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REFORMING THE FAITH

INDONESIA'S BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF ISLAM

James M. Dorsey

NAHDLATUL ULAMA (Revival of the Muslim Scholars), with 50 million plus members, the world's largest Sunni Muslim movement, is bent on reforming Islam. The powerful Indonesian conservative and nationalist group that operates some 14,000 madrassahs (or religious seminaries) across the archipelago has taken on the ambitious task of reintroducing *ijtihad* or legal interpretation to Islam, as it stands to enhance its political clout with its spiritual leader Ma'ruf Amin. The leader is slated to become vice president as the running mate of incumbent President Joko Widodo in elections scheduled for April 2019.

In a 22-page document, argued in terms of Islamic law and jurisprudence, Nahdlatul Ulama's powerful young adults wing, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, spells out a framework for what it sees as a humanitarian interpretation of Islam, first developed in

2015 with government backing—one that is tolerant and pluralistic in nature. The group that boasts a two million-strong private militia, which prides itself on its participation in the 1965 slaughter of alleged communists in the wake of an aborted pro-communist coup, defines as radical not only militants and jihadists but any expression of political Islam and asserts that it is struggling against the weaponization of the faith.

To achieve its reform goal, Nahdlatul Ulama is bonding with groups across the globe, spanning the political spectrum from Muslim organizations to Jews, Christian Democrats, evangelists and evangelicals, and Islamophobes—and all this in a bid to muscle the political clout to impose the adoption of its concept of humanitarian Islam on Middle Eastern states that it sees as the motor of political Islam and religious extremism.

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Photo: Guliver Image/Getty Images

Embracing reform: President Widodo and Nahdlatul Ulama's leader Ma'ruf Amin

MANIFESTO POLITICS

Proponents within Nahdlatul Ulama of the initiative to reform Islam chose the movement's young adults wing Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, as their vehicle as part of a broader strategy to neutralize the group's more conservative elements. Ansor, whose leader reportedly is being groomed for a senior position in government (possibly Defense Minister) is the brother of Yahya Staquf, a diminutive and soft-spoken General-Secretary of the group's Supreme Council. He is also a member of Indonesian President Joko Widodo's presidential advisory council, and the public face of the initiative.

The initiative is designed to counter what many in Nahdlatul Ulama—founded in 1926 in opposition to Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's neo-puritan interpretation of Islam—see as the faith's foremost challenge: the rise of political Islam in both its militant and non-violent forms. Nahdlatul Ulama's "analysis of tyranny—which parallels and reflects that of traditional Sunni Islam—is that tyranny is inextricably linked to human nature itself, which (in the absence of spiritual awareness and self-discipline) has a tendency to indulge in self-gratification and the exploitation/oppression of others," said C. Holland Taylor, the representative of Ansor to the United Nations,

Europe, and the Americas and co-founder of the LibForAll Foundation.

Nahdlatul Ulama was founded in response to West Sumatran pilgrims, who returning from Mecca in the nineteenth century, brought back with them Saudi notions of a puritan, literal interpretation of the faith. The pilgrims argued that Indonesia's fusion of Islam and local culture constituted a deviation from the true faith.

Resulting in the Padri War (1821-1837) in which local rulers defended their authority against the Wahhabis, the pilgrims did not shy away from violence in their bid to enforce their vision. Much like the Wahhabis elsewhere in the early part of the twentieth century and modern-day jihadists, they killed those who rejected their vision, enslaved unbelievers, and propagated the destruction of historic graves and sites to prevent idolatry.

It is a war that Nahdlatul Ulama continues to fight using other means against Wahhabism—and what it sees as its descendants—that it is now framing as reform of Islam. In so doing, Nahdlatul Ulama takes on fundamental precepts of Islam upheld by Saudi-inspired ultra-conservatives as well as expressions of political Islam.

In a 2016 speech at the Jakarta Foreign Correspondents Club, Staquf said the following:

The politicization of Islam is readily enabled by the fact that supremacist political theories—which became fully established during the Middle Ages and continue to hold sway to the present—represent a core element of orthodox Islam [...]. Integral to this dynamic is the fact that a number of Muslim autocrats rely upon Islamic supremacism to justify their monopolization of power, while propagating sectarian/supremacist Islam as an instrument of soft power on a truly global scale.

Echoing Nahdlatul Ulama's Nusantara Manifesto that embodies the movement's reform proposals, Staquf went on to say that

What we require is not merely the emergence of new intellectual concepts, reinterpreting and recontextualizing Islam. Alongside such necessary theological/academic endeavors, we must also develop a powerful social movement that encourages Muslim communities to embrace religious views that foster pluralism, tolerance and social harmony, so that Muslims (and non-Muslims) throughout the world may come to regard these as the primary values of Islam. Hand in hand with this endeavor, the international community should strive to develop a societal consensus to halt the politicization of Islam and impel those who fuel the politics of Islamic supremacism—including Iran and Saudi Arabia—to abandon this destructive policy.

Describing orthodox Islam as “os-sified,” the Manifesto argues that there is a “wide discrepancy [...] between the structure of Islamic orthodoxy and the context of Muslims’ actual (lived) reality.” It attributes the discrepancy to practices governing relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, including the rights, responsibilities, and role of non-Muslims who live in Muslim-majority societies; relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim world; the legitimacy of modern nation states with political systems that govern the lives of Muslims; and the relationship between Islamic law and state constitutions and statutory laws/legal systems.

The Manifesto also rejects the concept of a caliphate as a solution and calls for a redress of

key tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that authorize and explicitly enjoin [...] violence [...]. Various actors—including but not limited to Iran, Saudi Arabia, ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, and Pakistan—cynically manipulate religious sentiment in their struggle to maintain or acquire political, economic, and military power, and to destroy their enemies, the Manifesto concludes.

Laying out a road map for reform that pays tribute to Southeast Asia scholar Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid's description

The Nusantara Manifesto insists that the crisis in Islam forces Muslims to develop new religious teachings suitable to the modern era; and mobilize the political support necessary to establish an alternative religious authority that is capable of propagating and defending these new teachings.

of Indonesia as a “beehive of novel Islamic thought,” the Nusantara Manifesto insists that the crisis in Islam forces Muslims to re-evaluate a number of obsolete concepts that remain firmly entrenched within Islamic orthodoxy; develop new religious teachings suitable to the modern era; and mobilize the political support necessary to establish an alternative religious authority that is capable of propagating and defending these new teachings.

LOCKING HORNS

Ansor's battle pits calls by reformists for changes to texts rooted in the Qur'an against ultra-conservative rejection of the concept of *bida'* or innovation based on a *hadith* or saying of the Prophet Mohammed.

The introduction of slavery by Islamic State is based on Islamic law. What can we do about this? Logically, we must revise Islamic law [...]. We need to also consider things like relationships between different religions. What we believed hundreds of years ago isn't necessarily relevant or appropriate today, said Staquf.

Similarly, Staquf argued that according to the rules of *fiqh* [classical Islamic law or jurisprudence], their imam has the right to choose: he may execute, he may ransom, he may enslave prisoners. This provision exists within *fiqh*. And if we may implement without questioning (*taqlid*) any provision of *fiqh* endorsed by the authoritative classical *ulama*, then we may implement this provision also and butcher such people, according to the rules of *fiqh* that still exist today. This is a problem.

Speaking to Islamic scholars gathered at a prestigious Nahdlatul Ulama madrasa in Rembang to discuss reform of the faith, K.H. Aunullah Habib, head of Ansor's theological wing and a prominent itinerant preacher, warned that

today, the world is facing chaos because of attempts by Muslim extremists to implement elements of *fiqh* that are no longer compatible with twenty-first-century reality. The catastrophic violence and human misery that result from these attempts are most visibly on display in the Middle East but threaten the entire world, presenting each of us with a profound moral choice: shall we remain silent or follow the example of the noble prophets in confronting tyranny?

Countering ultra-conservative dogmatism, Habib justified the call for reform by noting that "*fiqh* is the product of *ijtihad* [independent

legal reasoning] and thus relative [subject to change], not Absolute or worth dying for."

Habib's deputy, K.H. Abu Yazid Bustomi, took the argument a step further by saying Muslims needed to escape, as he put it,

religious tyranny, the tyranny of dogma, the tyranny of classical *fiqh* and the tyranny of thinking that we have the most correct understanding of religious truth [...]. The only solution to the crisis facing Muslim communities worldwide is to construct a global *fiqh* that reflects our present reality. We [Nahdlatul Ulama theologians] have the requisite ability, courage and authority to conduct *ijtihad*.

Participants in the gathering were issued a licence to interpret the seven-verse *Fatihah*, or opening chapter of the Qur'an, which Muslims believe summarizes the holy book's essence and asks for guidance, lordship and mercy of God. The license targeted reinterpretation of verses six and seven of the *Fatihah* that are traditionally interpreted as referring to Jews as "those who have incurred Your wrath" and Christians as "those who have gone astray." Religion scholar and Anglican pastor Mark Durie noted "that devout Muslims are daily declaring before Allah that Christians have gone astray and Jews are objects of divine wrath, must be considered a matter of central importance for interfaith relations. It's difficult because

it is the hadith that gives the conventional interpretation that would need to be disavowed in some way."

Implicit in the push for reform is what amounts to a contested analysis of the root cause for the rise of ultra-conservatism and militancy in Indonesia. It is an analysis that puts less emphasis on domestic grievances, including marginalization, disenfranchisement, exclusion, and lack of prospects of social and economic advance as the fertile ground for the embrace of Saudi and Arab-inspired ultra-conservatism as well as Arabization. The notion of Arabization is fueled by shifts in social behavior that include greater adherence to more literal interpretations

of the faith; changes in consumption and sartorial choices; a stark increase in the number of veiled women; more frequent pilgrimages to Mecca, and increased use of Arabic terms in Bahasa Indonesia.

Anthropologist Joel C. Kuipers and religion scholar Askuri noted in a 2017

study that in Bantul, a town south of Yogyakarta, the use of Javanese rather than Arabic names for newly born had

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dropped from 70 percent in the early twentieth century to less than 10 percent in 2010. The choice for Arabic names for newly born among Abangan—a Javan sect numbering more than 12 million people who adhere to a syncretic form of Islam that marries the faith with Hindu and animist rituals—increased substantially during the 1965 slaughter of suspected communists. Concerned that they too would be targeted, Abangan parents opted against Javanese names. "It was better to give your child an unsuspicious name. Sort of like in Europe after World War II, when but a few Adolfs were born,"

Kuiper said.

Nahdlatul Ulama's identification of the flow of ultra-conservative notions and money from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states as the core of the problems was partly informed by the fact that some of its mosques, as well as ones associated with Muhammadiyah

—Indonesia's second largest Muslim movement with some 20 million followers that was often associated with ultra-conservative efforts to purify religious beliefs and practices—were being taken over by the Indonesian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. In a twist of irony, Nahdlatul Ulama's Ittihad Muballighin or Union of Preachers, despite the fact that anti-Wahhabism was grafted into the movement's DNA, was its grouping with "the most direct connections to Saudi Arabia and the Muslim World League," one of the kingdom's main vehicles for the propagation and funding of ultra-conservatism, according to Indonesia scholar Martin Van Bruinessen. In fact, one of the movement's most prominent conservatives, Kiai Haji Ahmad Sjaichu, served as one of the League's main entry point into the archipelago.

Perceptions of Arabization were furthered by the fact that many ultra-conservative and militant activists are Indonesians of Arab descent, graduates of Arab universities, including the Islamic University of Medina, or have other Arab connections. They strive to correct Indonesian Muslim practices and beliefs deemed to be deviant often operating from mosques and seminar-ies that were ideologically and financially supported by Gulf states.

In a November 2018 rally attended by Widodo, Ansor general chairman H.

Yaquut Cholil Qoumas, Staquf's brother, said the following:

We are acutely aware that the mindset on display in the Middle East has begun to penetrate our beloved country. Conscious of the virulent threat that confronts us, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor always and explicitly rejects those [Sunni radicals] who claim to possess a monopoly on religious truth while condemning the beliefs of others, who constitute the majority of Indonesia's citizens. Gerakan Pemuda Ansor also rejects the weaponization of religion as a political tool to acquire worldly power, which the tragic example of the Middle East and other regions proves to be a source of bitter conflict and division—by deliberately inciting the inhabitants of a nation to despise, reject and even seek to destroy their fellow citizens

Arabization is frequently used as a code word for the spread of Saudi-inspired ultra-conservatism and the encroachment of Arab culture that Indonesia and Islam scholar Ahmad Najib Burhani equates to resistance against Westernization as a foreign cultural threat. In its reasoning, Nahdlatul Ulama reduces the phenomenon to Middle Eastern funding, indoctrination of Indonesian students at Saudi educational institutions like the Islamic University of Medina, and the provision of ultra-conservative texts to local educational and cultural institutions with ultra-conservative curricula.

Indonesia scholar Martin van Bruinessen notes that "the talk of Arabization versus Westernization implicitly assumes an essentialized, homogenized Arab world, or an equally monolithic West, impinging upon a vulnerable and malleable Indonesian Islamic community." Disciples of late Indonesian president and charismatic Nahdlatul Ulama leader Abdurrahman Wahid quote him as saying that "Islam was not intended to make us adopt Arabic culture. It was not intended to adopt the word *ana* for the word I, *antum* for you, or *akh* for brother. We know what is ours and need to separate culture from teachings."

IGNORING DISTINCTIONS

The fact of the matter is that the 1998 fall of Suharto and emergence of democracy enabled ultra-conservative and militant voices to express themselves, ultimately becoming in the words of Van Bruinessen "the dominant voices, setting the terms of debate."

Nahdlatul Ulama, nonetheless, lumps various strands of ultra-conservative and political Islam together, rejecting any differentiation in the myriad of Wahhabi, Salafi, and religiously-

inspired political groups that run the gamut from jihadist to apolitical, including the Muslim Brotherhood or Hizb-ul-Tahrir that often are as hostile towards one another as they are towards perceived common enemies.

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Nahdlatul Ulama's analysis further brushes over the fact that corruption facilitated the uncontrolled flow of funds from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states that often was allowed through customs unchecked at Indonesian air and seaports.

"We know this threat, we have been fighting it for almost 90 years—it's

our daily business to face them. We know how they think, we know who they are, we know how they operate. We are encouraging Muslim communities all over the world that they have the right to be Muslims, while at the same time maintaining their own local cultures and civilization," Yahya Staquf said. Staquf was referring to the fact that Nahdlatul Ulama was founded specifically to preserve traditional Indonesia Islam against the spread to the then Dutch East Indies of Wahhabism in the wake of the Saudi conquest of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, and the more conservative agenda of

Muhammadiyah, established by the Saudi-educated scion of a prominent Yogyakarta religious family, Ahmad Dahlan. Ironically, as Indonesia turned more conservative over the last decade, leaders of not only Muhammadiyah but also Nahdlatul Ulama, as well as militant preacher Abu Bakar Bashir, often hailed from a prominent seminary that increasingly disseminated puritan, anti-Western Islamic currents as a result of its close ties to the World Muslim League, the primary Saudi vehicle that globally supported ultra-conservatism.

To counter militancy and political Islam, Nahdlatul Ulama established a center to train Arabic-speaking students to combat jihadist rhetoric and co-founded the Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Radicalism and Extremism (VORTEX), initially a joint program with the University of Vienna in Austria funded by the Austrian interior ministry to “produce counter-narratives against radical ideas and propagate them globally,” according to an official of the movement.

The project effectively died a silent death after several years. Ansor, however, also has cooperative arrangements with Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS) at Sweden’s National Defense College and Policy Exchange in the UK and has created a cyber army of its own. Further, LibForAll, the foundation co-founded by Taylor, is a member

of the European Union’s Radicalization Awareness Network.

In Holand’s words, Vortex led Syuriah PBNU [the NU Supreme Council] to conclude that ISIS propaganda is rooted in actual tenets of Islamic orthodoxy, despite statements to the contrary issued by al-Azhar and various grand muftis/state ulama throughout the Middle East. This, in turn, led to/informed the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) and the ISOMIL Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration, which VORTEX helped to shape; the First Global Unity Forum; the Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam; and the Nusantara Statement/Nusantara Manifesto.

ISLAM WITH JAVANESE CHARACTERISTICS

Aming mystical music, Sufi images and an emphasis on Javan saints, Rahmat Islam Nusantara: East Indies Islam as an Expression of Divine Grace, produced by one of the group’s prominent activists, Ahmad Mustofa Bisri, denounces Wahhabism as “grasping and materialistic Islam, coarse and cruel.” With the video describing the Islamic State as a “Wahhabi army,” Bisri warned that “genuine Islam, Islam Nusantara, Indonesian Islam, the Islam taught by the Messenger of God, has been supplanted by Saudi Islam [...] The Wahhabi view is just a ghoul-

ish nightmare that keeps the world awake at night, trembling in horror.” Bisri roots the movement’s non-legalistic interpretation Islam in traditions of Sufism, the faith’s mystical wing.

The film suggests that Wahhabi persecution of Muslims adhering to less literal and alternative strands of the faith and its destruction of shrines and sacred graves because they allegedly represent idolatry created the basis for jihadism. Implicitly equating jihadism with Wahhabism, one scene in the film depicts Islamic State fighters

marching prisoners to a riverbank, shooting them one by one and dumping their bodies over a blood-soaked dock into the water.

The scene is accompanied by Wahid, the former president and Nahdlatul Ulama leader, singing the lyrics of a Javanese mystical poem: “Many who memorize the Qur’an and Hadith love to condemn others as infidels while ignoring their own infidelity to God, their hearts and minds still mired in filth.” Said Nahdlatul Ulama executive council chairman Said Aqil Siradj at an introduction to the film in 2016: “Islam Nusantara is not anti-Arab, but

it is an Islam that developed in the eastern islands and it is very different to the Islam of the Middle East.” Siradj asserted that Islam Nusantara preceded Wahhabism, established by preacher Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab in the

late eighteenth century, by some 300 years.

Nahdlatul Ulama’s campaign amounts to more than simply confronting ultra-conservatism and militancy. It is a pushback against the notion that secularism and pluralism are expressions of a Western conspiracy to undermine Islam frequently identified by the Arabic

term for cultural invasion *al-ghazw al-fikr*. Fear of the conspiracy in 2004 prompted Nahdlatul Ulama as well as Muhammadiyah, to remove prominent moderates from their leadership committees and Indonesia’s semi-official Council of Muslim Scholars (MUI) to declare a year later that secularism, liberalism, and pluralism were incompatible with what Indonesia scholar Moch Nur Ichwan terms “puritanical moderate Islam.”

Masruf Amin, Nahdlatul Ulama’s spiritual guide, MUI head and Widodo’s vice-presidential running mate in elections scheduled for April,

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described the movement's more conservative approach as "softening the hardliners, hardening the soft-minded." The shift towards greater conservatism constituted the culmination of battles between moderates and conservatives in various Muslim groups that were fought over the decade running up to the moves in 2004 and 2005. As a result, the shift meant that proponents of inter-faith dialogue, pluralism and minority rights were sidelined. It moved many of them to revert to concepts of an indigenous, traditional Indonesian Islam.

The Indonesian government backs the Nahdlatul Ulama reform initiative in the belief that it offers an ideological antidote for radicalism and terrorism.

The Indonesian government backs the Nahdlatul Ulama reform initiative in the belief that it offers an ideological antidote for radicalism and terrorism. Partnerships with local Muslim groups are an important part of Indonesia's "comprehensive" counterterrorism strategy that balances the use of hard power with "religiously and culturally sensitive approaches," said Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi.

Security measures should not [mean] blindly attacking. Counterterrorism doesn't always have to mean direct armed confrontations. Promoting tolerance and pluralism is equally important—this is what differentiates Indonesia from other nations. We're lucky because we have

Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah who, together with the government, continue to voice the importance of tolerance, pluralism, moderateness, Marsudi said.

Both Nahdlatul Ulama and the government see Islam as a model that enables harmony in a religiously diverse society, the basis for a marriage between Islam and nationalism, and a framework that allows Muslims to accept a secular polity. It constitutes an effort to reverse the flow of ideas that historically travelled from the Arab heartland of Islam to the

Muslim periphery on the back of maritime trade links dating back some 1,100 years that allowed Arab merchants to play an important role in introducing Islam to the archipelago.

President Widodo affirmed the government's support in November 2018, when Ansor presented him with a commemorative steel plaque engraved with a statement summarizing the essence of the manifesto that embodies Islam Nusantara, at a rally in the Central Javanese town of Pekalongan attended by some 100,000 of the group's members gathered to commemorate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad and National Heroes' Day.

NATIVIZING ISLAM

Islam Nusantara, Nahdlatul Ulama's brand of the faith that is closely associated with Wahid's concept of *pribumisasi* Islam, or the nativizing and indigenization of Islam, which he introduced in the 1980s. Wahid, a religious pluralist and proponent of inter-faith dialogue and coexistence widely known as Gus Dur, saw Nusantara Islam as the marriage of Islam and Indonesia's local culture. He viewed the adoption of Arab garb and the replacement of Bahasa religious terms with their Arabic counterparts as an effort to drive a wedge between Islam and local culture.

V.S. Naipaul noted in his book, *Among the Believers* (1981), that

Islam, which had come [to Indonesia] only in the fifteenth century, was the formal faith. But the Hindu-Buddhist past, that had lasted for 1,400 years before that, survived in many ways—half erased, slightly mysterious, but still awesome, like Borobudur itself. And it was this past which gave Indonesians [...] the feeling of their uniqueness.

Said Indonesia legal scholar Nadirsyah Hosen: "Pribumisasi Islam is a form of resistance to transnational Islam, which was considered an imported product, poorly suited to Indonesian culture."

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Burhani, the Indonesia and Islam scholar, described Nusantara Islam as "an attempt to draw a line between Arab culture and Islam, and a process to strengthen local and national identity [...] an expression of Indonesian [...] religious orthodoxy, and authenticity." He positions Nusantara Islam not as a geographical but as a civilizational category. Speaking at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Amin, the Nahdlatul Ulama spiritual leader and vice-presidential

candidate dressed in a sarong, skull cap and sandals, defined Nusantara as "a unique and distinctive kind of Sunni Islam."

Beyond pribumisasi Islam, Burhani traces Islam Nusantara's intellectual roots to the notions of twentieth century Indonesian thinkers and lawyers who propagated an Indonesian form of Islam that openly defied the literalism of ultra-conservatives and militants. They include Islam scholar Muhammad Hasbi Ash Shiddieque who advocated an Indonesian Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh* that would be developed through *ijtihad* or independent interpretation of the faith's legal sources.

While condemned by ultra-conservatives as a form of *bida'* or innovation, Hasbi saw the development of local jurisprudence as a way of reconciling revelation with Indonesian reality. Lawyer and former interior minister Hazairin went further, proposing the development of an Indonesian madhab or Islamic legal school alongside the four universally recognized schools while former religion minister Munawir Sjadzali insisted that Islam needed to be contextualized.

The Widodo government's embrace of Nahdlatul Ulama was in part driven by the threat of militancy at home evidenced by multiple attacks, including the targeting of tourists in Bali in 2005 and 2015, and the fact that several hundred Indonesian Muslims had joined the Islamic State to fight in Iraq and Syria. They credit the movement alongside other groups with the fact that the ratio of Indonesian foreign fighters is nonetheless far lower than in many other countries.

A 2016 study commissioned by the United States Agency for International Aid (USAID) concluded that only one per one million Indonesian Muslims had joined the fighting in Syria and Iraq as opposed to Tunisia's 280 and France's 18 per million. Similarly, Indonesia with several hundred foreign fighters compared favorably to Tunisia's 6,000, Russia's 2,400, and France's 1,700.

GOING GLOBAL

The statement engraved in the plaque presented to Widodo read:

We call upon people of goodwill of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus to prevent the political weaponization of Islam, whether by Muslims or non-Muslims, and to curtail the spread of communal hatred by fostering the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.

Addressing the crowd, Widodo asserted that "GP Ansor is not easily intimidated; that is the true spirit of Indonesia [...] We must all bravely demonstrate that Pancasila is the foundational ideology of the Indonesian nation state and cannot be replaced by other ideologies, including imported ideologies." He was referring to Indonesia's philosophical foundation.

Going forward, Nahdlatul Ulama may be aided in its campaign by the fact that Middle Eastern institutions of Islamic learning such as the Islamic University of Medina and Al Azhar in Cairo no longer hold a near monopoly. Islamic studies at European and North American institutions such as Leiden University, Oxford University, London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the University of Chicago, and McGill University have challenged the dominance of the Middle East.

While Nahdlatul Ulama stands a good chance of impacting Islamic discourse in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, it is likely to face an uphill battle in making substantial headway beyond Indonesia despite its links to major Muslim organizations in India, the United States and elsewhere. It also faces opposition from the group's more conservative factions, some of whom have argued in line with Saudi-inspired approaches that Islam is pure, monolithic, and one. As such, it cannot be segmented by either attaching attributes to its name or suggesting that it should be localized. Denouncing Nusantara Islam as a corrupt deviation from the faith as well as Nahdlatul Ulama's foundational conservatism and a heresy, some critics have dubbed it Jennah Nusantara Islam, derived from the Arabic word for demons.

Amin, the demure 75-year-old vice-presidential candidate, is widely viewed as a conservative who as head of the Council of Muslim Scholars issued fatwas against minorities, including one in 2005 denouncing Ahmadi, a sect widely viewed by Muslims as heretics. Violent attacks on Ahmadi by extremists have since escalated with mob killings and the razing to the

ground of their homes. Ali Yasir, an Ahmadi leader, charged that the council had adopted the 2005 resolution at the behest of Saudi Arabia. More than a decade later, Amin justified the closure of an allegedly Ahmadi mosque as "the right thing to do." He argued that the closure did not violate human rights because Ahmadi were blasphemous.

Amin and Nahdlatul Ulama's denunciation of Ahmadi as non-Muslims—although conflicting with notions of tolerance—has enjoyed political, government-

tal, and societal support for decades. Describing Indonesian nationalism as "godly nationalism," Indonesia scholar Jeremy Menchik argued that anti-Ahmadi sentiment "played a productive role in creating the 'we-feeling' that constitutes contemporary Indonesian nationalism. Indonesian nationalism is modern, plural and predicated on theological rather than geographic or religious exclusion," Menchik said.

Amin, labeled by *The Economist* as "ideologically elastic," is also believed to have played a key role in mass protests in 2016 that brought down Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, aka Ahok, an ethnic Chinese Christian and Widodo ally.

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His testimony figured prominently in Ahok's sentencing to two years in prison on charges of blasphemy against Islam. Nahdlatul Ulama's backing of the protests alongside militant groups like the far-right Sunni Muslim Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front, or FPI), whose leader, Habib Rizieq Shihab, fled to Saudi Arabia to escape sexual harassment charges, and Salafis, signaled the strength of the movement's hardliners and cast a shadow on the projection of itself as a model of moderation.

Amin's alliance with Widodo comes on the back of Nahdlatul Ulama's ever closer association with the Widodo government. Hundreds of the movement's members serve as senior officials in regional governments and state-owned companies. Indonesia's Vice President, Jusuf Kalla, serves on the Nahdlatul Ulama Advisory Board. Senior Nahdlatul Ulama leaders enjoy privileged access to the presidential palace while the flow of state funds to the movement has increased. Nahdlatul Ulama has benefitted from a government land redistribution program and its seminars have been able to tap a Sharia-based micro-finance initiative.

Amin's alliance with Widodo comes on the back of Nahdlatul Ulama's ever closer association with the Widodo government. Hundreds of the movement's members serve as senior officials in regional governments and state-owned companies.

Like in the case of Ahok, Widodo, nonetheless, appears incapable of reversing the rise of political Islam that Nahdlatul Ulama's young adults wing wants to stymie. Widodo was the guest of honor in November 2018 at a meeting in which Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) politician Grace Natalie, an ethnic Chinese Protestant, pledged that her party would not support discriminatory local laws based on "the Bible or Sharia." Natalie was subsequently questioned by police for seven hours after an opposition politician filed charges alleging that her comments were blasphemous. "PSI will prevent injustice, discrimination, and all form of intolerance in this country. We want to fight this because Indonesia is diverse, if we do not maintain this diversity Indonesia could become like Syria or Iraq, and nobody will benefit from this," Natalie, a former journalist, said.

Amin's speech appeared more in sync with the reformist thinking of Ansor. In fact, Amin's candidacy in Widodo's bid to win a significant segment of the religious vote and counter criticism that he is not sufficiently Muslim constitutes the domestic counterpart to Nahdlatul Ulama's effort to pro-

ject itself globally as a conservative but non-Islamist movement. The effort strokes with Indonesia's vying for greater international recognition through its non-permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council and hosting of major events such as the Asian Games, the annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and the Our Ocean Conference.

A ROUNDABOUT WAY

Ansor and the movement's more pluralistic wing hopes to increase its already substantial influence within Nahdlatul Ulama and win Middle Eastern hearts and minds in a somewhat roundabout way. Nahdlatul Ulama first identified the Middle East as a prime target for its campaign in the final declaration of the movement's International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) that in 2016 brought together Sunni Muslim leaders from across the globe. In order to advance its reform agenda, Nahdlatul Ulama is targeting European governments as well as the Trump administration in a bid to generate pressure on Arab regimes to promote a tolerant, pluralistic form of Islam rather than use orthodox expressions of the faith to garner legitimacy and enhance regional influence.

Staquf told the European Union Council Terrorism Working Party in a video address that

We have to deal with [militancy and ultra-conservatism] globally. We need a global consolidation of powers to defeat it. That is why we stand ready to support European countries in the present challenges and the likely difficulties that lie ahead. The growing radicalization of Muslim communities thanks to the mainstreaming of Salafism, the massive importation of some Muslim migrants posing as refugees and of some refugees who support ISIS, who cannot integrate into a society they do not respect and the growing boldness of some militants in your continent, are all pressing issues that we can help you with. It is our desire to help you because we want to consolidate with you to fight this threat together.

Staquf was referring to the Islamic State by one of its acronyms, ISIS. LibforAll said Staquf's remarks had contributed to the July-December 2017 Estonian EU presidency introducing to the European Council principles of Islam Nusantara.

To further its initiative, Nahdlatul Ulama established an Arabic-named NGO, Bayt al-Rahman li ad-Da'wa al-Islamiyah Rahmatan li al-'Alamin (Home of Divine Grace for Revealing and Nurturing Islam as a Blessing for All Creation), in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. A close associate of Staquf, the Nahdlatul Ulama general secretary Taylor, a trim,

fluent Bahasa-speaking and unassuming former telecom tycoon and Ansor representative—who together with former president Wahid founded the LibForAll Foundation—hails from North Carolina.

In a study published by the Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS), political violence expert Magnus Ranstorp argued that

LibforAll's demonstration of strength involves creating a cross-sector network that is based on a five-level integration of the following: religious leaders (ulama) who have garnered widespread public support and who can address radical backlash; religious scholars and teachers who can garner the requisite intellectual and theological support for a pluralistic and tolerant interpretation of Islam; pop idols who have massive support from young people; government leaders who are able to address social factors as an underlying factor of extremism; as well as business leadership that can offer requisite financial support.

Nahdlatul Ulama's political party, the National Awakening Party (PKB) became in November 2018, one of several non-Christian parties to join the Centrist Democrat International (CDI), which groups 77 political organizations worldwide. "We want to influence the European dynamic through engagement," a Nahdlatul

Ulama official said. Nahdlatul Ulama has also forged links to the center-right European People's Party (EPP), the biggest political bloc in the European Parliament. Staquf, the Nahdlatul Ulama's general secretary, serves as the representative to the European Union and the Americas of the movement and its party.

To promote the initiative and Nahdlatul Ulama's international standing, Staquf met in June 2018 with American Vice President Mike Pence and Reverend Johnnie Moore. A frequent traveler to the Middle East, Moore is an evangelist who in May 2018 was appointed by President Donald J. Trump as a member of the board of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Staquf also paid in June a controversial visit to Israel, where he met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against the backdrop of Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Netanyahu's office trumpeted the meeting as an indication that "Arab countries and many Muslim countries [are] getting closer to Israel" despite the country's policy towards the Palestinians becoming more hard line—and doing so with American backing. The meeting served to strengthen Nahdlatul Ulama's relations with Trump's evangelist, pro-Israel supporters.

While making significant inroads in the West, Nahdlatul Ulama risks being identified with autocrats like United Arab Emirates crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed, who also strives to depoliticize Islam as a means of ensuring the survival of his regime. It also risks being tainted by its tactical association with Islamophobes and Christian fundamentalists who would project their alliance as Muslim justification of the evils of Islam. Nahdlatul Ulama's connection to non-Muslim conservatives could further bolster the position of evangelists locked into battle with expanding Islam along the tenth parallel, the front line between the two belief systems, with Nigeria and Boko Haram, the West African jihadist group, at its core.

The risk is in the double-edged sword of acknowledgements like that of Staquf that "Islamic State is a part of Islam and the threat is real." While recognizing a fact, it diverges from a global effort to ensure that Islam is shielded from being identified with militancy by arguing that Islam is part of the problem rather than denouncing jihadism as an aberration and beyond the mainstream Islamic pale.

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Nahdlatul Ulama and Saudi Arabia's vision of Islam, despite stark differences, pursue in one respect a common goal: the depoliticization of the faith. For Nahdlatul Ulama it is an ideological struggle, one that is intended to shape Islam and Indonesia's future. For Saudi Arabia it is a political tool to ensure the survival of the ruling Al Saud family at whatever cost witness the brutal crackdown in the kingdom and handling of dissidents abroad and the Saudi-UAE-led economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar.

Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's

religious approach focuses on promotion of a specific strand of Islam, Madkhalism, a Salafi sect that advocates absolute obedience to the ruler, rather than ideological reform. Led by Saudi Salafi leader, Sheikh Rabi Ibn Hadi Umair al-Madkhali, a former dean of the study of the Prophet Mohammed's deeds and sayings at the Islamic University of Medina, Madkhalists seek to marginalize more political Salafists critical of Saudi Arabia by projecting themselves as preachers of the authentic message in a world of false prophets and moral decay. Beyond propagating absolute obedience to the ruler, they preach abstention from politics.

Despite their different goals, Nahdlatul Ulama and Saudi Arabia's strategy is also in some respects similar. The movement's association with the European and American right-wing mirrors parallels Saudi moves to counter widespread criticism of the conduct of its war in Yemen and the October 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by fostering ties with Europe's right wing and far-right as well as non-Muslim, Western ultra-conservatives.

FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES

Nahdlatul Ulama's seemingly roundabout strategy to reform Islam may be rooted in the fact that Nusantara Islam is, unlike its Saudi-inspired transnational rivals, primarily a Java-based local ideology that has yet to garner a broader following Indonesia.

Forget about Islam Nusantara, Nahdlatul Ulama only has any real strength in Java. Nahdlatul Ulama has no international reach like Wahhabism, Ikhwanul Muslimin [Muslim Brotherhood] or Hizbut Tahrir. The issues raised by these transnational movements are global concerns and, accordingly, have broader relevance for Muslims across the world. Nahdlatul Ulama, meanwhile, is focused primarily on cultural issues of interest to the Javanese. How then can Islam Nusantara ever hope to have any global influence?

Saudi Arabia has declared itself the custodian of two the holy cities, Turkey believes it should represent the Muslim world because it was the last caliphate, and Egypt always was a center of Islamic studies because of Al-Azhar University. "What can Nusantara Islam leverage?," asked legal scholar Nadirsyah Hosen.

If successful, Nahdlatul Ulama's strategy could have far-reaching consequences. For many Middle Eastern autocrats, adopting a more tolerant, pluralistic interpretation of Islam would mean allowing far greater social and political freedoms and embracing concepts of pluralism. That would likely lead to a weakening of their grip on power.

Nahdlatul Ulama's credibility in pushing a tolerant, pluralistic interpretation of Islam rides in part on its willingness to subdue its own demons. First and foremost among which is sectarianism manifested in deep-seated prejudice against various Muslim sects, including Shiites in East Java, part of the group's heartland, and Ahmadis. That may be too tall of an order in a country in which ultra-conservative Islam is a rising social and political force. Muslim organizations in Indonesia "are tolerant, but they are not liberal, and they do not want liberalism in Indonesia," said Azumardi Azra, a prominent Islamic intellectual. Coining the phrase

'communal tolerance,' Menchik, the Indonesia scholar, noted that "Indonesian Islamic organizations support tolerance based on group [rather than individual] rights, legal pluralism, and the separation of religious and social affairs."

A banner at Nahdlatul Ulama's 2010 congress warned of the dangers of fundamentalism, radicalism, and liberalism while publicly welcoming non-Muslims to the event. The banner was in part a reflection of a deep-seated equation dating back to colonial experience that identifies liberalism with freedom of religion, which many in Indonesia see as a guise to enable Christian missionaries. 'Even I think that too much liberalism is bad, like with the freedom of religion. That is how the Christians have spread their proselytization, via 'freedom of religion,'" said Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, one of Nahdlatul Ulama's foremost liberals.

Indonesia scholar Burhani graphically described the gap between Nahdlatul Ulama's Islam Nusantara philosophy and the group's reality. Mosques in the East Javan city of Sura-

baya play a popular song that calls for tolerance and cautions against "easily and recklessly" denouncing those with differing religious views as infidels alongside the daily five calls to prayer.

"Many who memorize the Qur'an and Hadith love to condemn others as infidels while ignoring their own infidelity to God, their hearts and minds still mired in filth," the song says. Yet, the councils of ulema or Islamic scholars in East Java with the exception of one have issued religious opinions denouncing Shiites and the Shiite community in Sampang on the island of Madura has been displaced for the past six years, forced to live in temporary shelters in an area near Surabaya.

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Anti-Shiite sentiment within Nahdlatul Ulama was fueled by fascination in the 1980s with the 1979 Iranian revolution that toppled the Shah. Works of Iranian intellectuals associated with the revolution such as Ali Shari'ati and Murtaza Mutahhari were translated into Bahasa, prompting increased interest among students and some intellectuals. Asad Ali, a former deputy head of Indonesian intelligence and a Nahdlatul

Ulama leader, identified Shiites as “the single largest domestic threat to national security,” even though they account for little more than one percent of the country’s 250 million people. He said the fact that some two million Indonesians had converted to Shiism over the last decades was a matter of grave concern.

“So-called Islam Nusantara cannot transcend Shari’a. Not all Islamic teaching can be ‘Indonesianized,’” texted Afifuddin Muhajir, an Islamic leader from Situbondo

in East Java, during a 2016 meeting between the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board (PBNU) and the movement’s East Java chapter. Pinpointing “the growing pull of Islamism within NU’s ranks,” Indonesia scholar Alexander R. Arifianto noted that “the closeness of the organization’s leadership with the incumbent administration has created divisions within the organization’s ranks, in a context where NU’s sway over the Islamic grassroots is being challenged by the rise of diverse, and frequently conservative, new Islamic figures [...]. Some of these new religious authorities come from the ranks of the organization itself and are forming alternative institutions within the NU that challenge the dominance of its leadership, which officially represents more moderate ideological and political views.”

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Founded in 2015 by young Nahdlatul Ulama scholars educated in the Middle East, True Path NU (NU Garis Lurus or NUGL) became a focal point of the movement’s more conservative factions. The scholars enjoy increasing popularity with hundreds of thousands viewing their sermons on YouTube. Some like Sumatra-based Abdul Somad, who endorses the caliphate and views non-Muslims as infidels, have attracted huge followings on social media. Somad has almost 1.5

million followers on Facebook and 6.4 million on Instagram. Somad initially turned down an opportunity to become the vice-presidential running mate of Widodo’s opponent in the upcoming election, but is believed to have not definitively dismissed the possibility. Should he as yet accept, the split in Nahdlatul Ulama would with Amin’s alliance with Widodo be highlighted by leaders of the movement running for office as representatives of rival political groupings.

True Path rejects the concept of Islam Nusantara and has vowed to defeat the “liberal” theological within the movement. They assert that Nusantara Islam’s approach has corrupted Nahdlatul Ulama’s adherence to Sunni Muslim principles. Their condemnation of Shi-

ism as a deviant form of Islam strokes with Saudi Arabia’s theological underpinnings and its geopolitical ambitions. “Because of these propositions, NU Garis Lurus serves as the most serious challenge towards NU’s moderate theological outlook promoted by Wahid and his successors over the past three decades,” Arifianto said. Islamic scholar Idrus Ramli, a True Path member, was expected to run for the chairmanship of Nahdlatul Ulama in leadership elections scheduled for 2020.

Many of East Java’s more hardline scholars are disciples or the descendants of disciples of a Saudi cleric, Sayyid Muhammad Alawi al-Maliki. He was the *qadi* or chief justice of Mecca, whose students included Nahdlatul Ulama’s founder Hasyim Asy’ari. Al-Maliki fell out with the kingdom’s Wahhabi religious establishment in the 1980s because he taught all four of Islam’s legal schools as well as Sufism and was removed from his teaching and judicial positions. However, Al-Maliki stayed in Mecca giving private lessons to pri-

marily Indonesian students which enhanced his prestige in the archipelago.

As a result, Nahdlatul Ulama’s battlefields are as much at home as they

Nahdlatul Ulama’s campaign amounts to more than simply confronting ultra-conservatism and militancy. It is a pushback against the notion that secularism and pluralism are expressions of a Western conspiracy to undermine Islam.

are in the larger Muslim world. Proponents of the reform strategy chose to launch it under the auspices of the group’s young adults wing in an admission that not all of Nahdlatul Ulama’s members would embrace it. Critics within Nahdlatul Ulama range from ultra-conservatives to those who charge that Nusantara Islam, the Islam of the archipelago, excludes

followers of alternative strands of Islam in Indonesia. The critics largely hail from the second and third generation of graduates from Nahdlatul Ulama religious seminaries who believe that the organization’s embrace of pluralism has led it astray from its founding philosophy. Moreover, they believe that pluralism serves as justification for what they see as morally corrupt liberalism and secularism. It is a viewpoint that many in the Middle East may find more akin than Nusantara Islam to the worldview with which they are familiar. ●