Veteran foreign correspondent, Middle East expert and Senior Fellow at Singapore’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Dr. James M. Dorsey, has written a comprehensive, 22-page analysis of Humanitarian Islam—a global, multi-faith movement guided by the spiritual leadership of the world’s largest Muslim organization, Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). The movement seeks to reform obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that enjoin religious hatred, supremacy and violence. Titled “Reforming the Faith,” Dorsey’s wide-ranging article examines the history, challenges and potentially far-reaching consequences of the NU leaders’ effort to block the weaponization of Islam for political purposes, which fuels Islamist extremism and terror worldwide. In his conclusion, Dr. Dorsey observes that:

“Nahdlatul Ulama’s campaign amounts to more than simply confronting ultra-conservatism and militancy. It is a pushback against the notion that secularism and pluralism are expressions of a Western conspiracy to undermine Islam... If successful, Nahdlatul Ulama’s strategy could have far-reaching consequences. For many Middle Eastern autocrats, adopting a more tolerant, pluralistic interpretation of Islam would mean allowing far greater social and political freedoms and embracing concepts of pluralism. That would likely lead to a weakening of their grip on power.”

Horizons—the flagship English-language quarterly journal of the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), a public policy think tank registered in Belgrade and New York—published the extensive piece in a special double issue of the journal. An institutional partner of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, CIRSD was founded in 2013 by Vuk Jeremić, Serbia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs between 2007 and 2012, and President of the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly—the youngest person ever to have held that post. Mr. Jeremić’s father was a prominent Orthodox Christian Serb and his mother hailed from a well-known Muslim Bosniak partisan family, two of whose members were posthumously declared Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem for saving Jews during the Holocaust. In the 1990s Mr. Jeremić was a leader of the student movement that helped overthrow the Serbian President and war criminal Slobodan Milošević.

What follows are excerpts from Dr. James M. Dorsey’s article. The communiqué concludes with additional commentary added by Bayt ar-Rahmah, which appears outside of the quoted text.

Reforming the Faith: Indonesia’s Battle for the Soul of Islam

“NAHDLATUL ULAMA (Revival of the Muslim Scholars), with 50 million plus members, the world’s largest Sunni Muslim movement, is bent on reforming Islam. The powerful Indonesian conservative and nationalist group that operates some 14,000 madrassahs (or religious seminaries) across the archipelago has taken on the ambitious task of reintroducing *ijtihad* or legal interpretation to Islam, as it stands to enhance its political clout with its spiritual leader Ma’ruf Amin [having secured the position of Vice President, after running on a joint ticket with
Indonesia’s moderate Muslim leader, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), who was elected to his second Presidential term in April, 2019].

“In a 22-page document, argued in terms of Islamic law and jurisprudence, Nahdlatul Ulama’s powerful young adults wing, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, spells out a framework for what it sees as a humanitarian interpretation of Islam, first developed in 2015 with government backing—one that is tolerant and pluralistic in nature. The group that boasts a two million-strong private militia, which prides itself on its participation in the 1965 slaughter of alleged communists in the wake of an aborted procommunist coup, defines as radical not only militants and jihadists but any expression of political Islam and asserts that it is struggling against the weaponization of the faith.

“To achieve its reform goal, Nahdlatul Ulama is bonding with groups across the globe, spanning the political spectrum from Muslim organizations to Jews, Christian Democrats, evangelists and evangelicals, and Islamophobes—and all this in a bid to muscle the political clout to impose the adoption of its concept of humanitarian Islam on Middle Eastern states that it sees as the motor of political Islam and religious extremism.

“MANIFESTO POLITICS

“Proponents within Nahdlatul Ulama of the initiative to reform Islam chose the movement’s young adults wing Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, as their vehicle as part of a broader strategy to neutralize the group’s more conservative elements. Ansor, whose leader reportedly is being groomed for a senior position in government (possibly Defense Minister) is the brother of Yahya Staquf, a diminutive and soft-spoken General-Secretary of the group’s Supreme Council. He is also a member of Indonesian President Joko Widodo’s presidential advisory council, and the public face of the initiative.

“The initiative is designed to counter what many in Nahdlatul Ulama—founded in 1926 in opposition to Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia’s neo-puritan interpretation of Islam—see as the faith’s foremost challenge: the rise of political Islam in both its militant and non-violent forms…

“In a 2016 speech at the Jakarta Foreign Correspondents Club, Staquf said the following:

“‘The politicization of Islam is readily enabled by the fact that supremacist political theories—which became fully established during the Middle Ages and continue to hold sway to the present—represent a core element of orthodox Islam... Integral to this dynamic is the fact that a number of Muslim autocrats rely upon Islamic supremacism to justify their monopolization of power, while propagating sectarian-supremacist Islam as an instrument of soft power on a truly global scale.’

“Echoing Nahdlatul Ulama’s Nusantara Manifesto that embodies the movement’s reform proposals, Staquf went on to say that:

“‘What we require is not merely the emergence of new intellectual concepts, reinterpreting and recontextualizing Islam. Alongside such necessary theological/academic endeavors, we must also develop a powerful social movement that encourages Muslim communities to embrace religious views that foster pluralism, tolerance and social harmony, so that Muslims (and non-Muslims) throughout the world may come to regard these as the primary values of Islam. Hand in hand with this endeavor, the international community should strive to develop a societal consensus to
halt the politicization of Islam and impel those who fuel the politics of Islamic supremacism—including Iran and Saudi Arabia—to abandon this destructive policy’…

“The Manifesto also rejects the concept of a caliphate as a solution and calls for a redress of ‘key tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that authorize and explicitly enjoin… violence… Various actors—including but not limited to Iran, Saudi Arabia, ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, and Pakistan—cynically manipulate religious sentiment in their struggle to maintain or acquire political, economic, and military power, and to destroy their enemies,’ the Manifesto concludes.

“Laying out a road map for reform that pays tribute to Southeast Asia scholar Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid’s description of Indonesia as a ‘beehive of novel Islamic thought,’ the Nusantara Manifesto insists that the crisis in Islam forces Muslims to re-evaluate a number of obsolete concepts that remain firmly entrenched within Islamic orthodoxy; develop new religious teachings suitable to the modern era; and mobilize the political support necessary to establish an alternative religious authority that is capable of propagating and defending these new teachings.

“LOCKING HORNS…

“Speaking to Islamic scholars gathered at a prestigious Nahdlatul Ulama madrassa in Rembang to discuss reform of the faith, K.H. Aunullah Habib, head of Ansor’s theological wing, warned that

“’Today, the world is facing chaos because of attempts by Muslim extremists to implement elements of fiqh [Islamic law] that are no longer compatible with twenty-first century reality. The catastrophic violence and human misery that result from these attempts are most visibly on display in the Middle East but threaten the entire world, presenting each of us with a profound moral choice: shall we remain silent or follow the example of the noble prophets in confronting tyranny?’

“Countering ultra-conservative dogmatism, Habib’s colleague, a prominent itinerant preacher named Kyai Haji Ahmad Nadhif Mudjib] justified the call for reform by noting that

“’Fiqh is the product of ijtihad [independent legal reasoning] and thus relative [subject to change], not Absolute or worth dying for.’

“Habib’s deputy [sic], KH. Abu Yazid Bustomi, took the argument a step further by saying Muslims needed to escape, as he put it,

“’religious tyranny, the tyranny of dogma, the tyranny of classical fiqh and the tyranny of thinking that we have the most correct understanding of religious truth… The only solution to the crisis facing Muslim communities worldwide is to construct a global fiqh that reflects our present reality. We [Nahdlatul Ulama theologians] have the requisite ability, courage and authority to conduct ijtihad.’”

“GOING GLOBAL”

“President Widodo affirmed the government’s support in November 2018, when Ansor presented him with a commemorative steel plaque engraved with a statement summarizing the essence of the manifesto that embodies Islam Nusantara, at a rally in the Central Javanese town of Pekalongan attended by some 100,000 of the group’s members… The statement engraved on the plaque presented to Widodo read:
“We call upon people of goodwill of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus to prevent the political weaponization of Islam, whether by Muslims or non-Muslims, and to curtail the spread of communal hatred by fostering the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.’

“A ROUNDABOUT WAY

“Ansor and the movement’s more pluralistic wing hopes to increase its already substantial influence within Nahdlatul Ulama and win Middle Eastern hearts and minds in a somewhat roundabout way. Nahdlatul Ulama first identified the Middle East as a prime target for its campaign in the final declaration of the movement’s International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) that in 2016 brought together Sunni Muslim leaders from across the globe. In order to advance its reform agenda, Nahdlatul Ulama is targeting European governments as well as the Trump administration in a bid to generate pressure on Arab regimes to promote a tolerant, pluralistic form of Islam rather than use orthodox expressions of the faith to garner legitimacy and enhance regional influence.

“Staquf told the European Union Council Terrorism Working Party in a video address that:

“‘We have to deal with [militancy and ultra-conservatism] globally. We need a global consolidation of powers to defeat it. That is why we stand ready to support European countries in the present challenges and the likely difficulties that lie ahead. The growing radicalization of Muslim communities thanks to the mainstreaming of Salafism, the massive importation of some Muslim migrants posing as refugees and of some refugees who support ISIS, who cannot integrate into a society they do not respect and the growing boldness of some militants in your continent, are all pressing issues that we can help you with. It is our desire to help you because we want to consolidate with you to fight this threat together.’

“To further its initiative, Nahdlatul Ulama established an Arabic-named NGO, Bayt ar-Rahmah li ad-Da’wa al-Islamiyah Rahmatan li al-‘Alamin (Home of Divine Grace for Revealing and Nurturing Islam as a Blessing for All Creation), in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. A close associate of Staquf, the Nahdlatul Ulama general secretary, [C. Holland] Taylor, a trim, fluent Bahasa-speaking and unassuming former telecom [pioneer] and Ansor representative—who together with former president Wahid founded the LibForAll Foundation—hails from North Carolina.

“In a study published by the [Swedish National Defence College’s] Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS), political violence expert Magnus Ranstorp argued that:

“‘LibforAll’s demonstration of strength involves creating a cross-sector network that is based on a five-level integration of the following: religious leaders (ulama) who have garnered widespread public support and who can address radical backlash; religious scholars and teachers who can garner the requisite intellectual and theological support for a pluralistic and tolerant interpretation of Islam; pop idols who have massive support from young people; government leaders who are able to address social factors as an underlying factor of extremism; as well as business leadership that can offer requisite financial support.’”
“ISLAM WITH JAVANESE CHARACTERISTICS”

The heavily-populated island of Java constitutes Nahdlatul Ulama’s center of gravity, and has always dominated the Indonesian Archipelago politically, culturally and economically, with Javanese NU leaders playing a decisive role in both the establishment and preservation of Indonesia as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state (NKRI) on the basis of “Pancasila” (“the Five [Foundational] Principles”), Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (“Oneness Amid Diversity”) and its 1945 Constitution. Throughout his piece, Dorsey highlights a variety of challenges facing the global movement for Humanitarian Islam, including his view that the profoundly spiritual, tolerant and pluralistic Islam Nusantara (“East Indies Islam”), which teaches that rahmah (universal love and compassion) is the primary message of Islam, “is, unlike its Saudi-inspired transnational rivals, primarily a Java-based local ideology that has yet to garner a broader following [outside] Indonesia.”

“Nahdlatul Ulama’s battlefields are as much at home as they are in the larger Muslim world,” added Dorsey, something borne out by the results of Indonesia’s 2019 Presidential elections, which saw the nascent consolidation of a voting bloc committed to a rigid application of political Islam in some of Indonesia’s “out-islands,” whilst Nahdlatul Ulama’s strong support of President Jokowi in Central and East Java swung the election in his favor. “Proponents of the reform strategy chose to launch it under the auspices of the group’s young adults wing in an admission that not all of Nahdlatul Ulama’s members would embrace it,” continues Dorsey.

“FAR REACHING CONSEQUENCES”

If successful, the Humanitarian Islam movement could affect a seismic shift in patterns of religious, socio-cultural and political influence in the Islamic world towards Southeast Asia, which has traditionally been seen as peripheral to the Islamic “heartland” in the Arab Middle East. “Both Nahdlatul Ulama and the government see Islam [Nusan] as a model that enables harmony in a religiously diverse society, the basis for a marriage between Islam and nationalism, and a framework that allows Muslims to accept a secular polity. It constitutes an effort to reverse the flow of ideas that historically travelled from the Arab heartland of Islam to the Muslim periphery on the back of maritime trade links dating back some 1,100 years that allowed Arab merchants to play an important role in introducing Islam to the archipelago.”

A close study of religious history reveals significant precedents of formerly-peripheral regions becoming the focal points for new, authoritative orthodoxies, including within Islam itself. Safavid Iran created a Persian, Shi’ite structure of Islamic authority divorced from the traditional centers of Islam in the Arab world, then dominated by the Ottoman Turks. Luther and other Protestant reformers—acting in conjunction with Northern European heads of state—built new centers of Christian authority without requiring or obtaining Papal consent. This, in turn, led to the Counter-Reformation and profound change within the Catholic Church itself. The spread of Buddhism from its birthplace in India to the ancient civilizations of China, Central and Southeast Asia led to the rise of Mahayana (as opposed to Hinayana, or Theravada) Buddhism, which came full-circle to dominate Buddhism within the Gangetic plains of East India, prior to its regional extinction at the hands of marauding Turks. And the unique circumstances associated with the spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago gave birth to the profoundly spiritual, pluralistic and tolerant traditions of Islam Nusantara.

As these examples demonstrate: once established, new centers of religious authority may powerfully alter the religious practice, status and centrality of formerly-dominant areas.
In the essay’s final section—which examines a number of challenges to the realization of Humanitarian Islam’s global agenda posed by competing factions within the NU itself—James Dorsey concludes that “Nahdlatul Ulama’s credibility in pushing a tolerant, pluralistic interpretation of Islam rides in part on its willingness to subdue its own demons.”

“If successful, Nahdlatul Ulama’s strategy could have far-reaching consequences. For many Middle Eastern autocrats, adopting a more tolerant, pluralistic interpretation of Islam would mean allowing far greater social and political freedoms and embracing concepts of pluralism. That would likely lead to a weakening of their grip on power.”