

Indonesia's Challenge to Radical Islam

The country is emerging as a champion of tolerance amid the rise of the Islamic State.

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The Prophet was right: that's about the only thing Muslims agree on. The substance of what the Prophet taught, however, remains a matter of debate. The terms of that debate are now leading to a confrontation between hard-liners and proponents of a more tolerant and moderate Islam, with both sides prepared to defend their views to the death.

Communities such as Syria and Iraq, which for centuries were tolerant of diversity, have seen the massacre of ancient communities of Christians and Yazidi sects. Age-old divisions between Sunni and Shia have resurfaced. The turmoil in the Middle East has left its ancient centers of Islamic learning emasculated, creating a vacuum in which radical interpretations can flourish. Baghdad, the former seat of Islamic learning, is in tatters; Cairo and its renowned al-Azhar Islamic university are under the thumb of another autocratic general.

Yet while this vacuum has provided fertile ground for the emergence of the radicalism of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and all of its offshoots, it has also created opportunity for Muslim scholars elsewhere in the world to have their say. Surprisingly, the religious teachers of Indonesia are emerging as the champions of a more moderate and tolerant interpretation of



Eid ul-Fitr prayer at Istiqlal Mosque in Indonesia, the largest mosque in Southeast Asia.

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what the Prophet taught, rejecting the austerity of the Salafi and Wahhabi schools and the violence of ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Leading the charge in the nation that has the largest Muslim population in the world but which has typically punched below its weight in Islamic discourse is Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staqf, general secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organization in the country and arguably the world, with at least 50 million adherents.

“Muslims must understand the ultimate ideals, goals, or mission of Islam,” he states. “The Prophet Muhammad himself said he had no mission other than to improve the noble character of people. In the textual tradition of Islamic teaching there are five principles that comprise the goal of Shariah – preserve life, preserve mind, preserve religion, preserve posterity, and preserve property – any action that is to be considered in line with Shariah must lead to these five results.”

Clearly, ISIS has a totally different interpretation and cares little about preserving life, mind, posterity, or property. The primacy of religion is its only apparent concern. According to Gus Yahya, as he’s known to the Muslim faithful in Indonesia, this is the logical outcome of generations of misperceptions about the Prophet.

Yahya is the leading proponent of what Nahdlatul Ulama calls Islam Nusantara, the Islam of the archipelago. He and his allies argue that Islam in Indonesia is different from that in most other parts of the world because it did not arrive at the end of a sword, but peacefully. The preachers who arrived in Java starting in the 15th century – the Wali Songo – were prepared to incorporate local practices, including elements of animism, into the understanding and practice of Islam.

That is the essence of Islam Nusantara: Not that Nahdlatul Ulama’s animist-flavored Islam should be a pattern for the rest of the world, but that Islam will naturally adjust to the society in which it exists. The Islam that teaches that Arab society in the 7th century is the only valid Islam is incorrect, it argues.

The gulf between the Salafis, Wahhabi, and more tolerant beliefs is the result of different interpretations of what Islam is. According to Yahya, insistence on what is written and the rejection of anything that is not written in the Quran and the Hadiths is wrong. And, taking a position that appalls those who insist on the primacy of these texts, he argues that they in fact contain the germ of the current problems facing Islam, which are spilling out in violence.

“What we have in the textual tradition of Islam, there is this written thought of Islamic discourse. This is a tradition that has been established and, at least in the last 500 years or so, there has been no significant change in the paradigm. The teaching of segregation between Muslim and non-Muslim is still there, the teaching of discrimination of non-Muslims is still there. This written source is an authoritative source of teaching. That is the problem,” he states.

In Indonesia, by contrast, there is a “fortune” in the legacy of an entirely different, more inclusive approach to the relationship between Muslim teaching and the wider society. Indonesia’s Islamic history has been one of “compromise” with the social and cultural reality of

local society. This, argues Yahya, is “a new manifestation of Islam – a manifestation that is harmonious to the pre-existing culture and civilization.”

He refers to the term *ijtihad*, the development of new thought within Islamic teaching. In the Indonesian context, there is both written and unwritten *ijtihad* and the latter represents “a fortune” of harmonious co-existence that is absent from the body of textual tradition. The Salafist view, on the other hand, demands that Muslims must abandon anything that is un-Islamic in terms of written *ijtihad*.

“By raising the idea of Islam Nusantara we call upon different Muslim societies everywhere in the world to connect themselves to the actual reality of their social and cultural environment,” says Yahya.

Yahya’s use of the word “compromise” is contentious. Compromise of the tenets of the Quran and the Hadith – the written textual legacy of Islam that constitutes the Sunna – leaves him open to charges that he is in fact an apostate. Yahya denies that this is the case. “There is, even in the textual tradition of Islamic teaching, a demand for Muslims to contextualize the teachings of Islam to the actual conditions of their lives. So when I say compromise, I mean contextualize.”

Such a position – and an active role in disseminating the Islam Nusantara message across the globe – puts Yahya high on the hit-list for ISIS and other radical groups. He is actively challenging, and actively lobbying for, religious institutions, governments and societies to re-evaluate their understanding of Islam and reject the path of violence. This, he insists, is what the Prophet Muhammad really meant.

That in the later years of his life, the Prophet led armies that began the Muslim conquest of much of the known world was simply the way things were done. But it should not be today’s way, Yahya argues. The textual tradition of Islamic discourse speaks of *Dar ul Kufr*, the territory of Islam and the territory of infidels, and states that Muslims should not live in the *Dar ul Kufr*.

“Now we live in a world in which there is no territory attached to religion – there is no border for Islam. So Muslims must change their view about their relations with non-Muslims,” says Yahya. ISIS, he says, tries “to claim territory with this mentality of pursuing the life of 1,400 years ago, that is the insanity of this thing.”

So what did the Prophet really teach? Holland Taylor, head of the LibForAll Foundation, which campaigns globally for acceptance of the Islam Nusantara model of Islam, states that its vision of the Prophet as a humanist who believed in progressive improvement in the human condition is fundamentally different from the rigid position of groups such as the Salafis, Wahhabis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hizbut Tahrir.

“Gus Yahya’s view is looking at the Prophet and the first generation of Muslims setting a direction, which then could progressively evolve toward what he desired but was not possible during his time due to the limitations of the culture and the people.” This, says Taylor, is exactly the opposite view of the prophetic mission and reality, in which the historical era of the Prophet is seen as the ideal and that Muslims have to abide by the strictures of that time.

“ISIS is conflating the message of Islam with the cultural limitations of the Arab world at the time the prophet revealed his message,” adds Taylor.

The consequence of the radical interpretation of the Prophet’s message is the creation of the climate of violence now manifesting itself across the world. “There is a religious view as part of Islamic discourse that insists on people to come back to the way of life of the earliest generation of Islam. And ISIS is adopting this view. They coherently develop views based on this kind of teaching,” says Yahya. The group’s strategy has also changed to encouraging adherents to commit violence wherever they are. “If you agree with ISIS, you can just do whatever you can. That is why you are seeing more and more so-called lone wolves everywhere.”

Indonesia’s second-largest Muslim organization, Muhammadiyah, is also engaged in a debate about how it should address the issue of misrepresentation of Islam by jihadist groups. Proponents of a new interpretation of Islamic law argue that many key Islamic concepts are misunderstood and used by extremists to wreak havoc for political ends. By re-examining those concepts, they argue, a counter-narrative can be constructed to take back Islam from the hard-liners.

The Maarif Institute, an NGO founded by former Muhammadiyah chairman Ahmad Syafii Maarif, is also arguing for a revitalization of Islamic thought. “We have a mission to engage Muhammadiyah scholars,” said the institute’s M. Abdullah Darraz, “so that they speak out about a tolerant Islam, about how to counter radicalism and extremism in Indonesia.”

“There is no comprehensive intellectual product in Indonesia which explains how Islam sees terrorism, or how the Quran perceives terrorism,” continues Maarif chairman Fajar Riza ul Haq, adding that the institute aims to fill this gap. “It will become a substantial contribution from Indonesia to the world in understanding terrorism today. Many terrorists, for example ISIS or Boko Haram, act on (the basis of) Islamic jihad, they act on the Quran. We must confront them through the Quran itself, through Islamic understanding itself.”

Syamsul Anwar, the chairman of Muhammadiyah’s council on legal interpretations of religion, earlier argued in a book discussing social diversity, that – like in Islam Nusantara – it should be possible to change certain laws, if necessary through *ijtihad*. “Legal provisions that because of the changing times and era are no longer in tune with the goal of Shariah, can be changed, under certain conditions,” he said.

Yet the move faces opposition from within Muhammadiyah itself. “There are suspicions that this project is only (meant) to undermine the Muslims, to vilify them, to demoralize Islam, or the Muslims,” admits Haq.

So how successful is the drive to educate Muslims across the world about this peaceful interpretation of Islam? Yahya laughs when he admits that “we are still at zero development. Making people believe in our way of thinking is so difficult – let alone convincing fellow Muslims.”

But, he says, there has been progress, at least in wider society. “The Prophet Muhammad came for the sake of the whole humanity, to trigger a force to move the whole human civilization to a

certain direction. And in my opinion we have indeed moved in the direction the Prophet wanted. We have less racialism, less discrimination of women or other religious groups, more humane manners of legal punishment, no legal slavery anymore – there is still slavery, but it’s not legal. This is all the direction that the Prophet was aiming for when he triggered the force.”

Taylor adds that scholars at Cairo’s al-Azhar are happy to see the Indonesian initiative. “Al-Azhar may not be in a position at this time to do this kind of work, despite [Egyptian President Abdel Fattah] el-Sisi having gone to al-Azhar and called for it, a year and a half ago. He called for precisely this. It is difficult for them to do it, but al-Azhar has been [to Indonesia] and they recognize explicitly that the NU is firmly within the mainstream Sunni tradition, which legitimizes the NU doing its work.”

Dr. Nico Prucha, a research fellow at the Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Terrorism and Extremism at the University of Vienna, is working closely with Yahya and Taylor. He agrees there is a vacuum in Islamic thought that needs to be filled. “The Arab centers of Islamic tradition and learning are dead in our times. Al-Azhar’s responses to Sunni extremism has had a marginal impact while from the Gulf we see little to nothing that is credible and is even based on the Arabic extremist parameters of Sunni extremist theology.”

Prucha argues that ISIS has created a consensus (shared with neo-Nazis and voters for right-wing political parties) that “beheading, destruction of churches, enslavement of women, mistreatment of non-Muslims, and undertaking regular attacks in Europe is the real Islam. Nothing else can exist left or right of it.” Warfare across the greater Middle East provides little room to move for Sunni Muslim activists who would contest this picture.

Within this context, the message of Islam Nusantara is refreshing, Prucha believes. “Gus Yahya’s definition of and understanding of the Prophet Muhammad’s mission ‘to improve the noble character of people’ is a counter narrative to what the extremists are advocating, namely that only proper Sunni Muslims – excluding everyone else – are considered humans and worthy of receiving kindness.

“What Gus Yahya and the NU stand for is Islam as a benefit for all of mankind while the extremists are violently exporting a restrictive Islam that can only apply for Muslim believers who are subject to conformity. In that sense, Gus Yahya’s message is exportable and can be sold easily.”

Prucha, like Yahya himself, admits that not too many are buying the message because of global polarization caused by the war on terror.

“People in the West have issues trusting Muslims in general and societies are becoming increasingly polarized while extreme right-wing movements and political parties are succeeding in elections based on their simple solutions such as closing borders, whereas Islam in general is defined as a threat without much distinction.”

Few people are now able to consider distinctions within Islam, especially since ISIS employs legitimate Islamic scripture, even if it neither represents nor attracts the majority of Muslims. “Angry white men and women in the streets of Europe and the U.S. ... for reasons such as anger

and fear vote for right-wing political parties and openly discriminate against our Muslim members of society,” notes Prucha. On the other side of the argument, extremists “are winning the war for the hearts, minds and Sunni Muslim identity.”

Yahya acknowledges that politics inevitably plays a role. In addition to the propagation of discourse on the meaning of Islam, moderate Muslim scholars also need to talk to governments and politicians to demonstrate that there is an alternative to extremism. If this is not done, the polarization of society will continue.

“If we don’t do this, then next is global war on religion. If Muslims around the world are all convinced they all have to follow this textual tradition in a pure way then war is an obligation. That’s what we have.” ISIS, he says, is pushing global society toward violent confrontation.

In this context, steps such as those by both local and national French governments to restrict the freedoms of Muslims are counter-productive, he argues. Conflict and war, says Yahya, are “natural unless people, leaders, really have the right vision for the future of humanity, it’s only natural: people provoke you, you fight back. We need more than that. We need leadership.

“I’ve been working on this since 2011, at least, longer than that, and as I said we’re still in zero development, because it’s so difficult. We simply believe that this is the right thing to do. We know that it is not for us to make a decision. It’s for God to help humans save humanity.”

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