



Al-Arab (The Arabs), a leading Arabic-language newspaper founded in 1977

Indonesia is Washington’s Gateway for Promoting Islamic Reform

Supporting local Islamic groups is an American recipe for confronting fundamentalism.

Tuesday, 27 October 2020



Local groups lead the battle for Islam’s renewal

Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama—an Islamic mass movement—is hosting a two-day conference in the capital Jakarta to explore the “shared civilizational aspirations” of Indonesia, the United

States and Islam. The event will be attended by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who is pushing his administration to promote Islamic reform.

JAKARTA: U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is determined to strengthen the efforts of the world's largest Islamic mass movement to reform the faith's prevailing religious discourse. The Secretary of State will be visiting Indonesia during the last leg of a tour of three Asian nations, as U.S. strategy increasingly focuses upon supporting *tajdid* (renewal) movements capable of accomplishing Islamic reform and mobilizing Muslim communities against radicalism and terror.

Local religious groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the Muhammadiyah—which has distanced itself from its Salafist origins—and the Sufi-oriented Movement for Support and Guidance play a key role in supporting Indonesian government efforts to foster widespread rejection of radicalism and extremism. The main goal of these mass movements is to promote the peaceful and moderate face of Islam and—thanks to their extensive social work caring for the poor and orphans, establishing religious schools, and preserving Indonesian social unity—they enjoy widespread popular support in this endeavor.

“Islam in Southeast Asia is known for its unique blend of religious tolerance and civilizational dialogue”

Nahdlatul Ulama [teaches its 90 million followers to embrace] four “societal values”: moderation and fair treatment of others; tolerance; balance; and enjoining the good and forbidding evil (*al-amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa-al-nahī 'an al-munkar*). NU believes that without the performance of good deeds and abstinence from evil, “society cannot achieve an existence that is prosperous and just from both a material and spiritual perspective.”

Nahdlatul Ulama follows the traditional religious teachings of Sunni Islam (ahl al-sunnah wa-al-jamā'ah), and was founded on 31 January 1926 by Kyai Haji Hasyim Asy'ari as a vehicle for Islamic scholars “to organize themselves and strive to maintain and preserve traditional Islamic civilization.” In terms of religious belief, official NU documents state that “In the field of creed (‘aqidah), Nahdlatul Ulama follows the Sunni teachings pioneered by Imām Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī [d. 935/936 CE] and Maṣū‘ al-Māturīdī [d. 944 CE]; in the field of Islamic law (fiqh), Nahdlatul Ulama follows the approach articulated by any of the four schools of jurisprudence (madhhab) established by Imām Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nu‘mān [d. 767 CE], Imām Mālik bin Anas [d. 795 CE], Imām Muhammad bin Idrīs al-Shafī‘ī [d. 820 CE] and Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal [d. 855 CE]; and in the field of Sufism (Islamic mysticism, or *taṣawūf*), Nahdlatul Ulama follows Imām al-Junayd al-Baghdādī [d. 910 CE] and Imām al-Ghazālī [d. 1111 CE].”

In interpreting Islamic law, Nahdlatul Ulama relies upon a committee known as “*Bahtsul Masa'il*”—which addresses a wide range of issues of immediate and practical concern to Muslims, including matters related to “contemporary reality, pressing topics [such as the legal status of non-Muslims, the caliphate and modern nation states] and laws derived from modern political processes”—and issues authoritative rulings on these matters.

Among the activities that NU regards as essential are “the study of practical social problems”; “preparing and propagating fatwas and legal rulings”; “improving the standard of *fiqh*

manuals”; and “working to issue rulings on societal and religious matters within the purview of Nahdlatul Ulama.”

American Opening



Societies are moving towards a humanitarian Islam

Pompeo’s openness to Nahdlatul Ulama—a powerful Islamic mass movement with some 50 million [sic] followers—gains added importance in view of the Trump administration’s drive to redefine human rights and prioritise religious freedom over other fundamental rights before the U.S. Presidential election, which President Trump may lose.

Pompeo’s Indonesian stop-over comes at the end of his Asia tour, which will begin in India followed by Sri Lanka. NU—an independent civil society movement—is competing globally with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates: states which are mobilizing religious soft power and attempting to create a new understanding of moderate Islam.

In contrast to its soft power competitors, Nahdlatul Ulama has clearly defined its conception of moderate Islam. In 2015, NU popularized and endorsed the terms Islam Nusantara and Humanitarian Islam, which fully recognize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Meanwhile, Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia present themselves as models of an as-yet-undefined “moderate Islam” that primarily consists of participating in interreligious dialogue and exhibits highly varying degrees of religious toleration.

“Religious scholars affiliated with NU have... abolished the category of infidels within Islamic law”

Saudi Arabia has stopped short of addressing problematic theological issues such as the legal understanding of *kufr* [disbelief], *kafir* [infidels] and *dhimmah*—a legal contract governing the treatment of conquered non-Muslims—as well as Muslim attitudes towards slavery, apostasy and polytheism. Another problematic area that Saudi Arabia has yet to address is the place of Christians within Islam. While Christians’ legitimate right to exist is acknowledged within Islamic orthodoxy, they are accorded a legal status inferior to Muslims.

Even though Nahdlatul Ulama still has far to go, the Indonesian mass movement has taken concrete steps towards addressing these issues. Thousands of religious scholars affiliated with NU have issued a *fatwa*—or religious opinion—that abolished the category of infidels within Islamic law, thereby demolishing one of the central pillars of orthodox teaching on Islam’s political supremacy. According to statements made by NU leaders, it is likely that they will also do away with the legal concept of slavery within Islam.

NU officials state that the mass movement has long embraced a reformed understanding and practice of orthodox teachings. The real test for Nahdlatul Ulama, however, will be how the movement deals with the Islamic concepts of apostasy and blasphemy—ideas that evoke strong emotions and are sure to be extremely controversial.

Experts on the subject of political Islam believe that “Humanitarian Islam” is, at present, closer to being a slogan than a concrete reality [in the international arena, beyond Indonesia]. Much legal and conceptual work remains to be done before Nahdlatul Ulama can bridge the chasm that exists between Islam and the realities of modern life, an extraordinarily difficult task. Nevertheless, the intention to act constitutes a necessary step in any transformative project.

Pompeo’s recognition of Nahdlatul Ulama signals that the Trump administration has grasped the following fact: that any successful religious reformation will most likely have to be undertaken by independent actors within civil society that enjoy the necessary religious credentials and a mass following. Implicit in this recognition is an awareness of the likely limits of state-led efforts to renew core Islamic tenets, including those of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and President Macron of France—who also harbors ambitions to solve the faith’s problems.

Local reports confirm that suicide bombings and other attacks perpetrated by Islamists within Indonesia—in addition to the demonization of Islam and Muslims [in the West]—spurred Nahdlatul Ulama to action. The group, which does not seek to impose sharia law upon society, has moved to forge strong links with its religiously and ethnically diverse environment and fought to re-enliven Indonesia’s indigenous Islamic identity.

Franz Magnis-Suseno—a Catholic theologian who has lived in Indonesia for many years—claims that extremist groups have little political influence in the country after their attempts in 2001 to impose sharia law upon Indonesian Muslims and enshrine its place within the constitution met with failure. The Islamist-sponsored drive was rejected by an 81 percent majority in Indonesia’s parliament and, adds Suseno, this and other incidents demonstrate that a broad coalition numbering some 220 million Indonesians stands ready to fight extremism.

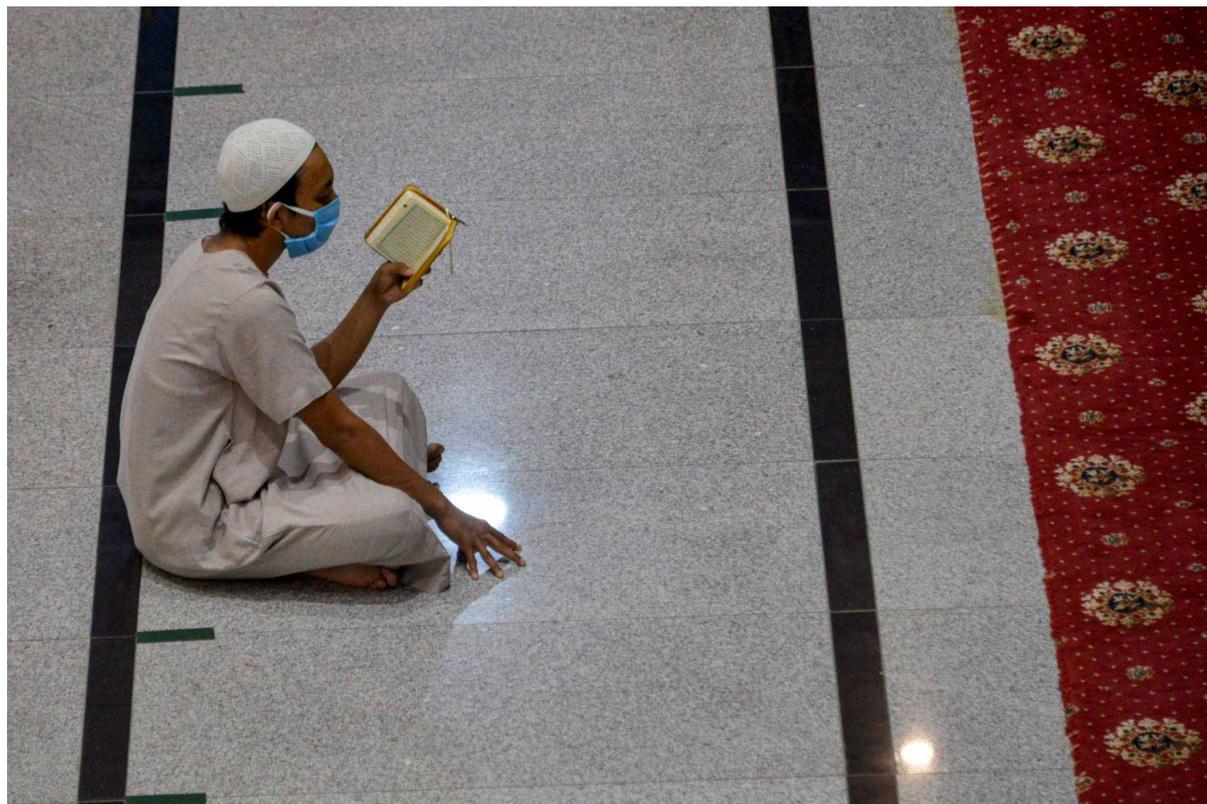
“Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country on earth”

The American initiative comes as French President Emmanuel Macron announced his mission to reform an Islam that he describes as “experiencing a crisis all over the world” in the

aftermath of the horrific slaying of French teacher Samuel Paty. Paty was murdered by an Islamist extremist of Chechen origin after the 47-year-old teacher showed a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed to students during a lesson on freedom of speech.

Analysts believe that the priorities of America’s policy for religious renewal include promoting ideas and projects that call for the modernization of Islam; engaging in a discussion of first principles with burgeoning moderate Islamic movements; and focusing upon societal, religious and educational reform.

A Hostile Environment for Extremism



“The Muslim states of Southeast Asia—especially Indonesia and Malaysia—have succeeded in integrating Islam with modern political systems to a degree that far surpasses the experience of the core Muslim-majority nations of the Middle East”

The history of Islam in Southeast Asia is known for its unique blend of religious tolerance and civilizational dialogue. This dialogue occurred between Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other Asian belief systems—a process that has inculcated a tolerance within citizens that affects every aspect of the region’s society, education and culture.

Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country on earth. As of 2016, it was home to over 209 million Muslims, representing 88 percent its population and 13 percent of Muslims worldwide.

The Indonesian state in particular has adopted a number of patriotic ideologies that aim to maintain national unity and promote cohesion between Muslims and every other element of

society. Although a radical discourse hostile to Indonesian pluralism still exists, the promotion of an inclusive nationalism has, in large part, been successful.

Pancasila has been Indonesia's official ideology since its inclusion in the country's 1945 constitution. It consists of five inter-related precepts that continue to play a key role in religious life and the general outlook of the state. Indeed, Pancasila shapes public life, and is adhered to by all religions and political forces with little opposition. The five precepts of Pancasila are: [Belief in] the Divinity Who is the Great "One"; a just and civilized humanity; the unity of Indonesia; society led by the wisdom that arises from deliberations among and between the people's representatives; and social justice for all the people of Indonesia.

The Muslim states of Southeast Asia—especially Indonesia and Malaysia—have succeeded in integrating Islam with modern political life to a degree that far surpasses the experience of the core Muslim-majority nations of the Middle East. This success has, to a large extent, dampened the desire of Muslims in the region to join fundamentalist movements.

The integration of Islam within the political life of Southeast Asia has taken multiple forms, such as permitting the formation of Islamic political parties and mass social movements (such as NU and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia). This enabled Islamic groups to enjoy a formal legal status and the ability to participate in legislative and presidential elections, so that these groups could work within the political system and within the framework of its political, legal and constitutional rules. In both Indonesia and Malaysia, this has led to the direct participation of Islamic groups in government.

“Any successful religious reformation will most likely have to be undertaken by independent actors within civil society that enjoy the necessary religious credentials and a mass following, rather than state actors”

Despite the spread of Islamic State to Southeast Asia, the terror group has yet to find the recipe for success in the region, and has not achieved battlefield successes comparable to its achievements in the Middle East. The American journal *Foreign Affairs* ascribes this to ISIS's lack of leadership cadres after the killing of Isnilon Hapilon and other prominent militants in the Philippine city of Marawi, which led to the collapse of the group's leadership structure in Southeast Asia.

A series of arrests have also impeded the terror group. Since 2013, Malaysia alone has interdicted approximately 519 terror suspects, a large number of whom were connected to Islamic State. In addition, security services across Southeast Asia have been more pro-active and pre-emptive in dealing with the threat posed by ISIS when compared with their earlier experience combatting al-Qaeda.

The region has also witnessed a greater degree of inter-governmental cooperation aimed at combating ISIS, including joint naval exercises designed to block the flow of armed militants to and from the Southern Philippines. This security cooperation led directly to the capture of two prominent Islamic State theologians, namely Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Aman Abdurrahman, who led the ISIS-affiliated Jamaah Ansharut Daulah terror group.

Foreign Affairs claims that local Islamist fighters within Southeast Asia displayed more interest in Islamic State than the terror group has shown in them. The nature of ISIS's presence within

the region remains unclear, although at present it appears to be restricted to propaganda activities rather than an organizational presence with a central command and formal structure.

Studies by American think-tank RAND indicate that moderate Muslims constitute an overwhelming majority within the Islamic world, and that these Muslims espouse a traditional form of Sunni Islam that adheres to the four jurisprudential schools, while embracing Islam's spiritual teachings and following in the footsteps of the first Muslims (*salaf*). According to this study, these traditional Muslims are Wahhabi Jihadists' most ardent opponents and should be actively supported.

The study examines a number of institutions in Southeast Asia that constitute potential partners in a network of moderate Muslims, including Islamic schools throughout the region, especially those in rural areas.

In addition, the analysts recommend that the United States seek to build networks of moderate Muslims as part of a comprehensive American strategy toward Islam, something that could be accomplished by the presence of a specialized agency tasked with overseeing this effort.



The Trump administration has grasped that any successful religious reformation will most likely have to be undertaken by independent actors within civil society that enjoy the necessary religious credentials and a mass following, rather than state actors.

[Read the Arabic version of this article](#)