



Understanding and Countering the Threat of Islamist Extremism: A Call for a New Global Alliance

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Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to begin by thanking Pat Robertson, Dean Bachman and the leadership of Regent University for this opportunity to join you in commemorating the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. It is an honor and a privilege to address you on this solemn occasion.

My name is Yahya Staqf, and I am the General Secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama — NU for short — which is the world's largest Muslim organization, with over 90 million followers.

I live more than 10,000 miles from New York City and Washington DC, on the far side of the Pacific Ocean. My country, Indonesia, is the fourth most populous nation in the world — after China, India and the United States — with approximately 280 million inhabitants. We also have the world's largest Muslim population and the most successful democracy in the Muslim world.

Like the United States, Indonesia has suffered from the horrors of terrorism. In 2002, just over a year after the 9/11 attacks, the first Bali bombing killed over 200 people — devastating the island's tourist economy and sending thousands of Indonesians back to their rice fields and out to sea, to feed their hungry families. Terrorists have also attacked churches, hotels, foreign emissaries and even our national mosque. My organization has a 5-million-member militia, called Banser, whose members we send to defend churches every Christmas and Easter.

On the evening of December 24th, 2000, a 25-year-old member of Banser, named Riyanto, discovered a suspicious bag on a pew in Ebenezer Church in Mojokerto, East Java. He grabbed the bag, rushed outside and was killed when a bomb exploded in his arms. To us in Nahdlatul Ulama, Riyanto is a martyr, and we honor his memory every Christmas Eve alongside millions of our Indonesian Christian brothers and sisters.

Nahdlatul Ulama was founded in 1926 in response to two world-historic events. The first was the conquest of the most holy cities in Islam — Mecca and Medina — by Abdulaziz Ibn Saud and his Wahhabi army, whose ideology resembled that of ISIS, al-Qaeda and those who attack Christian churches in Indonesia.

The second event was the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate, by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in 1924. For nearly 600 years, the Ottoman Empire — an Islamic Caliphate — had politically dominated much of the Islamic world and shaped its understanding of Islamic orthodoxy. Seemingly overnight, this unifying force vanished, leaving a political, theological and civilizational vacuum in its wake. Nahdlatul Ulama's founders recognized that this seismic event heralded a profound change within the international order, which would affect the lives of Muslims worldwide.

Prior to World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate, the world was largely dominated by empires. Unlike America and Indonesia today, these empires generally had official state religions. The full enjoyment of legal privileges by the subjects of these empires was usually predicated upon their adopting the state's religious identity. For example, the Ottoman Empire — and other Islamic caliphates before it — systematically discriminated against non-Muslims by enforcing a wide range of orthodox Islamic tenets that govern the treatment of conquered infidels, or “*dhimmi*.”

Like Christianity — whose institutionalized teachings and practices have varied widely over the course of its 2,000-year history — Islam is a diverse and complex religion. One element thereof is classical Islamic law, known as *fiqh*, which addresses how a Muslim state should be governed and conduct international affairs. This classical Islamic jurisprudence evolved gradually over the course of centuries, within the context of a bygone “age of empires,” which witnessed over 1,200 years of violent conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims — including many jihads and crusades.

In the post-World War II era of nation states, equal citizenship, human rights and religious freedom, some tenets of classical Islamic orthodoxy are no longer relevant to Muslims' daily lives. A few examples of such tenets are norms that encourage enmity towards non-Muslims; require the establishment of a universal Islamic state, or caliphate; and reject laws derived from modern political processes.

For over 1200 years prior to the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate, the majority of the world's Muslims lived under political systems that sought to embody the orthodox ideal of a unified Muslim community, led by a pious Muslim ruler who adhered to the basic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy and led his community in a state of permanent warfare with neighboring non-Muslims. These tenets of classical Islamic jurisprudence are still taught by most orthodox Sunni and Shi'ite institutions as authoritative and correct — and thus continue to shape what may be described as the “prevailing Muslim mindset” worldwide.

One of the few regions of the Muslim world where these orthodox legal teachings were not historically dominant is in the Malay Archipelago, the territory of modern-day Indonesia, which we call Nusantara.

Prior to the invention of nuclear weapons and the advent of modern technology, which enabled the attacks of 9/11, the United States enjoyed a remarkably high degree of security, protected by the vast expanses of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Similarly, the diverse cultures and civilization of the East Indies long flourished in relative security. Although the Malay Archipelago has, for thousands of years, been a major crossroads of international trade, it generally enjoyed the luxury of embracing the best elements, and benignly neglecting the worst, of foreign cultures and civilizations. That is no longer possible today.

Our relative isolation ended with the onset of the industrial age in the 19th century. Greatly improved transportation and communication in the form of steamships and other innovations cut journey times between the East Indies and the Middle East. For the first time, large numbers of Nusantara Muslims began visiting the holy cities of Mecca and Medina for pilgrimage — many staying for years before returning home with a much more detailed understanding of Islamic orthodoxy, including classical Islamic law.

The return of these pilgrims and legal scholars to the East Indies led to the emergence of a new kind of Islamic scholarship, closer in form and substance to that prevailing within the Ottoman Caliphate.

Before this, from the 15th century to the 19th century, the distance between Nusantara and the traditional centers of Islamic learning in the Middle East meant that local Muslim leaders had to find creative solutions that met the needs of their followers with very little reference to classical Islamic law.

In effect, this meant that Nusantara religious scholars — called *kyais* — were engaged in a process of *ijtihad* — that is, creating new religious rulings and norms, long after this process had formally ended in the Middle East.

For example, in Nusantara the nine saints who proselytized Islam — known as the *Wali Songo* — used local cultural expressions such as shadow puppet theater accompanied by an orchestra playing brass gongs to teach the essential spiritual message of Islam, even though a fundamentalist understanding of Islamic orthodoxy would prohibit such practices.

This tradition of de facto *ijtihad* made Nusantara Islam more responsive to the changing needs of contemporary reality, and much better prepared to deal with the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate and the transformation of global order from one of empires to one whose fundamental building block is the modern nation state.

The Muslim scholars who founded Nahdlatul Ulama were fully aware of this changing reality. For example, the father of Kyai Maimun Zubair — one of our most respected classical scholars, who was born in 1928 and sadly passed away in 2019 — would constantly emphasize, to his son, how world civilization was changing. The founding generation of Nahdlatul Ulama scholars deliberately prepared their followers — that is, subsequent generations of NU scholars — to face the challenges posed by the remarkable changes that followed in the wake of World War I and World War II.

It quickly becomes obvious to anyone who examines the critical decisions made by Nahdlatul Ulama's leadership over the past century, that these NU leaders made their decisions in light of the demands posed by contemporary reality, in order to promote the welfare of all Indonesians. For example, NU did not support the establishment of Indonesia as an Islamic state. Rather, our leaders chose to found Indonesia as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state, imbued with respect for the nation's enormous cultural, religious and ethnic diversity.

This momentous decision had no precedent in Islamic orthodoxy. It was the result of *ijtihad* and a profoundly difficult negotiation between Islamic orthodoxy and the emergence of a new world. I would say that NU *kyais* supported the founding of Indonesia as a pluralistic nation

state after an extensive dialogue with secular scholars, as they grew up together and engaged in nationalist, anti-colonial activism.

The sudden dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate and emergence of a new international order triggered profound anxiety, confusion and chaos throughout the Islamic world. Many Muslims joined Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood or Jamaat-e-Islami; many, in the Middle East, embraced Arab nationalism; while others turned to Communism. Even in Indonesia there was profound opposition to the establishment of a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state. From 1949 to 1962, we waged a bitter struggle to defeat an armed insurrection called the Darul Islam, or Islamic State, movement. During the 1950s and 60s, the third largest Communist party in the world was that of Indonesia. Following a Communist coup attempt in 1965, Nahdlatul Ulama joined other Indonesian nationalists to defeat those who wanted our country to become part of the Communist bloc.

Unlike many across the Muslim world, NU leaders did not insist upon a return to the obsolete construct of an Islamic caliphate. Instead, they chose to establish Indonesia as a nation state, which they acknowledged as the fundamental building block of a new, rules-based international order that promised to foster harmonious relations between different civilizations and to avoid the great religious conflicts of the past.

Unfortunately, many Muslims — especially in the Middle East — have come to view the nation state as a colonial imposition. Muslim extremists dream of re-establishing a global caliphate. The devastating events of 9/11, the Bali bombings and the constant drumbeat of attacks perpetrated by Islamist terrorists worldwide for the past two decades have convinced us that Indonesia's traditionally pluralistic and tolerant understanding and practice of Islam cannot survive if we neglect to address developments in the Muslim world at large.

Indonesia's first democratically elected president and former NU Chairman Abdurrahman Wahid foresaw this challenge. President Wahid played a leading role in overthrowing the 32-year dictatorship of Suharto in 1998 and transforming Indonesia into the world's 3rd largest democracy. During his brief term in office, President Wahid succeeded in establishing press freedom, restoring civil and political liberties to Indonesia's ethnic Chinese population and other minorities, and restored civilian control of the military, thereby stabilizing Indonesia's young democracy and preserving the Republic of Indonesia as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state despite serious challenges posed by Islamist extremists and their opportunistic political allies.

Humanitarian Islam and the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values are twin legacies of President Wahid, inspired by his realization that Muslims need to adapt to the modern world of freedom, democracy and human rights in order to live peacefully alongside people of other faiths.

In May of 2016, Nahdlatul Ulama hosted Islamic scholars from 33 countries and adopted the *International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration*, which states:

“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.”

These considerations explain why, in February of 2019 — at a gathering of over 20,000 NU religious scholars — Nahdlatul Ulama adopted an official ruling that abolishes the legal category of infidel within Islamic law; theologially legitimizes the nation state and laws derived from modern political processes; and establishes a religious obligation for Muslims to foster peace rather than wage war on behalf of our co-religionists, whenever conflict erupts between Muslim and non-Muslim populations anywhere in the world.

But this struggle cannot be won by Muslims alone. That is why we have established the Center for Shared Civilizational Values: so that Muslims and non-Muslims alike can join to reject any and all forms of tyranny, and foster the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.

We are pleased that the World Evangelical Alliance, which represents 600 million Protestants in 140 nations, is working hand-in-hand with us to accomplish these objectives.

The sovereign nation state is the indispensable cornerstone of an emerging global civilization, and the nation state requires a strong foundation of religious values, culture and tradition. In Indonesia, our local Islamic traditions, epitomized by NU, serve as the fundamental pillar of support for our nation state. These traditions are clearly threatened by transnational movements such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, which seek to eradicate our cultural identity and to establish an Islamic caliphate.

I believe that your situation, in America, has many parallels to ours in Indonesia. Our national motto is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, or Unity Amid Diversity. I am aware that it was primarily Protestants who established the United States and its Constitution. Although imperfect, your ancestors’ vision helped to inspire a global movement that ultimately led to the abolition of slavery worldwide and the establishment of a rules-based international order, founded upon the aspiration to ensure respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.

We hope that all of you, as Americans, will remain proud of that which is noble within your history and traditions, while joining people of good will of every faith and nation in embracing change that is for the betterment of humanity at large.

But if local cultures and traditions — like those of Indonesia and the United States of America — are to survive amid the rapidly accelerating globalization of the 21st century, we must engage with each other and adapt to new realities. That is why we are working hand-in-hand with the world’s largest political network, Centrist Democrat International, which was previously known as Christian Democrat International. It is also why we have established a Joint Working Group with the World Evangelical Alliance.

As stated in a book we recently published with the WEA, titled *God Needs No Defense: Reimagining Muslim-Christian Relations in the 21st Century*:

Leaders
of the World Evangelical Alliance
and the Humanitarian Islam Movement
cordially invite you
to join in building a global alliance
founded upon shared civilizational values.

This alliance seeks to prevent the political
weaponization of identity;
curtail the spread of communal hatred;
promote solidarity and respect among the diverse
people, cultures and nations of the world;
and foster the emergence of a
truly just and harmonious world order,
founded upon respect for the equal rights
and dignity of every human being.

Thank you for your invitation to speak on this solemn occasion. May we never forget those who have lost their lives to terrorism. And may we honor their memory by striving to bequeath to our children and grandchildren a more peaceful world in which Muslims and Christians may live side by side, respecting each other's God-given freedom of conscience.