



### **Hudson Institute's *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*:**

**“Nahdlatul Ulama has emerged as a formidable challenger to powerful state actors in the battle for the soul of Islam”**

**“The [Humanitarian Islam] movement has gone beyond paying lip service to notions of tolerance and pluralism with the issuance of fatwas intended to re-contextualize the faith by eliminating categories like infidels”**

WASHINGTON, D.C.: A leading U.S. think tank has published an in-depth analysis of “The Battle for the Soul of Islam,” reporting that Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama has emerged as a formidable contender in the Islamic world’s competition for religious soft power and leadership — capable of operating on the same level as states such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkey and Iran.

The 18-page article by Dr. James M. Dorsey — a Middle East expert who is a senior fellow at prominent universities in Singapore, Germany and Israel — appeared in the journal *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, which is published by Hudson Institute’s Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World.

Soon after its publication, the article was nominated for the prestigious European Press Prize, amidst the intense debate that followed the beheading of a French school teacher and other Islamist attacks committed in Nice, Vienna and Dresden.

Dr. Dorsey concludes his article by stating:

“A major battle for Muslim religious soft power that pits Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, and Indonesia against one another is largely about enhancing countries’ global and regional influence. This battle has little to do with implementing notions of a moderate Islam in theory or practice despite claims by the various rivals, most of which are authoritarian states with little regard for human and minority rights or fundamental freedoms.

“Muslim-majority Indonesia, the world’s third largest democracy, is the odd man out. A traditionalist and in many ways conservative organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim movement, has garnered international respect and recognition with its embrace of a Humanitarian Islam that recognizes the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the principles enshrined in it and has taken tangible steps to address Islamic concepts that it considers outdated. In doing so, Nahdlatul Ulama has emerged as a formidable challenger to powerful state actors in the battle for the soul of Islam. But it still faces the challenge of overcoming the Arab view, expressed by Abdullah I of Jordan after the end of caliphate, that Muslim leadership must somehow return to the Arabs.”

An abridged version of Dr. Dorsey’s article appears below, or you may read the full article [here](#).

## **The Battle for the Soul of Islam**

Jordanian ruler Abdullah I bin al-Hussein gloated in 1924 when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the visionary who carved modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire, abolished the Caliphate. “The Turks have committed suicide. They had in the Caliphate one of the greatest political forces, and have thrown it away... I feel like sending a telegram thanking Mustapha Kemal. The Caliphate is an Arab institution. The Prophet was an Arab, the Koran is in Arabic, the Holy Places are in Arabia and the Khalif should be an Arab of the tribe of Khoreish,” Abdullah told *The Manchester Guardian* at the time, referring to the tribe of the Prophet Mohammed. “Now the Khaliphate has come back to Arabia,” he added.

It did not. Arab leaders showed no interest in the return of the Caliphate even if many Muslim intellectuals and clerics across the Middle East and the Muslim World criticized Ataturk’s abolition of it. Early Islamist political movements, for their part, largely declared the revival of the caliphate as an aspiration rather than an immediate goal. A century later it is not the caliphate that the world’s Muslim powerhouses are fighting about. Instead, they are engaged in a deepening religious soft power struggle for geopolitical influence and dominance.

This battle for the soul of Islam pits rival Middle Eastern and Asian powers against one another: Turkey, seat of the Islamic world’s last true caliphate; Saudi Arabia, home to the faith’s holy cities; the United Arab Emirates, propagator of a militantly statist interpretation of Islam; Qatar with its less strict version of Wahhabism and penchant for political Islam; Indonesia, promoting a humanitarian, pluralistic notion of Islam that reaches out to other faiths as well as non-Muslim centre-right forces across the globe; Morocco which uses religion as a way to position itself as the face of moderate Islam; and Shia Iran with its derailed revolution.

In the ultimate analysis, no clear winner may emerge. Yet, the course of the battle could determine the degree to which Islam will be defined by either one or more competing stripes of ultra-conservatism—statist forms of the faith that preach absolute obedience to political rulers and/or reduce religious establishments to pawns of the state. Implicit in the rivalry is a broader debate across the Muslim World that goes to the heart of the relationship between the state and religion. That debate centers on what role the state, if at all, should play in the enforcement of religious morals and the place of religion in education, judicial systems and politics. As the battle for religious soft power between rival states has intensified, the lines dividing the state and religion have become ever more blurred, particularly in more autocratic countries. This struggle has and will affect the prospects for the emergence of a truly more tolerant and pluralistic interpretation of one of the three Abrahamic religions.

### **An Ever More Competitive Struggle**

A survey of the modern history of the quest for Muslim religious soft power reveals an ever more competitive struggle with the staggered entry of multiple new players. Initially, in the 1960s, the Saudis, with Pakistani and a degree of West African input, had the playing field more or less to themselves as they created the building blocks of what would emerge as the world’s most focused, state-run and well-funded Islamic public diplomacy campaign...

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran marked the moment when Saudi religious soft power was no longer in a class of its own. It also launched a new phase in Saudi-Iranian rivalry that progressively has engulfed the Middle East and North Africa and beyond. Competition for religious soft power and influence is a fixture of the rivalry...

## **An Ever More Complex Battle**

If the first phase of the battle for the soul of Islam was defined by the largely uncontested Saudi religious soft power campaign, and the second phase began with the emergence of revolutionary Iran, the third and most recent phase is the most complex one, not only because of the arrival on the scene of new players but also because it entails rivalries within rivalries.

The new players are first and foremost the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Qatar, and Indonesia. Their entry into the fray has further blurred the dividing lines between purely religious and cultural soft power, nationalism, and the struggle within Muslim societies over values, including various freedoms, rights, and preferred political systems.

The third phase is complicated by the fact that all of the players with the exception of Indonesia have embraced Iran's model of coupling religious soft power with hard power and the use of proxies to advance their respective agendas. This is apparent in the Saudi-UAE-led war to counter Iran in Yemen; Emirati, Egyptian and Turkish support for opposing sides in Libya's civil war; and Turkish and Gulf state involvement in Syria.

The intensifying violence lays bare the opportunism adopted by most players. Saudi Arabia, for example, has been willing to forge or maintain alliances with groups aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood even though it has designated the organization as a terrorist entity, while the UAE, which claims the mantle of moderation but still supports the forces of Libyan rebel leader Khalifa Haftar whose ranks include a significant number of Salafist fighters...

## **The New Kid on the Block**

Indonesia, the new kid on the block in the competition for Muslim religious soft power and leadership, has proven to be a different kettle of fish. Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim movement, rather than the government of President Joko Widodo, has emerged as a formidable contender, one that is capable of operating on the same level as the states with which it competes.

As a result, the Indonesian state takes a back seat in the global competition among Muslims. It benefits from its close ties to Nahdlatul Ulama as well as the movement's ability to gain access to the corridors of power in world capitals, including Washington, London, Berlin, Budapest, the Vatican, and Delhi. Nahdlatul Ulama was instrumental in organizing a visit to Indonesia in 2020 by Pope Francis that had to be postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The movement also forged close working ties to Muslim grassroots communities in various parts of the world as well as prominent Jewish and Christian groups. Nahdlatul Ulama's growing international influence and access was enabled by its embrace in 2015 of a concept of "Nusantara (archipelago) Islam" or "humanitarian Islam" that recognized the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. The movement has also gone beyond paying lip service to notions of tolerance and pluralism with the issuance of fatwas intended to re-contextualize the faith by eliminating categories like infidels.

Nahdlatul Ulama's evolution towards a process of re-contextualization of Islam dates back to a 1992 gathering of religious scholars chaired by Abdurrahman Wahid, the group's leader at the time and later president of Indonesia. The gathering noted that "the changing context of reality necessitates the creation of new interpretations of Islamic law and orthodox Islamic teaching."

Speaking to a German newspaper 25 years later, Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary Yahya Cholil Staquf laid out the fundamental dividing line between his group's notion of a moderate

Islam and that of Indonesia's rivals without identifying them by name. Asked what Islamic concepts were problematic, Staquf said: "The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, the relationship of Muslims with the state, and Muslims' relationship to the prevailing legal system wherever they live ... Within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity... In today's world such a doctrine is unreasonable. To the extent that Muslims adhere to this view of Islam, it renders them incapable of living harmoniously and peacefully within the multi-cultural, multi-religious societies of the 21st century."

Widodo initially hoped that Nahdlatul Ulama's manifesto on humanitarian Islam would empower his government to position Indonesia as the beacon of a moderate interpretation of the faith. Speaking at the laying of the ground stone of the International Islamic University (UIII) in West Java, Widodo laid down a gauntlet for his competitors in the Middle East by declaring that it was "natural and fitting that Indonesia should become the (authoritative) reference for the progress of Islamic civilization." Widodo saw the university as providing an alternative to the Islamic University of Medina, that has played a key role in Saudi Arabia's religious soft power campaign, and the centuries-old Al Azhar in Cairo, that is influenced by financially-backed Saudi scholars and scholarship as well as Emirati funding. The university is "a promising step to introduce Indonesia as the global epicenter for 'moderate' Islam," said Islamic philosophy scholar Amin Abdullah.

Saudi and Emirati concerns that Indonesia could emerge as a serious religious soft power competitor were initially assuaged when Widodo's aspirations were thwarted by critics within his administration. A six-page proposal to enhance Indonesian religious soft power globally put forward in 2016 by Nahdlatul Ulama at the request of Pratikno, Widodo's minister responsible for providing administrative support for his initiatives, was buried after the foreign ministry warned that its adoption would damage relations with the Gulf states.

That could have been the end of the story. But neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE anticipated Nahdlatul Ulama's determination to push its concept of humanitarian Islam globally, including at the highest levels of government in western capitals as well as in countries like India. Nor did they anticipate Mr. Widodo's willingness to play both ends against the middle by supporting Nahdlatul Ulama's campaign while engaging on religious issues with both the Saudis and the Emiratis.

The degree to which Nahdlatul Ulama is perceived as a threat by the UAE and Saudi Arabia is evident in battles in high level interfaith meetings convened by the Vatican, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, and others over principles like endorsement of the UN human rights declaration.

Nahdlatul Ulama's rise to prominence was also what persuaded Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, the head of the Muslim World League, to visit the Indonesian group's headquarters in Jakarta in early 2020. It was the first visit to one of the world's foremost Islamic organizations in the League's almost 60-year history. The visit allowed him to portray himself as in dialogue with Nahdlatul Ulama in his inter-faith contacts as well as in conversation with Western officials and other influential interlocutors.

Al-Issa had turned down an opportunity to meet two years earlier when a leading Nahdlatul Ulama cleric and he were both in Mecca at the same time. He told a Western interlocutor who was attempting to arrange a meeting that he had "never heard" of the Indonesian scholar and could not make time "due to an extremely previous busy schedule of meetings with international

Islamic personalities” that included “moderate influential figures from Palestine, Iraq, Tunisia, Russia and Kazakhstan.”

Saudi Arabia was forced several months later in the run-up to the 2019 Indonesian presidential election to replace its ambassador in Jakarta, Osama bin Mohammed Abdullah Al Shuaib. The ambassador had denounced in a tweet—that has since been deleted—Ansor, the Nahdlatul Ulama young adults organization, as heretical and he had supported an anti-government demonstration.

Nahdlatul Ulama’s ability to compete is further evidenced by its increasingly influential role in Centrist Democrat International or CDI, the world’s largest alliance of political parties, that grew out of European and Latin American Christian Democratic movements. Membership in CDI of the National Awakening Party or PKB, the political party of Nahdlatul Ulama, arguably gives it a leg up in the soft power competition with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which both ban political parties. Meantime, the PKB is far more pluralistic than Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has shown increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

CDI’s executive committee met in the Javan city of Yogyakarta in January 2020. Participants included prominent Latin American leaders and former heads of state, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban, Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa and Elmar Brok, a close associate of German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Nahdlatul Ulama’s sway was apparent in CDI’s adoption of a resolution that called for adherence to universal ethics and humanitarian values based on Western humanism, Christian democracy, and Humanitarian Islam. The resolution urged resistance to “the emergence of authoritarian, civilizationalist states that do not accept the rules-based post-WWII order, whether in terms of human rights, rule of law, democracy or respect for international borders and the sovereignty of other nations.”

Nahdlatul Ulama benefits from what journalist Muhammad Abu Fadil described as rejection of an “Arab face of Islam” that in his words was “hopelessly contorted by extremism” in Western perceptions. Abu Fadil suggested that “certain elements in the West have become interested in ‘Asian Islam,’ which appears to be more moderate than Arab Islam; less inclined to export radical ideology; less dominated by extremist interpretations of religion; and possessed of a genuine and sincere tendency to act with tolerance.”

## **Conclusion**

A major battle for Muslim religious soft power that pits Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, and Indonesia against one another is largely about enhancing countries’ global and regional influence. This battle has little to do with implementing notions of a moderate Islam in theory or practice despite claims by the various rivals, most of which are authoritarian states with little regard for human and minority rights or fundamental freedoms.

Muslim-majority Indonesia, the world’s third largest democracy, is the odd man out. A traditionalist and in many ways conservative organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim movement, has garnered international respect and recognition with its embrace of a Humanitarian Islam that recognizes the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the principles enshrined in it and has taken tangible steps to address Islamic concepts that it considers outdated. In doing so, Nahdlatul Ulama has emerged as a formidable challenger to powerful state actors in the battle for the soul of Islam. But it still faces the challenge of overcoming the Arab view, expressed by Abdullah I of Jordan after the end of caliphate, that Muslim leadership must somehow return to the Arabs.