



al-Ahram

**Egypt's *al-Ahram* newspaper hails Nahdlatul Ulama project
“to transform Islam from a problem — as it is in many nations — into a solution”**

“The majority of Muslims look to the Arab world for guidance, but the failure of this region’s ulama to keep up with the transformations taking place will lead to the rug being pulled out from under them... by Nahdlatul Ulama and its new Chairman”

***~ Mohamed Abu Al-Fadl
Deputy Editor, al-Ahram (The Pyramids)***

CAIRO, Egypt, 16 February 2023 — One of the oldest and most influential newspapers in the Arab world, Egypt’s *al-Ahram* (est. 1875), has published a highly favorable analysis of Nahdlatul Ulama’s efforts to recontextualize obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy. In the words of Mohamed Abu Al-Fadl, deputy editor of *al-Ahram*, “NU inevitably faces great challenges, and deserves support. For Nahdlatul Ulama’s project is not only consistent with a rules-based international order and the Charter of the United Nations, but could clearly serve the interests of Arab governments that are locked in an unavoidable confrontation with extremist ideas.”

Dr. Abu Al-Fadl’s article appeared following his participation in the [First International Convention on Islamic Jurisprudence for a Global Civilization](#) in Surabaya, Indonesia, on 6 February. This was Dr. Abu Al-Fadl’s third visit to Indonesia since 2015, when his extensive reporting on Nahdlatul Ulama, in [al-Ahram](#) and [al-Arab](#), precipitated *The New York Times*’ publication of a highly influential article titled [“From Indonesia, a Muslim Challenge to the Ideology of the Islamic State.”](#)

Dr. Abu Al-Fadl’s latest article includes a highly critical analysis of the Arab world’s failure to substantively engage with Nahdlatul Ulama’s project to recontextualize Islamic teachings, and the consequences thereof. “Nahdlatul Ulama’s project revolves around separating politics from religion and breaking out of the mental prison of calls to establish an Islamic caliphate.... So long as the Arab world remains mired in the trench of traditional Islamic orthodoxy, we will not escape the catastrophic impact this has upon governments, nations, and the future.”

Referencing Indonesia’s emerging leadership of the Muslim world, Dr. Abu Al-Fadl writes that, “The majority of Muslims look to the Arab world for guidance, but the failure of this region’s *ulama* to keep up with the transformations taking place will lead to the rug being pulled out from under them. For the openness adopted by Nahdlatul Ulama and its new Chairman, Yahya Cholil Staquf, will not stop at borders, nor be confined to one specific country or region.”

The complete *al-Ahram* article may be read below or [downloaded](#) in PDF format.



al-Ahram (The Pyramids)

(est. 1875), one of the oldest and most widely-read newspapers in the Arab world



Indonesian Islam... once again

by Mohamed Abu Al-Fadl, Deputy Editor, *al-Ahram* | 16 February 2023 | Cairo

When I first wrote about “Indonesian Islam” in this newspaper following a trip to Jakarta many years ago, the term — and its political and religious implications — astonished many. It was as if there was one Islam that was Egyptian, another Indonesian, and a third Saudi or Pakistani. At that time, the phrase was meant to identify a new model of tolerance that confronts extremist groups and supports peaceful coexistence between religions.

Eight years after first publishing that article, I flew to Surabaya, which lies around 1,000 km East of the Indonesian capital Jakarta, to attend the centennial celebrations of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) — the Islamic mass movement that first inspired me to coin the term “Indonesian Islam.” NU is an organization that enjoys strong relations with Egypt’s al-Azhar University: some 90 million of Indonesia’s 280 million citizens are members of NU, and many have studied at al-Azhar University, forging strong relations between the *ulama* (religious scholars) of both organizations.

Nahdlatul Ulama’s centennial celebrations were therefore attended by delegations from across the world, Egypt first and foremost among them — represented by Muhammad al-Dhuwaini, the Deputy Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar University, and Dr. Mahmoud al-Hawari [head of al-Azhar’s Office of Senior *Ulama*]. NU’s celebrations represented the inauguration of a new era in the history of a movement that is searching for a practical foundation from which to spread its project both within Indonesia and internationally. This project is to transform Islam from a problem — as it is in many nations — into a solution, by recontextualizing the five principles of Indonesia’s official state ideology of *Pancasila* in a way that respects other societies’ specificities and is suitable for them. The five precepts of *Pancasila* are: belief in God, humanity, justice, national unity, and *shura* [consultation among the nation’s representatives]. Nahdlatul Ulama’s project revolves around separating politics from religion and breaking out of the mental prison of calls to establish an Islamic caliphate. It thus necessarily entails confronting groups — and their followers — that insist on mixing religion and politics. In light of the wide gamut of extremist ideologies in existence, NU inevitably faces great challenges, and deserves support. For Nahdlatul Ulama’s project is not only consistent with a rules-based international order and the Charter of the United Nations, but could clearly serve the interests of Arab governments that are locked in an unavoidable confrontation with extremist ideas.

Nahdlatul Ulama’s approach appears easy in Indonesia, where tolerance, coexistence, and harmony prevail, but its continued [global] propagation will encounter two obstacles. The first is the growth of extremist groups such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as their hidden agendas — which fundamentally conflict with the rules-based international order. The second is the lack of full cooperation and coordination between Nahdlatul Ulama and the Arab world, which represents the fulcrum of Islamic jurisprudence.

If we consider the first obstacle, then Nahdlatul Ulama has made great strides in overcoming it. Overcoming the second obstacle, however, will require the joint effort of *ulama*, intellectuals, and governments worldwide. The role of al-Azhar, the Abu Dhabi-based Muslim Council of Elders, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation will be among the most important in this regard. I know that al-Azhar has a considerable presence in East Asian countries — and in Indonesia in particular — but I do not understand why it does not participate in Nahdlatul Ulama’s global project. This project could change the prevailing mindset regarding ideas that are at the forefront of the challenges facing governments; it presents jurisprudence that flows into the general idea of a civilizing project whose components are not incompatible with followers of other religions; and it resolutely confronts the destructive ideas promoted by extremists in different countries. On far too many religious occasions, al-Azhar’s role is confined to a symbolic and moral one, and its avoidance of bold *ijtihad* in the realm of *fiqh* will lead to a reduction of its central relevance in the future and the squandering of an opportunity to strengthen its position within Egypt and abroad. For the opportunity to “be in the room” in Indonesia and elsewhere — if seized — is enough to guarantee Cairo a central role in combatting classical ideas derived from sections of Islam’s traditional corpus (*turath*), without discriminating between one era and another.

The majority of Muslims look to the Arab world for guidance, but the failure of this region’s *ulama* to keep up with the transformations taking place will lead to the rug being pulled out from under them. For the openness adopted by Nahdlatul Ulama and its new Chairman, Yahya Cholil Staquf, will not stop at borders, nor be confined to one specific country or region. Mr. Staquf is following in the footsteps of the late NU leader and former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid. Critical thinking, vigilance regarding the nation state, and overcoming the problems of difference between the heavenly religions is among the factors that will encourage more *ijtihad* to block the path of extremists. This will occur provided that strong scholarly and civilizational arguments are put forward that abort the proofs presented by those who cling to the *turath* without cleansing it of the mistakes and historical sediments that have build up over time, and are not compatible with our current era. Legitimizing the nation state will require a wide range of contemporary *ijtihad* as well as a great capacity to propagate it. This may halt extremist groups that desire to reconstitute and re-impose obsolete *turath* discordant with the realities of the 21st century. For the trans-national caliphate desired by ISIS and al-Qaeda — and which subtly appears in the discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood — is viewed by NU as an obstacle in the way of its project and duty to establish a *fiqh* foundation that may solve a crisis that has continued for many long centuries.

So long as the Arab world remains mired in the trench of traditional Islamic orthodoxy, we will not escape the catastrophic impact this has upon governments, nations, and the future. This makes it incumbent upon *ulama* to come into the light and combat the dark ideas within which extremists find their justification for maintaining the status quo. For continued silence or slow *ijtihad* provides the extremists an opportunity to monopolize and seize the keys to issuing legal rulings (*fatwas*), impeding those who have an opposing agenda.

The majority of the Arab and Islamic delegations at the First International Convention on Islamic Jurisprudence for a Global Civilization expressed a traditional mindset that has become outdated. For they dealt with the centenary of NU as if it were a carnival. The *ulama* and *shaykhs* did not take advantage of the opportunity to support the rejection of the caliphate and strengthen the shared bases for building a strong foundation for the civil state in regions that face an acute crisis with Islamist groups. If the leadership of religious institutions in the Arab world continue to insist on burying their heads in the sand, then Arab states may require another 100 years in order to absorb the project of Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia.

English translation (from Arabic) by Thomas G. Dinham.