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Maneuvering within Islam's Narrative Space: The Key to Defeating Islamist Extremism and Terror

FORT LEAVENWORTH, Kansas and MAGELANG, Indonesia: On January 1, 2018, *Strategic Review*—“The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy and World Affairs”—published a two-part cover story titled [“Maneuvering within Islam's Narrative Space.”](#) The authors are LTC Brian Steed, Assistant Professor of Military History at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and C. Holland Taylor, Chairman & CEO of [LibForAll Foundation](#), which he established in 2003 with former Indonesian President H.E. Kyai Haji [Abdurrahman Wahid](#). Mr. Taylor also represents the world's largest Muslim youth organization, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, and works closely with senior figures within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—including its spiritual leader and former Chairman, Kyai Haji [A. Mustofa Bisri](#), and KH. [Yahya Cholil Staquf](#), the current General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council—to [expand NU and Ansor operations worldwide](#).

Colonel Steed and Mr. Taylor met at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany in May of 2017, when both were invited to address the [Partnership for Peace Consortium](#) (PfPC) Combating Terrorism Working Group (CTWG), an annual event that gathers CT professionals from dozens of nations to share best practices in countering violent extremism. They subsequently decided to collaborate on the cover story published in the January – March 2018 issue of *Strategic Review*.

Colonel Steed's pioneering work establishes a unique conceptual framework for understanding the “narrative space,” in which Islamist movements including ISIS and al-Qaeda have decisively out-manuevered their Western opponents. Terrorist organizations accomplish this by weaponizing religious, socio-cultural and historical narratives to mobilize support and wage asymmetric warfare, both online and upon the physical battlefield, which now includes public streets, restaurants, office buildings, stores, churches, synagogues, museums and concert halls in cities throughout Europe and North America.

As Colonel Steed writes at the conclusion of his essay: “Lessons from Islam Nusantara”—the companion article by Mr. Taylor—“describes how inhabitants of the Malay archipelago have successfully maneuvered in the narrative space for more than 500 years, to produce one of the most pluralistic and tolerant Islamic societies in the world today.” Mr. Taylor's essay concludes with a discussion of the 2016 [ISOMIL Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration](#) and 2017 [Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam](#), which have launched a [global movement](#) to recontextualize (i.e., reform) problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that underlie and animate jihadist movements.

In recent years, *Strategic Review* has published a [substantial body of work](#) authored by major Nahdlatul Ulama figures and their Western colleagues, building on the theme of “Indonesia's ‘Big Idea’: How to resolve the bitter global debate on Islam.”

[Read the *Strategic Review* cover story, “Maneuvering within Islam's Narrative Space”](#)