences of the (seemingly) increasingly diverse, decentralized and disjointed practices of Islamic religious authority, both regionally and comparatively. With our interdisciplinary team, we introduce a novel, wide-ranging and multi-lingual research agenda that historicizes debates about religious authority in Islam and moves away from misleading periodization; distinguishes the reality of decentralized and multivalent authority from the appearance of fragmentation that globalization and modernity amplify; critically examines the popular view among scholars and policy makers that takes as given state monopoly over the definition and exercise of religious authority and that also understands the plurality of religious authority to be an expression of opposition to the state and its servants; and also examines the diffusion of authority vis-à-vis themes of governance, polycentrism, transnational movements, and the emergence of increasingly networked peoples and societies. By engaging policy-related issues, we also aim to challenge a misleading and damaging national discourse about Islam. In this initiative we pay close attention to regions of the world that are not as widely studied through an Islamic studies lens and we plan to translate all the work we produce into multiple "Islamic" languages and disseminate it throughout our regions of inquiry.

Please submit to [earprogram@indiana.edu](mailto:earprogram@indiana.edu)