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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.



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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, Wahabbism.

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.

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