



Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Terrorism and Extremism (VORTEX)

Islamist movements such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir and Boko Haram share a common ideology, which constitutes a very real and rapidly evolving threat not only to international peace and security, but also to the noble values of religion itself. In response, renowned Muslim theologians from the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) have joined world-class scholars from the University of Vienna's Institut für Orientalistik, to create the Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Terrorism and Extremism (VORTEX).

This strategic initiative is designed to produce academically rigorous applied research concerning the ideology of religious hatred, supremacy and violence that underlies and animates Islamist terrorism, and contribute to developing the societal consensus, and sound government policies, that are necessary to marginalize, discredit and defeat Islamist extremism, which is contributing to the rise of Islamophobia throughout the non-Muslim world.

VORTEX partners include the University of Vienna (est. 1365); the Nahdlatul Ulama (est. 1926); GP Ansor (the NU youth movement, est. 1934) and a network of closely-affiliated organizations founded by [H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid](#)—Indonesia's first democratically elected president and former chairman of the NU executive board—and [Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri](#), former chairman of the NU Supreme Council.

These organizations include [Bayt ar-Rahmah](#) 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); [LibForAll Foundation](#) and its International Institute of Qur'anic Studies (IIQS); Markaz al-Islam al-Mo'asser (the Center for Contemporary Islam, or CCI); and Majma' Buhuts an-Nahdliyyah (the Forum for NU Religious Teachings, or MBN)—which are active on four continents and have been the subject of extensive [international media coverage](#), as well as [counter-terrorism research](#) conducted by the Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies at Sweden's National Defense College, among others.

Based in Indonesia, the NU is the world's largest Sunni Muslim organization, with over 50 million members, 14,000 madrasahs and a rich, longstanding and well-documented tradition of promoting tolerance, pluralism and mutual respect among those of different faiths. In 2009, senior NU theologians—in conjunction with top leaders of the Muhammadiyah, the world's second-largest Muslim organization—published a landmark book entitled *The Illusion of an Islamic State*, which the *Wall Street Journal* described as “pioneering” and the *Washington Post* hailed as “remarkable... a roaring success.” In his introduction to the book, President Wahid wrote:

People who are convinced that they know more than anyone else about Islam, and yet are full of hatred towards any of God's creatures who do not travel the same path as they; and those who claim to be in possession of the absolute truth, and for that reason entitled to act as God's vice-regents on earth (caliphs) and to dictate how everyone else must live—clearly, their words and behavior will not lead us into the presence of God. Their dream of an Islamic state is merely an illusion, for the true Islamic state is not to be found in the structure of any government, but rather, in hearts which are open to God and all His creatures.

VORTEX combines academic rigor with theological expertise and generations of experience countering extremist ideology and movements. European partners Dr. Rüdiger Lohlker, Dr. Nico Prucha and Dr. Ali Fisher monitor, grade and evaluate jihadist content on the internet and social media; document jihadist networks; and collect the Arabic and non-Arabic language hash tags used by ISIS to disseminate its messages worldwide. This includes:

1. Systematic analysis of extremist ideology and movements. This work is conducted primarily in Arabic, since that is the primary language employed to create and disseminate extremist propaganda. However, it also entails analyzing various “mutations” of extremist propaganda that target audiences using English, German, French, Indonesian, etc.;
2. Promotion of the highly successful model employed by Indonesian clerics to address the threat of religious hatred and extremism. VORTEX is positioning this “Indonesian approach” as a model for Western countries to study, and examine how and to what extent key elements of this model are applicable to individual Member States within the European Union;
3. Deciphering and contextualizing the core of extremist ideology, in cooperation with Muslim clerics acting on both a local and international basis. Our objective is to compete with extremist ideology on a global basis; contest the “monopoly on truth” that Islamist movements have claimed for decades; undermine their digital hegemony; and, ultimately, dismantle their ability to project strategic influence in the Muslim world and the West.

As C. Holland Taylor, Chairman & CEO of LibForAll/IIQS, has observed: “Our ability to dissuade hard-core extremists is limited. Rather, our strategic goal is to mobilize the vast, silent majority of Muslims who reject extremism. When mobilized, this ‘silent majority’ has the ability to isolate extremists. Mainstream Muslims can exert social pressure in millions of unique interactions, that peel away less committed rank and file extremists, isolating Islamist leaders and leaving them with a small and shrinking band of hard core followers, while providing government actors (i.e., security services, ministry officials, etc.) with the public support required to deal effectively with these remnants.”

The historical experience of Islam in Indonesia, and the nation’s long tradition of religious tolerance—as conveyed by the term [*Islam Nusantara*](#)—are essential elements of this work, which seeks to encourage and widely disseminate the view that Islam’s primary message is one of universal love and compassion (*rahmatan li al-’alamin*). As stated in the [Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration](#), promulgated at the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) held May 9 – 11, 2016 in Jakarta, Indonesia:

1. Nahdlatul Ulama offers the insights and experience of Islam Nusantara (East Indies Islam) to the world, as a salutary paradigm of Islam in which religion contributes to civilization, by respecting pre-existing cultures and prioritizing social harmony and peace.
2. Nahdlatul Ulama does not seek to “export” Islam Nusantara to other regions of the world. Rather, it is simply inviting others to recall the beauty and dynamism that emerged from the historic encounter of the spirit and teachings of Islam with the reality of local cultures throughout the world, which gave birth to numerous great civilizations, including that of the East Indies, or Malay, Archipelago.
3. Islam Nusantara is not a new or distinct religion. Rather, it is the expression of Islam that spontaneously flourished amid the culture of Nusantara, and does not conflict with Islamic *shari’ah*, as understood, taught and practiced by the traditional *ahlussunnah wal jamaah* (Sunni Muslim) community worldwide.
4. From the perspective of Islam Nusantara, no conflict exists between religion and nationalism. *Hubul watan minal iman*: “Patriotism is integral to faith.” Whoever lacks patriotism either has no native land, or is devoid of attachment to it. Those who lack a native land will be devoid of history.
5. Within the worldview of Islam Nusantara, Islam does not enjoin its adherents to conquer the world, but rather, to engage in the continuous development of *akhlaqul karimah*, or noble character and virtue, for it is only through *akhlaqul karimah* that Islam can manifest as Divine Grace for all creation.

15. The Nahdlatul Ulama calls upon people of goodwill of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus not to politicize Islam, and to marginalize those who would exploit Islam in such a way as to harm others.
16. The Nahdlatul Ulama will strive to consolidate the global *ahlusunnah wal jamaah* (Sunni Muslim) community, in order to bring about a world in which Islam, and Muslims, are truly beneficent and contribute to the well-being of all humanity.

The government of Austria—through the Austrian Ministry of Interior—has provided direct support for the creation of VORTEX, which both [Western](#) and [Arab](#) media outlets have hailed as a strategic initiative of global significance, with the potential to serve as an example of best practice for Western governments and intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).