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Sample Media Coverage
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JAKARTA, Indonesia — The scene is horrifyingly familiar. Islamic State soldiers march a line of prisoners to a riverbank, shoot them one by one and dump their bodies over a blood-soaked dock into the water.

But instead of the celebratory music and words of praise expected in a jihadi video, the soundtrack features the former Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid, singing a Javanese mystical poem: “Many who memorize the Quran and Hadith love to condemn others as infidels while ignoring their own infidelity to God, their hearts and minds still mired in filth.”
That powerful scene is one of many in a 90-minute film that amounts to a relentless, religious repudiation of the Islamic State and the opening salvo in a global campaign by the world’s largest Muslim group to challenge its ideology head-on.

The challenge, perhaps surprisingly, comes from Indonesia, which has the world’s largest Muslim population but which lies thousands of miles away from the Islamic State’s base in the Middle East.

A. Mustofa Bisri, the spiritual leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, an Indonesian Muslim organization that claims more than 50 million members, in the film “Rahmat Islam Nusantara” (The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam). LibForAll Foundation and the International Institute of Quranic Studies

“The spread of a shallow understanding of Islam renders this situation critical, as highly vocal elements within the Muslim population at large — extremist groups — justify their harsh and often savage behavior by claiming to act in accord with God’s commands, although they are grievously mistaken,” said A. Mustofa Bisri, the spiritual leader of the group, Nahdlatul Ulama, an Indonesian Muslim organization that claims more than 50 million members.

“According to the Sunni view of Islam,” he said, “every aspect and expression of religion should be imbued with love and compassion, and foster the perfection of human nature.”

This message of tolerance is at the heart of the group’s campaign against jihadism, which will be carried out online, and in hotel conference rooms and convention centers from North America to Europe to Asia. The film was released Thursday at the start of a three-day congress by the organization’s youth wing in the Central Java city of Yogyakarta.

New York Times
As world leaders call for Muslims to take the lead in the ideological battle against a growing and increasingly violent offshoot of their own religion, analysts say the group’s campaign is a welcome antidote to jihadism.

“I see the counternarrative as the only way that Western governments can deal with the ISIS propaganda, but there’s no strategy right now,” said Nico Prucha, a research fellow at King’s College London, who analyzes the Islamic State’s Arab-language online propaganda.

And Western leaders often lack credibility with those most susceptible to jihad’s allure. “They don’t speak Arabic or have never lived in the Muslim world,” Mr. Prucha said.

The campaign by Nahdlatul Ulama, known as N.U., for a liberal, pluralistic Islam also comes at a time when Islam is at war with itself over central theological questions of how the faith is defined in the modern era.

In a way, it should not be surprising that this message comes from Indonesia, the home of Islam Nusantara, widely seen as one of the most progressive Islamic movements in the world. The movement — its name is Indonesian for “East Indies Islam” — dates back more than 500 years and promotes a spiritual interpretation of Islam that stresses nonviolence, inclusiveness and acceptance of other religions.

Analysts say the theology developed organically in a place where Hinduism and Buddhism were the primary religions before Islam arrived around the 13th century. Indonesian Islam blended with local religious beliefs and traditions, creating a pluralistic society despite having a Muslim majority.

Indonesia today has more than 190 million Muslims, but also has a secular government and influential Christian, Hindu and Buddhist minorities.

Such liberalism poses a counterargument to the Islamic State, analysts said.

“We are directly challenging the idea of ISIS, which wants Islam to be uniform, meaning that if there is any other idea of Islam that is not following their ideas, those people are infidels who must be killed,” said Yahya Cholil Staquf, general secretary to the N.U. supreme council. “We will show that is not the case with Islam.”

N.U. has established a nonprofit organization, Bayt ar-Rahmah, in Winston-Salem, N.C., which will be the hub for international activities including conferences and seminars to promote Indonesia’s tradition of nonviolent, pluralistic Islam, Mr. Yahya said.

N.U. is also working with the University of Vienna in Austria, which collects and analyzes ISIS propaganda, to prepare responses to those messages, which N.U. will disseminate online and at conferences.

A prevention center based in Indonesia, expected to be operational by the end of the year, will train male and female Arabic-speaking students to engage with jihadist ideology and messaging under the guidance of N.U. theologians who are consulting Western academia.
The film, “Rahmat Islam Nusantara” (The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam), has been translated into English and Arabic for global distribution, including online. The film explores Islam’s arrival and evolution in Indonesia, and includes interviews with Indonesian Islamic scholars.

In scene after scene, they challenge and denounce the Islamic State’s interpretations of the Quran and the Hadith, the book of the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings, as factually wrong and perverse.

The Islamic State’s theology, rooted in the fundamentalist Wahhabi movement, takes its cues from medieval Islamic jurisprudence, where slavery and execution of prisoners was accepted. The filmmakers accept the legitimacy of those positions for the time but argue that Islamic law needs to be updated to 21st-century norms.

Other sects and Muslim leaders have made this argument before. And non-Arab countries like Indonesia tend to have less influence on the practice of Islam, especially in the Middle East.

“The problem with Middle East Islam is they have what I call religious racism,” said Azyumardi Azra, an Islamic scholar and former rector of the State Islamic University in Jakarta. “They feel that only the Arabs are real Muslims and the others are not.”

Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and the main source of financial support for Wahhabism worldwide, has had more success in imposing its interpretation and has even made inroads in Indonesia. Analysts say a steady flow of money from Persian Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, supports an active and growing Wahhabist movement here.

There are also reservations here about the N.U. going global, rather than first tackling violent extremism at home. Indonesia has suffered several deadly terrorist attacks by Islamic militants in recent years that have killed hundreds, including bombings on the resort island of Bali in 2002 and 2005, and at five-star international hotels in Jakarta in 2003 and 2009.

The best known of the Indonesian jihadi groups, Jemaah Islamiyah, a onetime Southeast Asian branch of Al Qaeda, has been crushed, but splinter groups still exist, as well as other militant Muslim groups like the Islamic Defenders Front, which occasionally smash up bars and attack religious minorities and their houses of worship.

Bonar Tigor Naipospos, vice chairman for the executive board of the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace in Jakarta, said N.U.’s campaign applied equally to local radicals.

“They want to show to Indonesian society, ‘Look, we are Islamic and we have universal values, but we also respect local cultures,’” he said. “We are not like Islam in the Middle East.”

Others say the international public discourse has to start somewhere, even if it is thousands of miles away from Syria and Iraq.

Hedieh Mirahmadi, president of the World Organization for Resource Development and Education, an organization based in Washington that works to combat extremism, said that, according to open source data, supporters of the Islamic State were sending an average of 2.8 million messages a day to their followers on Twitter.
“Who’s going to counter that?” she asked.

“It’s what they are doing in Indonesia, it’s what we are doing in the U.S., and in other places,” she said. “You flood the space, and you hope people get the right messages.”

Indonesia provides a vision of a peaceful post-Islamofascist world

World View: A very large Muslim organisation in the world’s most populous Muslim country says the time has come to fight back against Isis ideology

Peter Popham  @peterpopham  Friday 27 November 2015

As the threat from Isis grows starker, the caliphate’s intellectual underpinnings have become clear: the missionary efforts of Wahhabi preachers, fuelled by tens of billions of dollars of Saudi oil money, that have saturated the Muslim world in the past 40 years. This is the rigid, medieval version of Islam which decrees that infidels be killed and their womenfolk violated – that such behaviour is the devout Muslim’s religious duty. Millions of Muslims, praying in the ugly mosques built with Saudi money, have absorbed this hate-ridden version of the religion with their mothers’ milk. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his followers are piously putting it into practice, with the results that we see.

It is not only the Shia, the Christians and the Yazidis who are suffering in consequence; the Sufis of Afghanistan and Kashmir and the Muslims of northern India, whose religious practices are
intertwined with Hinduism, have been forced into silence. Great artists like the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the legendary qawwali singer of Pakistan, are condemned as un-Islamic by imams for whom all music is the Devil's work.

Against this background of atrocity and intolerance, a very large Muslim organisation in the world’s most populous Muslim country this week declared that the time has come to fight back.

Nahdlatul Ulama, an Indonesian Muslim organisation, claims to have 50 million members, more than one in four of Indonesia’s Muslims. This week it released a feature-length film, The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam, which, from a foundation of Sunni theological orthodoxy, challenges Isis head on. Against Isis footage of prisoners being marched to a river bank, shot in the head and dumped in the water, the soundtrack declares, “Many who memorise the Koran… love to condemn others as infidels while ignoring their own infidelity to God, their hearts and minds mired in filth.”

“We are directly challenging the idea of Isis, which wants Islam to be uniform, meaning that if there is any other idea of Islam that is not following their ideas, those people are infidels who must be killed,” Yahya Cholli, general secretary of the organisation’s supreme council, told the New York Times. “We will show that is not the case with Islam.”

Like European countries with large Muslim populations, Indonesia has suffered its share of terrorism from the Islamofascists, most notoriously the Bali bombings of 2005 (180 dead) and 2015 (seven dead), which were aimed at foreign tourists. Non-Sunni Muslims and minority religions have also been targeted, with churches forced to close, Shia Muslims attacked, and Ahmadiyya Muslims, stigmatised as heretics, harassed and intimidated.

In the province of Aceh, where coastal areas were destroyed in the 2004 tsunami, with the loss of more than 230,000 lives, Saudi-style Islamism has taken root. Fundamentalists interpreted the tsunami as God’s punishment for sinful behaviour, and the imposition of Sharia law followed, with corporal punishment for gambling and drinking alcohol and women obliged to wear headscarves in public and other repressive measures. But Aceh has always been exceptional: as the spot where
Islam arrived in South East Asia in the 15th century, it has always been the most religiously conservative part of the country.

The rest of the country continues to hold out against such policies. The main island of Java was a major centre of both Hinduism and Buddhism for more than a millennium before Islam swept all before it, and the Indonesians continue to take pride in the richness of their cultural heritage: the extraordinary ninth century Buddhist complex at Borobudur, near Yogyakarta, survives, despite bombs in the 1980s and recent threats by Isis to destroy it, and continues to stage performances of the Ramayana, the Hindu epic.

"Islam," VS Naipaul wrote in 1981 in his book Among the Believers, “which had come only in the 15th 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.”

The rich, even baffling diversity of Indonesia’s past is matched by the complexity of its present, and makes it more comfortable in a globalised world than countries like Saudi Arabia, glued to a one-dimensional tradition of zealotry. In 2009, on her maiden overseas trip as secretary of state, Hillary Clinton told her hosts: “As I travel around the world… I will be saying to people, if you want to know whether Islam, democracy, modernity and women’s rights can co-exist, go to Indonesia.” It has held fast to the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, keeping out of exclusive alliances and maintaining good relations with countries as diverse as Russia, China and Japan, as well as the United States and Saudi Arabia.

It is no accident that Nahdlatul Ulama has come out fighting against Isis this week: the organisation was founded in 1926 in reaction to the spread of Wahhabism, and has defined itself in opposition to the fundamentalists ever since. The spiritual leader of the group, Ahmad Mustofa Bisri, said: “Highly vocal elements within the Muslim population… justify their harsh and often savage behaviour by claiming to act in accord with God’s commands.” They are, he said, “grievously mistaken.”

Can Muslims so far from Arabia have any influence on opinion in the religion’s heartland? They stand a better chance than the likes of Messrs Cameron and Hollande.

How to Challenge ISIS Propaganda? 
Indonesia Shows the Way

There is a spectre haunting the world. The spectre of ISIS. And the ideological challenge to the so-called ‘Islamic’ State is coming from within Islam itself.

The US, Europe, Russia and Syria along with an assortment of Arab countries continue to bomb parts of Syria and Iraq in the hope of decimating the world’s most dangerous terror organisation. Despite the efforts of the world’s best armies, ISIS was able to carry out the devastating attacks in Paris.

The terror organisation has also been able to recruit Muslim youth, through effective use of the internet and social media as propaganda tools. Western attempts to combat their propaganda machinery have met with mixed results at best.

Now, a powerful ideological challenge is being posed to the ISIS by the Nahdlatul Ulama, a Muslim organisation from Indonesia. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, and it’s fighting ISIS’ horrifying interpretation of Islam.

**A Religious Attack on Islamic Fundamentalism**

Indian Muslim organisations have condemned the ISIS as un-Islamic and even issued fatwas against them. In Indonesia though, a different strategy is being tried out.
The Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is an organisation of Muslims in Indonesia that has over 50 million members. According to a report in the New York Times, the Nahdlatul Ulama has released a 90 minute film, much of it using ISIS’ own footage.

But the visuals are not used to glorify the Islamic State, but rather point out how it is intolerant, anti-Islamic and, not to put too fine a point on it, evil.

*The spread of a shallow understanding of Islam renders this situation critical, as highly vocal elements within the Muslim population at large – extremist groups – justify their harsh and often savage behaviour by claiming to act in accord with God’s commands, although they are grievously mistaken. According to the Sunni view of Islam, every aspect and expression of religion should be imbued with love and compassion, and foster the perfection of human nature.*

*A Mustofa Bisri, Spiritual Head, Nahdlatul Ulama*

The film is part of an ongoing campaign to combat ISIS and its potential to convert and corrupt the youth of the country. The NU stands for a tolerant, liberal Islam and is opposed to the fundamentalist interpretation of the Quran that both Wahabism and ISIS share. The question though, is whether their campaign will find resonance beyond Indonesia, where the group is most active.

**ISIS Most Disliked in Muslim Countries**

Movements and messages like those of NU, with a message of tolerance and brotherhood, may find resonance across countries with high Muslim populations. According to a survey published by Pew Research Centre, most people in 11 countries with high Muslim populations expressed an
active dislike for the ISIS. Pakistan was the only exception, where most people surveyed did not have an opinion.

With the general threat of extremism and fundamentalism growing, these numbers can be an encouraging sign. A part of the battle against ISIS has to be on the ideological front, and initiatives like those of the NU will go a long way in that fight.

World’s Largest Islamic Organization Tells ISIS To Get Lost

A 50-million strong Sunni movement in Indonesia just launched a global anti-extremism campaign.

Krithika Varagur
Associate What's Working Editor, The Huffington Post

Each time the Islamic State, al Qaeda or another terrorist group commits violence in the name of Islam, a familiar refrain arises: What's the Muslim world doing about it?

In fact, anti-extremism efforts abound in the global Muslim community: Muslim leaders and scholars have denounced the Islamic State group, the U.K.'s Muslim Youth League has declared "ideological holy war" against extremism, and YouTube has even tried to recruit American Muslims to counter extremist content.

And in Indonesia, home of the world's largest Muslim population, a massive anti-extremism movement is underway.
Nahdlatul Ulama, or NU, is the largest independent Islamic organization in the world, with 50 million members. Part Sunni religious body, part political party and part charity, it was founded nearly 90 years ago, in 1926, as a response to another Sunni movement, Wahabism.

Wahhabism is the ultra-conservative reform movement based in Saudi Arabia that advocates for puritanical laws from the time of Islam's origins. It rejects the modern notion of "religion as a purely private activity" and the separation of church and state. The Islamic State is highly committed to Wahhabi principles, using its religious textbooks and embracing its hardline tradition of killing unbelievers.

NU's stated goal is to "to spread messages about a tolerant Islam in their respective countries to curb radicalism, extremism and terrorism," which, it claims, "often spring from a misinterpretation of Islamic teachings." It launched its global anti-extremism initiative in 2014.

Its work was recently magnified by the Paris terror attacks, which Indonesia's Vice President, Jusuf Kalla, who serves on the NU Advisory Board, condemned at a three-day conference last week in Malang, Indonesia. The conference was held by the International Conference of Islamic Scholars, another Indonesian anti-radicalism project that its Foreign Ministry started in 2002, in wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. Kalla said, "There is nothing religious about such attacks because Islam never justifies them."

NU is setting its sights globally. In December 2014, it created an American nonprofit called Bayt ar-Rahmah in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to serve as headquarters for its international activities. It is planning "an international conference and cultural event in Washington, D. C." in Spring 2016, NU General Secretary Yahya Cholil Staquf told the Huffington Post.

It is also building a "prevention center" in Indonesia to train Arabic-speaking students to combat jihadist rhetoric, alongside NU theologians. And it's has created a joint program with the University of Vienna in Austria called VORTEX, the Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Radicalism and Extremism. The project, which is funded by the Ministry of Internal Security, works to "produce counter-narratives against radical ideas and propagate them globally," said Staquf. He said NU is also working on future projects with the Swedish and British governments.

There are domestic concerns about NU's global ambitions, since there's still a need to counter extremism within Indonesia itself. The country has faced a number of deadly terrorist attacks in recent years, including on its beach resorts and luxury hotels. But NU says its campaign applies "equally to local radicals," according to the New York Times. And NU suggests that the specific differences of Indonesian Islam, which it believes is more moderate and tolerant than that of the Middle East, should be both encouraged at home and propagated abroad. "When we learn that the threat of radicalism is global, we need to consolidate globally to challenge it," Staquf told HuffPost.

Indonesia is home to one of the most liberal Muslim populations in the world. On Nov. 14, the Indonesian Ulema Council, the country's top Muslim clerical body, which includes NU, announced a plan to mobilize 50,000 preachers to spread moderate, or "Wasathiyah," Islam within Indonesia.

As suggested in a 2012 article in the Indonesian policy journal Strategic Review, pluralism may be the "big idea" that Indonesian Islam can bring to the world stage. Although Indonesian Muslims are a numerical majority, they live alongside Hindus and Buddhists who predated them on the island, and they share and mix spiritual traditions. Indonesia's national motto is *bhinneka tunggal ika*, or "unity in diversity," and that ethos is central to the country's Muslim traditions. It's the backdrop for the school of Islam Nusantara, or "Islam of the Archipelago," a 500-year-old strain of Sunnism that emphasizes Hindu-Buddhist tenets like nonviolence and religious tolerance.
In a 90-minute film released by NU called "The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara," Indonesian Islamic scholars systematically criticize and denounce the Islamic State's interpretations of the Quran and Hadith.

The film underscores the ambition and scope of NU's anti-extremism platform. "At the upstream level, it is the job of clerics to combat embryos of terrorism, while on the downstream side, it is the job of law enforcement institutions to do so," said Muzadi, who also serves as secretary-general of ICIS.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/indonesian-muslims-counter-isis_565c737ae4b072e9d1c26bda
Though over one billion people in the world subscribe to the faith of Islam, every time a Muslim individual commits a violent and highly-publicized attack in the West, Americans demand unequivocal apologies and condemnations from all adherents to the religion. They cannot be bothered, of course, with the exact, same terroristic slaughter of non-whites in far-off lands.

Over and over, Islamic groups around the world condemn terrorist attacks and reiterate that violent radicals do not truly adhere to the religion. Even so, this never seems to be enough for the Fox News-inclined, who often falsely claim Muslims remain silent because they are uncivilized, violent savages. They insist ‘good’ Muslims must do more to combat extremism.

Such rhetoric, however, is increasingly, conspicuously false. One of the biggest blows to this mentality comes from Indonesia, where the largest independent Islamic organization in the world not only condemns acts of radical Islam, but has launched a massive, worldwide initiative to counter the ideology that breeds it.

Nahdlatul Ulama, or NU, was founded in 1926, and boasts 50 million members. As Huffington Post explained, it is “part Sunni religious body, part political party and part charity.” NU says its goal is “to spread messages about a tolerant Islam in their respective countries to curb radicalism, extremism and terrorism,” which the organization argues “often spring from a misinterpretation of Islamic teachings.” To do so, the group launched a global anti-extremism campaign last year.

In December of 2014, NU began building a center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to serve as its headquarters for the international project. NU is also planning “an international conference and cultural event in Washington, D.C.,” scheduled for Spring 2016, according to NU General Secretary, Yahya Cholil Staquf.

Further, NU has collaborated with the University of Vienna to create the Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Radicalism and Extremism (VORTEX). Staquf says the aim of this project is to “produce counter-narratives against radical ideas and propagate them globally.” NU is also working on initiatives with the Swedish and British governments.
NU condemned last month’s attacks in Paris, and only weeks afterward, participated in the International Conference of Islamic Scholars’ annual forum on the “importance of promoting a peaceful Islam to combat radicalism worldwide.”

The group also believes its efforts should apply “equally to local radicals” in Indonesia.

Indonesia is home to one of the most liberal Muslim populations in the world, and its constitution provides for freedom of religion. Though the government recognizes only six religions (and/or denominations) — Islam, Protestantism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Catholicism, and Buddhism — religious minorities live in general harmony.

Even so, 88% of Indonesia’s population is Muslim — and sectarian conflicts persist.

Terrorist attacks in Indonesia have increased in recent years, and multiple groups have moved to tackle the problem. The country’s leading clerical body, the Indonesian Ulema Council, which includes groups like NU, recently launched an initiative to “mobilize 50,000 preachers to spread moderate, or ‘Wasathiyah,’ Islam within Indonesia.” It has also launched a training center in the country to teach Arabic-speaking students how to counter extremist rhetoric and ideology.

Domestically and globally, NU is taking a proactive approach to curbing the proliferation of Islamic extremism. What is most relevant about its goals, however, is its condemnation of Wahhabism, a sect of Islam with roots in Saudi Arabia. Like NU, Wahhabism is derived from the Sunni sect of Islam, but their approaches could not be more different. As Huffington Post summarized:

“Wahhabism is the ultra-conservative reform movement based in Saudi Arabia that advocates for puritanical laws from the time of Islam’s origins. It rejects the modern notion of ‘religion as a purely private activity’ and the separation of church and state. The Islamic State is highly committed to Wahhabi principles, using its religious textbooks and embracing its hardline tradition of killing unbelievers.”

Because of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia has been directly linked to the Islamic State, though the United States has failed to highlight this relationship, much less acknowledge the many human rights abuses its monarchical ally commits. In fact, NU was aware of the dangers of Wahhabism when the organization launched, inspired by a direct intention to counter the Saudi-linked ideology.

In light of these facts, the Western response to radical Islam seems woefully insufficient. While NU evidently seeks to strike at the root of the world’s most radical Islamic beliefs, the United States and its Western allies align themselves with the very purveyor of, and inspiration for, ISIS. High-level officials have argued that the U.S. military directly contributed to the rise of the terror group — but all the while, Western populations condemn Muslims for ‘not doing enough’ to counter this ideology.

NU’s actions run in direct conflict with this repeatedly disproved notion. The organization’s spiritual leader, A. Mustofa Bisri, has said, “The spread of a shallow understanding of Islam renders this situation critical, as highly vocal elements within the Muslim population at large — extremist groups — justify their harsh and often savage behavior by claiming to act in accord with God’s commands, although they are grievously mistaken.”

“According to the Sunni view of Islam,” he added, “every aspect and expression of religion should be imbued with love and compassion, and foster the perfection of human nature.”

http://theantimedia.org/the-worlds-largest-muslim-group-has-been-opposing-radical-islam-for-90-years/
Indonesia’s largest Muslim group joins battle against radical Islam

Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has joined the global battle against radical ideology, producing a documentary film to draw the line between moderate and radical Islam.

By Sujadi Siswo    Posted 10 Dec 2015 19:38     Updated 10 Dec 2015 21:26

JAKARTA: Never in its 90-year history has the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) come out so forcefully to explain the brand of Islam it propagates in Indonesia.

In its 90-minute documentary film The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara, NU explains how Islam has spread in the archipelago through local wisdom and culture.

And the teachings of the nine saints in mainland Java - popularly known as Wali Songo - is at the heart of this Islamic tradition that promotes peace and tolerance.

NU wants to promote this practice here, as radicalism takes root.

“Our primary target is our common Muslim people, because we know they need a bright line. They need this bright line that separates radical Islam from the true Islam,” said Yahya Cholil Staqful, NU secretary general. “What we need is a consensus among the societies - societal consensus - that can marginalise those radical ideologies.”

Several global organisations who supported the film's production have pooled their resources to counter the extremism being spread through popular media.
“This film was created to use technology in order to function as a loudspeaker and to easily propagate the traditional teachings of Islam that is a characteristic of not only Nusantara, or Indonesian Islam, but also the characteristics of the vast majority of Muslim population throughout the world,” said C Holland Taylor, chairman and CEO of LibForAll Foundation.

“Other organisations must also start to engage this ideological battle,” said Noor Huda Ismail, director of the Institute for International Peace-building. “Since 2002, we’ve seen a silent majority. We let the fringe minority of Muslim radicals grab the microphone and dictate the discourse.”

2002 was the year the Bali bombings shook Indonesia, and the country realised it was home to regional terror network Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).

Jemaah Islamiyah has been decimated structurally, but its teachings and spirit are far from dead. While the JI was more of a regional phenomenon, Indonesia is now dealing with the threat and global appeal of Islamic State. By latest estimates, 700 Indonesians have joined IS in Syria and Iraq - the largest contingent of foreign fighters from Asia. What is more worrying is that more than 160 of them are back in Indonesia.

As the face of moderate Islam in Indonesia, NU wants a bigger part in the ideological battle.

“Nahdlatul Ulama has already set in motion to build a cooperation with the University of Vienna in Austria to produce counter-narratives to radical Islamic ideologies,” said Yahya Cholil Staquf.

Home to the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia can play an important role for moderate Muslims looking for good role models, as they fight the spread of radical ideas.

HILLARY CLINTON takes political correctness too far when she refuses to characterize the fight against terrorism as a battle to defeat “radical Islam.” To use that term, she has argued, “sounds like we are declaring war against a religion.”

Such linguistic sensitivity may be well intentioned — especially given Donald Trump’s grotesque call to bar Muslims from entering the United States. But it does a disservice to the tens of millions of moderate, peaceful Muslims who abhor the extremism and violence of radical Islamists, and who want to highlight, not downplay, their rejection of the jihadists.

“If we’re to succeed in defeating terrorism, we must enlist Muslim communities as some of our strongest allies,” President Obama rightly stressed in his Oval Office address Sunday night. “That does not mean denying the fact that an extremist ideology has spread within some Muslim communities. It’s a real problem that Muslims must confront without excuse.”

Many Muslims would enthusiastically agree. Among them is the newly formed Muslim Reform Movement, launched this month by a coalition of moderate Muslims from Canada, Europe, and the United States. In a public manifesto, the coalition put the stakes bluntly: “We are in a battle for the soul of Islam, and an Islamic renewal must defeat the ideology of Islamism.” It explicitly condemned violent jihad, embraced equal rights for women and religious minorities, and insisted on separation of mosque and state. “We are loyal to the nations in which we live,” the reform declaration stated. “We reject the idea of the Islamic state . . . We oppose institutionalized sharia.”

To underscore their opposition to Wahhabism, the harsh and puritanical version of Islam promoted by Saudi Arabia, members of the reform coalition posted a copy of their manifesto, Martin Luther-like, to the door of the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., a mosque funded in part by the Saudi government.

Halfway around the globe, meanwhile, another organization of Muslim moderates is mounting a vigorous challenge to ISIS and jihadi extremism.

In Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim group has embarked on an international effort to repudiate the jihadist teachings and ideology of the Islamic State. The group is Nahdlatul Ulama, or NU, a 90-year-old Sunni social organization with 50 million members and a reputation for progressive pluralism. It recently kicked off a new anti-extremist campaign, a multipronged ideological drive, as The New York Times reported, to be “carried out online, and in hotel conference rooms and convention centers from North America to Europe to Asia.”

Last month, NU released a 90-minute film that vigorously refutes ISIS and its Wahhabist-rooted fundamentalism. The grisly massacres celebrated in so many jihadist videos are denounced in this film as an appalling perversion of Islam that the Muslim world must not tolerate. NU is also
training Arabic-speaking students, both male and female, to disseminate its antiradical values and challenge Islamist supremacism.

It is a great mistake to blame the evils committed by jihadi extremists on the Muslim religion. Radical Islam — not Islam itself — is the menace that must be defeated. Ultimately, that defeat can only be administered by Muslims passionately committed to moderation and tolerance. Those moderate Muslims need all the support we can give them as they battle for the soul of their faith.

THE AUSTRALIAN

Nahdlatul Ulama: Indonesia’s antidote to Islamism’s feral fringe

THE AUSTRALIAN    DECEMBER 12, 2015 12:00AM

Peter Alford
Correspondent
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Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest independent Muslim organisation, is exporting Indonesia’s traditionally tolerant Islamic values as the religion’s authentic form, an antidote to nihilistic radicalism tearing apart the Middle East.

Claiming more than 40 million followers in the world's biggest Muslim nation, NU spiritual leaders are also trying to supplant the influence of Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism, which they believe is the ideological wellspring of Islamic State.

The message to vulnerable Muslim communities everywhere is “NU is here to help”, Supreme Council secretary-general Yahya Cholil Staquf told The Weekend Australian.

“We know this threat, we have been fighting it for almost 90 years — it’s our daily business to face them,” said Haji Yahya.

“We know how they think, we know who they are, we know how they operate.”

NU has this week launched Rahmat Islam Nusantara (The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam), a video explaining Indonesian Islam’s origins and theology, fiercely rebutting Islamic State and Wahhabi fundamentalism.

NU formed in 1926 in part to resist the spread of Wahhabism to what was then the Dutch East Indies, following the Saudis’ conquest of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

The new video denounces Saudi Islam as “grasping and materialistic, coarse and cruel” and links Wahhabist persecution of non-conforming Muslims and destruction of ancient shrines and sacred graves to Islamic State’s depredations.

“Perhaps we have not witnessed with our own eyes our friends and neighbours being slaughtered,” says NU chairman Said Aqil Siradj amid images of horrific executions and mosque destruction.

“We have not witnessed with our own eyes the graves of our saints and our religious scholars being desecrated and destroyed by these people. But it’s obvious, obvious they are working non-stop to reach us.”
NU, an organisation that has seen itself defending Indonesian religious values from aberrant foreign doctrines, is now joining the international ideological struggle.

Its message is directed both at the faithful abroad and non-Muslims horrified particularly by Islamic State.

"It is very important we export the ideas of Islam Nusantara to the world, in these times when many in the world hate Islam because of the acts of some Islamic people," Dr Said said at the launch.

But as NU also struggles ideologically with extremists at home, some surreptitiously resourced from the Arabian Peninsula, others openly supporting Islamic State or al-Qa’ida, the video also reiterates Islam Nusantara’s traditions of pluralism and tolerance.

Indonesia’s senior security minister Luhut Panjaitan this week said the government was working with NU, Muhammadiyah, the other mass Sunni Muslim organisation, and other religious groups on a program of “soft approach to the problem of radicalisation”.

But NU leaders worry the government itself has been reluctant to confront radical groups, particularly those pushing as their main line imposition of sharia law across the nation, which NU opposes.

The thuggish Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which enjoys close relations with some senior police, bullies non-Sunni communities — Shia and Ahmadiyya — and Christian churches, against NU’s precepts.

NU leaders believe the upsurge in attacks on Shias and Ahmaddis in the past five years is directly related to the spread of Wahhabi influence in Indonesia.

The former regional terrorist organisation Jemaah Islamiah remains legal in Indonesia and is energetically recruiting among young middle-class people in the cause of sharia law.

The government itself has yet to give legal teeth to its 2014 “ban” on Islamic State, so that recruitment and travelling to Syria to fight for the caliphate still are not illegal.

Radical agendas prevailed at a Congress of Indonesian Muslims in February when NU, Muhammadiyah and the organiser Indonesian Ulama Council were pushed to the margins by the likes of FPI, Hizbut Tahrir and Indonesian Mujahadin Council.

Rahmat Islam Nusantara throughout emphasises and reinforces the tradition of Walisongo, the Nine Saints who began proselytising Islam in Java in the early 15th century.

That is a tradition of peaceful conversion, co-option of local cultures and the strong element of Sufi mysticism, all anathema to Saudi Islam and radical variants such as Islamic State.

“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 civilisation,” said Haji Yahya.

The video is being distributed internationally as The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara, including an Arab-language subtitled version, over the internet and social media.
ISIS in the World’s Largest Muslim Country

Why are so few Indonesians joining the Islamic State?

EDWARD DELMAN | JAN 3, 2016 | GLOBAL

In recent days, rumblings of ISIS have reached the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. Security forces in Indonesia, which is home to some 200 million Muslims, launched a manhunt for the militant leader Santoso, who had publicly pledged loyalty to the Islamic State. Police arrested several suspected ISIS supporters amid chatter about terror plots, while Australia’s attorney-general warned that the Islamic State was intent on establishing a “distant caliphate” in the Southeast Asian island nation. But the flurry of activity doesn’t tell the whole story about ISIS’s inroads in Indonesia. Consider, for example, that while the number of foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and other violent extremist groups is estimated to have more than doubled between June 2014 and December 2015, relatively few are coming from Indonesia—at least for now. The question is: Why?

Indonesia has certainly experienced its share of terrorism and jihadist movements since declaring independence from the Netherlands in 1945. After proclaiming an “Islamic state” in 1949, the organization Darul Islam denounced the Indonesian state as apostate and staged a series of armed rebellions against it in the 1950s and early 1960s, before moving underground. The militant Islamist movement then split into numerous groups, from Laskar Jihad, which led an anti-Christian
campaign across Indonesia, to Jemaah Islamiyah, which executed the 2002 Bali bombings. Indonesian jihadists have not solely focused on local targets; many went to Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion as mujahideen, though most only received training rather than engaging directly in the fighting there.

Moreover, there is clearly a base of support for ISIS in Indonesia. A September 2014 report by the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) details the Islamic State’s aggressive recruitment and propaganda efforts in the country, as well as mass professions of allegiance to the group. (As the report and a more recent one from USAID caution, these public declarations—in which roughly 1,000 to 2,000 people have taken part—are not necessarily accurate measures of active support for ISIS.) IPAC notes in another report that “the conflict in Syria has captured the imagination of Indonesian extremists in a way no foreign war has before,” for reasons ranging from the suffering of Sunni Muslims there, to the prospect of restoring an Islamic caliphate, to the fact that “Syria is directly linked to predictions in Islamic eschatology that the final battle at the end of time will take place in Sham, the region sometimes called Greater Syria or the Levant, encompassing Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel.”

Whatever the extent of ISIS’s support in Indonesia, that support has not translated into Indonesians heeding the call of jihad and heading to the Middle East in large numbers. A recent Soufan Group report on foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria (not necessarily fighting with ISIS) cited an Indonesian-government estimate that 700 of those fighters hailed from Indonesia as of July 2015—a number that the group says is probably an overestimate. In comparison, the official estimate for France is 1,700; for Russia, 2,400; for the United States, 150; and for Tunisia, 6,000. In France, 18 people per million Muslim citizens are thought to be fighting in Syria and Iraq, according to the USAID study. In Tunisia, that number is 280. In Indonesia, it’s just over one.

Why are so few Indonesians traveling to Syria to fight? The statistics in Indonesia do conform to a degree with those of nearby countries. Official estimates indicate that only 100 foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria are arriving from Muslim-majority Malaysia, and that a minuscule 23 are coming from India, whose population includes 177 million Muslims. But explaining the phenomenon as a regional trend glosses over country-specific dynamics. ISIS may have gained less traction in
Malaysia than in the Arab world or Western Europe, but Malaysia still has over six times the rate of Muslim citizens leaving for battle in the Middle East as Indonesia has. Polls also suggest that a higher percentage of Malaysians than Indonesians are sympathetic to ISIS and the tactic of suicide bombings, though in both cases that support is confined to a small minority of the population. In India, much of Muslim civil society has repudiated ISIS and other Islamic terrorist organizations, with nearly 70,000 clerics signing an anti-ISIS fatwa.

In November, *The New York Times* pointed to one factor behind the muted response to ISIS in Indonesia: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an Islamic organization that claims to have 50 million members. NU preaches an Islam of compassion, inclusivity, and tolerance of other faiths, as opposed to ISIS’s fundamentalist, Wahhabi-inspired theology. “We are directly challenging the idea of ISIS, which wants Islam to be uniform, meaning that if there is any other idea of Islam that is not following their ideas, those people are infidels who must be killed,” Yahya Cholil Staquf, the general secretary to the NU supreme council, told the *Times*.

Sidney Jones, the director of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, agreed that NU has played a role in minimizing ISIS’s appeal to Indonesians. “That movement is indeed a bulwark against more people being attracted by extremist ideologies,” Jones told me. However, “the people that are getting recruited into ranks such as ISIS and other jihadi groups before that are not coming from Nahdlatul Ulama,” so the organization’s impact may be more limited than its size suggests.

Instead, Jones mentioned several other causes: “Indonesia is a country that doesn’t have a repressive government, is not under occupation, it’s politically stable, so there’s no social unrest or conflict, and the Muslims aren’t a persecuted minority. So when you put all of those factors together, it’s not all that surprising that it’s actually only a tiny minority of even the activist population that’s leaving for Syria.”

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“Indonesia doesn’t have a repressive government, is not under occupation, it’s politically stable, and the Muslims aren’t a persecuted minority.”

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Indeed, the countries that send the largest numbers of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, either in absolute terms or on a per-capita basis, tend to be either politically repressive (Saudi Arabia, 2,500 fighters), politically unstable (Tunisia, 6,000 fighters), discriminatory toward a Muslim minority (Russia, 2,400 fighters), or a combination of the above. As further evidence for her point, Jones cited the tumultuous period immediately following the collapse in 1998 of the authoritarian Suharto government, which had ruled Indonesia for more than three decades. The resulting instability provided “the best recruitment tool radical groups ever had. They’ve never been able to get back to that level of attraction of joining a jihadi movement, because there’s not a local driver” for radicalization in the young democracy, she explained.
Jones added that Indonesia’s freedom of expression creates space within which radical communities can advocate for Islamic law and an Islamic state without feeling the need to resort to violent action in pursuit of those goals. While acknowledging that certain groups have taken advantage of that space, Jones said that “it does keep the numbers of violent extremists” to a “manageable” level.

Meanwhile, according to IPAC, “ISIS has triggered a bigger backlash than ever seen before in the Indonesian Muslim community, suggesting that support will stay limited to a fringe of the radical fringe.” And that backlash isn’t just coming from NU; other mainstream Muslim organizations, including a coalition known as the Brotherhood Forum of the Indonesian Council of Religious Scholars, have rejected ISIS’s ideology. Nor has ISIS received the warmest of welcomes from Indonesia’s jihadist communities. The Islamic State’s brutality and decision to proclaim a caliphate have drawn criticism from jihadist media outlets and radical clerics in the country; “most of the hardline Muslim community have distanced themselves from ISIS or have taken a wait-and-see stance,” IPAC notes, including Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, which has declared ISIS a “deviant” movement. When asked about the possible impact of deradicalization programs by the Indonesian government, Jones responded, “I think it’s the good sense of the Muslim majority rather than government programs that are keeping the numbers down.”

But that “good sense,” it seems, is shaped at least in part by a stable, representative political system that respects its Muslim constituents—and a Muslim population that, even in some of its radical corners, loudly rejects ISIS’s practices and narrative. Which raises a question: Can lessons from countries like Indonesia somehow be applied to repressive and volatile countries in the Middle East, or to marginalized Muslim communities in Europe? ISIS’s ability to continue attracting recruits may hinge on the answer.

http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/01/isis-indonesia-foreign-fighters/422403/
Daesh, Islam Nusantara and shades of grey

KEITH LOVEARD, GUEST CONTRIBUTOR – 14 JANUARY 2016

It's an old enemy of Wahhabism. But is Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama and its project of tolerant, peaceful Islam an antidote to the extremism of Islamic State?

A statement late last year by Islamic State’s spokesman and senior leader, Sheikh Abu Muhammad Al Adnani, drew attention mainly because of his orders to attack “unbelievers” in the West.

It was widely assumed that these unbelievers were non-Muslims, like those killed in the Paris attacks. But Adnani was also telling Muslims that they too may be judged unbelievers, and suffer the consequences.

He urged Muslims to attack unbelievers in any way they could.
If you refuse to do this, while our brothers are being bombarded and killed, and while their blood and their possessions are destroyed everywhere, then review your religion. Then you are in a dangerous situation.

Islamic State is playing on an old Islamic theme. If a caliphate exists, Muslims must defend it. If they fail to do so, they will be considered apostates.

There are no greys in the Islamic State religious scheme, notes Holland Taylor, head of non-profit LibForAll, which fights for tolerant Islam. Islamic State, like so many other religious groups over the centuries, believes it is the only way to God. Anyone who does not believe that may be killed or enslaved, sold as chattel.

As many have already noted, Daesh, as many Muslims prefer to call Islamic State, is a death cult attempting to put the world into reverse and turn it into a medieval construct ruled entirely by its leaders’ strict interpretation of shariah law. The acronym Daesh happens to sound like Dahes, Arabic for sowing discord. Small wonder that Islamic State will cut your tongue out for using the term.

The emergence of Daesh is a problem for Muslims, for whom it is doctrinally impossible to deny sharia, or fiqh, the law. To deny Islamic State is, at least in the eyes of the radicals, to deny Islam. Many Muslims who know very little of their faith are easily cowed into submission by the threat of apostasy.

But while Daesh has wreaked havoc in the Middle East, many Indonesian Muslims are determined to oppose its demands.

Entering the lift at the central headquarters of traditionalist Sunni movement Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Jakarta, I and the other passengers are greeted by a recorded voice: “Salam Alaikum” (Welcome). When we stop at a floor, the recorded voice says “Alhamdilillah” (thanks to God). There are a few titters from the passengers, who perhaps like me are reminded of an evangelical prayer group in the West.

Indonesia, and even cosmopolitan Jakarta, adheres increasingly to the formalities of Muslim life.

Muslim modes of fashion and public behavior have become far more entrenched in daily life. NU, among all the changes of modern life, stoutly defends its traditional style of Islam. The world’s largest single organisation of any kind with an estimated 50 million members, it represents a traditional, Indonesian-flavored Islamic community that says the barbarians of Daesh have got it all wrong.

The lift reaches the seventh floor, and we arrive at the Aula, the hall, where I grab a seat in the second row. The hall fills up quickly, the audience including a number of acquaintances, some foreign journalists, another Indonesia-watcher, a finance man. I ask the latter why he’s come to the screening of the NU film. “I’m French. After Paris this is important to me,” he states. It’s important to all of us, I respond.

The speakers arrive. Kyai Haji Said Aqil Sirodj, the general secretary of the central board of Nahdlatul Ulama, tells us why we’re here.

The aim of the film is to export to the whole world. Donald Trump wants to ban all Muslims from entering America because of the actions of a small group of people who are conducting terror in the name of Islam. 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 and his allies at NU are promoting their unique form of Islam as an antidote to Islamic State, a rejection of Wahhabism, an alternative model for Muslims everywhere as a comfortable fit of religion and culture, and as a message to the West that not all Muslims are crazed murderers.

Islam Nusantara, says Said Aqil, was introduced to the Indonesian islands in 1470, nearly 300 years before Ibn Abd al-Wahhab formed an alliance with a local ruler, Muhammad Ibn Saud, in what many believe has now become an unholy alliance of religious fanaticism and oil wealth.

We settle down to watch the documentary, The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara. It’s a one-and-a-half hour movie, slickly produced that carries the argument of the local brand of the religion as a remedy to Islamic State. The theme of the movie is a festival held in 2014 to honour the last resting places of the Walisongo (Nine Saints).

While there is debate among historians about how Islam arrived in the islands, NU credits Maulana Malik Ibrahim with the honour. Considered the first of the Walisongo, the others were his descendants. While some say they were of Arab descent, NU itself states that they were Chinese mystics. The second Walisongo, Sunan Ampel, is believed to have been born in Champa, modern-day Vietnam.

The tombs of the Walisongo, scattered around the north coast of Java, are pilgrim sites to this day. At just one, the custodian says that on an average day around 15,000 people visit. In Saudi Arabia, sites such as this have been erased from the earth by the purist Wahhabi in a sterilised form of state Islam that Said Aqil states is also intrinsically capitalist.

**Mysticism**

The presence of the Walisongo in Java did not result in conflict with established religions. The courts followed Hinduism and Buddhism but most people, according to historian and religious school operator KH Agus Sanyoto, followed a belief system called Kapitayan. Instead of rejecting this creed, the Walisongo adopted it into what became Islam Nusantara – Islam with the flavor of the East Indies archipelago.

“The Kapitayan worshiped the highest God, who they called Sang Hyang Taya, the Great Void or Absolute,” Sanyoto recounts in the film. “Taya means emptiness, yet although the word literally means ‘that which is not’ it does not imply non-existence.

“This cannot be explained in purely rational terms, which is why Sang Hyang Taya came to be described with the phrase Tan Keno Kinoyo Ngopo, ‘that to which nothing can be done’. The mind cannot grasp ‘That’ which lies beyond human concepts, nor can ‘That’ be approached using any of the five senses.”

Followers of Sang Hyang Taya venerate rocks and boulders, which they see as containing the essence of the absolute. Priests meditated to caves, which represented emptiness. The Dutch described the belief system as animist, and Daesh and the Wahhabi consider it – and Islam Nusantara with it – as apostasy.

**Old enemies**

For NU, the propagation of Islam Nusantara as a counter to Daesh is not merely a question of theology. The organisation was formed specifically to counter pressure from Wahhabi infiltration. “We know who these people are, we have been fighting them for 90 years,” says KH Yahya Cholil Staquf, one of the leaders of the Islam Nusantara project.

KH Mustofa Bisri, until recently the spiritual head or Rois Aam of NU, describes the proselytising of the Wahhabi as an offence to the Prophet Muhammad. “The Prophet advised those who
proselytise (*da’wa*) to make things easy for people, not cause them to live in terror. And yet lately it is precisely *da’wa* that makes people feel horrified and appalled by Islam.

“Genuine Islam, Islam Nusantara, Indonesian Islam, the Islam taught by the Messenger of God, has been supplanted by Saudi Islam, a grasping and materialistic Islam, coarse, cruel and savage. The Wahhabi view is just a ghoulish nightmare that keeps the world awake at night, trembling in horror.”

The enmity between Indonesian Islam and Wahhabism has deep roots.

Pilgrims from West Sumatra who returned from the haj in the early 1800s determined that their indigenous Islam, coloured with local traditions and culture, was inferior to the austere Wahhabi form they had seen in Mecca and the other centers of Islamic life.

They strove to apply its strictures in their own country, where Sufi traditions had blended with local cultural legacies. Those who refused to acknowledge the new ‘pure’ version of Islam were murdered, including close family members. Others were enslaved, just as Daesh enslaves ‘unbelievers’ today. The conflict became known as the Padri wars.

Historical accounts of the Padri wars say they stretched from 1821 to 1837. The Wahhabi faction might have prevailed, but their philosophy denied the legitimacy of local rulers, who were naturally reluctant to give up their power and fought back. The Dutch colonists, initially tied down in a war in Java, finally were able to assist the rulers and defeat the Wahhabi adherents. Ironically, the attempt to impose an austere form of Islam on the people of West Sumatra ended as a springboard for Dutch expansion into other areas of Sumatra.

For NU, the war against the Wahhabi has been a long one, and it is still not finished. Said Aqil Sirodj warned in October 2015 that Daesh wants to expand its network across Asia by 2017. And, while he did not provide any sources to back up his statement, he added that it is aiming for a global caliphate by 2022. That would absorb Indonesia, Malaysia and Muslim areas of the southern Philippines, answering the prayers of hard-liners in the three Southeast Asian states.

**The right to innovate**

In opposing the Wahhabi theology, the proponents of Islam Nusantara realise what they are taking
on. They are actively presssing for revisions of Islamic law to outlaw practices such as killing of so-called apostates and slavery.

Yahya Staquf admits that, as the law — *fiqh* — currently stands, Muslims have a problem. “The introduction of slavery by Islamic State is based on Islamic law,” he says. “What can we do about this? Logically, we must revise Islamic law.”

On the question of slavery, he states that:

This is a question of jurisprudence and perhaps it needs to be re-interpreted. Other factors need to be considered such as the relationship between people of different religions. What we believed hundreds of years ago isn’t necessarily relevant or appropriate today.

This represents *bid‘ah* – innovation, which in the Muslim sense is usually a negative connotation. One hadith is reputed to state: “Every *bid‘ah* is a going astray and every going astray is in hellfire” (although the point is made that in Arabic ‘every’ means ‘nearly every’.)

The website Masjid al-Muslimiin states the following:

God ordered Muslims not to divide themselves into sects. Innovations and divisions in matters of religion and worship within Islam are considered to be contamination, error, and deviation.

And this:

The changing of God’s laws is forbidden in Islam. God condemns religious leaders who alter divine principles. One who attempts to make changes places him or herself on the same level with God, committing polytheism. An example of this would be to make the killing of innocents lawful. The laws of God are perfect and do not need to be ‘modernised’ by anyone.

The question of *bid‘ah* goes to the heart of the scriptural argument between Islamic State and other Muslims, including Islam Nusantara. Holland Taylor, a former US telecom tycoon who has been working for years with NU, notes that for most Muslims there are acceptable and unacceptable *bid‘ah*.

The latter would include attempts to change the basic rules of Islam. “If someone says it is not necessary to pray five times a day (that) is unacceptable *bid‘ah*. But to ‘innovate’ by adjusting the practice of Islam to current circumstances is acceptable to many,” he states.

To Daesh, any *bid‘ah* is unacceptable. They insist on the application of *fiqh* as formulated in the centuries immediately after the Prophet Muhammad. These were times of violence and bloodshed, and required a violent stance but the Wahhabi argue that Muslims must live under the laws that applied at that bloodthirsty time.

For NU, that is erroneous. Its teachers point out that the *fiqh* that Daesh insists still applies to society was not formed by the Prophet himself but by the Umayyad and later caliphates that came a century later.

As such, this interpretation of *fiqh* cannot be seen as the word of God. Instead, NU believes that Islam should reflect changing times. “They are not bound by the letter of the law but by the spirit of the law,” says Taylor.
This presents a diametrically opposed view of Islam. Islam Nusantara is setting itself up as the champion of tolerant, moderate Islam, rejecting all forms of violence. Yet it too has engaged in violence.

In the wake of an aborted pro-communist coup in Indonesia in September 1965, Muslim mobs, with major involvement of Ansor, the NU youth group, embarked on a slaughter of communists and sympathisers. Accounts vary of the death toll, but at least 500,000 people died, clogging rivers in Java and Bali with dead bodies.

This bloody history leads many to reject a role of Islam Nusantara and NU from attempting to oppose Islamic State. Those with blood on their own hands cannot now claim to be the champions of peace and tolerance, they argue.

I put this to Said Aqil. “We have to see this in the context of history and not just the outcomes,” he replied. “There were many actions of the PKI (the Indonesian Communist Party) that opposed the beliefs of the Indonesian people and many conflicts occurred.”

The PKI became increasingly confrontative in the wake of a rebellion in the East Java town of Madiun in 1948, as nationalists were still fighting the Dutch for control of the country. Put down harshly by the Indonesian Army, the communists regrouped quickly and aimed their venom at traditional societies.

“Between 1948 and 1965 there was no time when there was not conflict between the PKI and the followers of Islam, especially NU,” says Said Aqil. “If we look at this from the perspective of the day, not today’s perspective, it compares to periods of conflict elsewhere in the world. The past is the past.

“There is no need for an apology (for the killings, as many demand). Leaders in the regions have approached the descendants of those that were killed and come to good terms. We don’t need to apologise.”

Said Aqil is keen to stress that NU and Islam Nusantara is about peace, not conflict. Yet it is not difficult to see NU and Ansor taking out the knives once again, this time not against communists, but against hard-line Wahhabi groups if they continue to contest the right of Indonesian Muslims to believe in the religion that has been theirs for centuries.

So far it has not come to that. But in distributing the film _The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara_ widely, NU is mounting a direct challenge to Islamic State and the Wahhabis. Yahya Staquf states that the film is an invitation to Muslims everywhere to reject radicalism and theological straight-jackets and stand up for their own cultural adaptation of Islam.

“They have the right to be Muslims and still retain their own civilization and culture. What the world needs now is to learn about the true nature of the threat.

“Islamic State is a part of Islam and the threat is real. We need to build a coalition and the will to combat this. The threat is what it is and we need to build a consensus on how to address the threat... We consider this a threat to all humanity.”

*Keith Loveard has been reporting on Indonesia since 1990.*