



Religious Soft Power

Indonesia's Religious Soft Power on Display in the Middle East

As Qatar doubles down on its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudi-based Muslim World League has “forged an unlikely alliance with Nahdlatul Ulama”

Indonesia's “Nahdlatul Ulama is arguably the world's only mass movement propagating a genuinely moderate and pluralistic form of Islam”

DOHA, Qatar and MECCA, Saudi Arabia — The fierce competition for religious soft power between Middle East nations was on stark display in September with the announcement of diametrically opposed initiatives by major Islamic organizations backed by the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Reflecting the growing influence of the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, Indonesian religious leaders are at the heart of both initiatives.

As [reported](#) by geopolitical analyst Dr. James Dorsey, on 10 September:

[F]ormer Indonesian Minister of Social Affairs Habib Salim Segaf Al-Jufri was named Secretary General of the Qatar-based International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), founded by controversial Islamic scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the world's foremost Muslim theologians associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Mr. Al-Qaradawi died on Monday in Doha at the age of 96.

Intriguingly, Mr. Al-Jufri, a senior member of Indonesia's Brotherhood-affiliated Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), also represents the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) in East and Southeast Asia, a Saudi government-funded organization initially established in the 1970s to promote Saudi religious ultra-conservatism globally.

Arab commentators have described Al-Jufri as a Muslim Brotherhood loyalist and argue that his election reflects not only the difficulties confronting the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, but also the group's hope to expand its footprint in Southeast Asia.

Nahdlatul Ulama has long viewed Muslim Brotherhood infiltration of religious and governmental institutions in Indonesia as a visceral threat to the country's security, due to its support for establishing an Islamic state or caliphate. In 2009, Nahdlatul Ulama leaders published *Ilusi Negara Islam (The Illusion of an Islamic State)* — a book that went viral on the Internet and ignited a firestorm of controversy across Indonesia, discrediting extremist ideology and movements as a threat to the nation and to Islam itself. The book — hailed as “remarkable” and “a roaring success” by the *Washington Post* — [dramatically influenced](#) Indonesia's 2009 elections, derailing the ambitions of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political party, PKS.

As former NU Chairman and Indonesia's first democratically elected president, H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, wrote in his introduction to the book:

People who are convinced that they know more than anyone else about Islam, and yet are full of hatred towards any of God's creatures who do not travel the same path as they; and those who claim themselves to be in possession of the absolute truth, and for that reason entitled to act as God's vice-regents on earth (caliphs) and to dictate how everyone else must live — clearly, their words and behavior will not lead us into the presence of God. Their dream of an Islamic state is merely an illusion, for the true Islamic state is not to be found in the structure of any government, but rather, in hearts which are open to God and all His creatures.

Nahdlatul Ulama Welcomes Muslim World League Participation in the R20

On Monday 5 September, Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muslim World League (MWL) jointly announced that KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Chairman of the NU Central Board, and Shaykh Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, Secretary General of MWL, will co-Chair the first annual G20 Religion Forum (R20) Summit in Bali, Indonesia on 2 – 3 November 2022. Nahdlatul Ulama established the G20 Religion Forum in conjunction with the Indonesian Presidency of the G20, in order to foster a rules-based international order founded upon shared moral and spiritual values.

The R20, which the Government of Indonesia has recognized as an official G20 main event, will provide a global platform through which diverse religious leaders from across the world may express their concerns and give voice to shared civilizational values. His Excellency Joko Widodo, President of the Republic of Indonesia, is scheduled to address the opening session of this year's R20 Summit on 2 November.

In an article titled "[Saudi Crown Prince shifts into high gear on multiple fronts](#)," Dr. Dorsey writes that "Religion has proven to be the arena in which Saudi Arabia may have scored its most prominent public relations feat." His article continues:

The Muslim World League, Mr. bin Salman's primary vehicle to garner religious soft power and propagate an autocratic version of Islam that is socially liberal but demands absolute obedience to the ruler, achieved a public relations coup when it forged an unlikely alliance with Nahdlatul Ulama.

Nahdlatul Ulama is arguably the world's only mass movement propagating a genuinely moderate and pluralistic form of Islam.

Moreover, as the world's largest Muslim civil society movement in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country and democracy, Nahdlatul Ulama's words and actions have an impact....

[NU]'s outreach to the [Muslim World] League is part of a bold and risky strategy. However, Nahdlatul Ulama believes that engagement creates an opportunity to persuade the League to embrace a more genuine and holistic vision of moderate Islam rather than one that is self-serving.

That may be a long shot, but it also may be a way of launching Saudi Arabia on a path that would help it repair its badly tarnished image.

Noting that “Southeast Asia, rather than the Middle East, could emerge as the cradle of religious reform in the Muslim world,” Dr. Dorsey emphasized “the importance of efforts by groups like Nahdlatul Ulama to promote a humanitarian interpretation of Islam that is tolerant, pluralistic, and respectful of human and minority rights.”