



## The universal values of Indonesian Islamic civilization

### *Kyai Haji A Mustofa Bisri*

is a former chairman of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council and currently serves as chairman of the North Carolina-based organization "Home of Divine Grace for Revealing and Nurturing Islam as a Blessing for all Creation."

Let us begin by regarding the roots of global extremism and Islamophobia. Centuries of conflict have left deep scars upon the collective psyche of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, in many parts of the world. The spread of Islamist extremism and terror in recent decades has revived, and exacerbated, this ancient trauma. And although this long history of conflict is inextricably tied to military and political rivalries – rather than the substantive (ie, spiritual) teachings of religion – the fact remains that Muslims and non-Muslims alike have been deeply enmeshed in nearly 14 centuries of armed conflict.

This, in turn, has led to a biased perception, characterized by widespread stereotyping, unfounded generalizations and prejudice, among Muslims regarding non-Muslims and vice versa. As a result, conflicts that have nothing to do with the substantive teachings of

religion are often attributed to religion itself.

The spread of a shallow understanding of Islam renders this situation critical, as highly vocal elements within the Muslim population at large (ie, extremist groups) justify their harsh and often savage behavior by claiming to act in accord with God's commands, although they are grievously mistaken.

According to the Sunni view of Islam, every aspect and expression of religion should be imbued with *rahmah* (love and compassion)

**Extremist groups justify their harsh and often savage behavior by claiming to act in accord with God's commands, although they are grievously mistaken.**

and foster the perfection of human nature, as expressed through sublime moral character (*akhlaqul karima*). This may be achieved – in fact, may only be achieved – if one's understanding and practice of the exoteric norms of religion such as ritual prayer, fasting and so forth are augmented by a full grasp of its inner, spiritual dimension.

When Muslim extremists act in ways that contradict the substantive teachings of religion, while loudly claiming to represent the true teachings of Islam, it is only natural that many non-Muslims will take these extremists at

their word and develop (or, in light of history, “rediscover”) an aversion toward Islam itself.

Certain steps are essential to address the complex and deep-rooted problems of Islamist extremism and Islamophobia:

- Recognize that efforts to defeat religious extremism are inseparable from, and integral to, efforts to create a just and peaceful world order.
- Marginalize and discredit Islamist ideology, which arises from a superficial understanding of religion and simultaneously seeks to render Muslims' understanding of Islam more shallow. This shall be done by disseminating the teachings of *ulama* (religious scholars) who grasp the profound essence of religion and its fundamental message of *rahmah* (universal love and compassion) – in other words, *ablus sunnah wal jama'ah ulama* (traditional/spiritual Sunni religious scholars).
- Consolidate and mobilize spiritual *ablus sunnah wal jama'ah ulama* throughout the world to guide Muslims to an understanding of Islam that is deeply imbued with universal love and compassion, so that this view becomes a powerful societal consensus among Muslims worldwide and a force for good in the world.
- Establish close cooperation between moderate Muslim groups and non-Muslims who hold an objective view of the issues at stake, to stem a rising tide of Islamist extremism and a corollary backlash against Muslims living in the West.

### Islam Nusantara (Indonesian Islam) as a “capital asset”

For more than six centuries, Islam Nusantara has been carefully nurtured by extensive networks of Sunni *ulama*, who combined spiritual wisdom with detailed knowledge of Islamic law and extensive engagement with the daily lives of local inhabitants in their respective environments. As a result, the Muslim populations that emerged in the East Indies archipelago traditionally maintained a close relationship with Sunni *ulama* and their lives generally reflected the compassion-centered teachings of Islam.

As a civilization, Nusantara (the East Indies Archipelago) embraced and came to represent what experts have termed “the smiling face of Islam” – conspicuous for its tolerance and emphasis on social harmony. This occurred because Sunni *ulama* provided religious guidance that emphasized a contextual and profoundly spiritual view of religion, while prioritizing coexistence with others who worship differently and unity of the nation as a whole.

Indeed, Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Islamic organization, played a vital role in securing independence and establishing the Unified State of the Republic of Indonesia upon the harmonious foundation of Pancasila (ie, as a multireligious rather than purely “Islamic” state), the Basic Constitution of 1945 and the national motto “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*” (Unity in Diversity). These founding principles of the Indonesian nation-state reflect the Sunni Muslim view of Islam,

### Islam Nusantara represents a form of “spiritual capital” that may contribute significantly to the cause of international peace and security.

whose core message is *rahmah* and whose sole purpose is to serve as an unconditional blessing for all creation, by enabling human beings to rise to the state of *khalifatullah fil ardh* (God’s vicegerent on earth, ie, sainthood).

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) was established in 1926 following the Wahhabi conquest of Mecca and Medina, to preserve and strengthen the solidarity of Sunni *ulama* networks throughout the Indonesian archipelago and support their traditional role of guiding the larger community of Muslims. Because of NU, “Islam Nusantara,” which we may define as the localized expression of Islam as a source of universal love and compassion, through the development of noble character, has remained vibrant among the predominantly Muslim population of Indonesia. Islam Nusantara represents a form of “spiritual capital” that may contribute significantly to the cause of international peace and security.

Key elements of Islam Nusantara include:

- An epistemological community: a large group of *ulama* (religious scholars) engaged in the continuous development of Islam Nusantara as a system of profound values, practically applied in order to address actual problems as they emerge from time to time and age to age.



AFP PHOTO/FACHRUL REZAINURPHOTO

- An effective social leadership structure, with *ulama* in the foremost position.
- A mass following – more than 40 percent of Indonesia’s population, according to exit polls from Indonesia’s 2014 national elections – with a high degree of cohesiveness that gives rise to, and expresses, the values of Islam Nusantara in daily life.

### The Indonesian government’s role

In June 2015, nearly 40,000 Nahdlatul Ulama followers gathered at Masjid Istiqlal, Indonesia’s national mosque, in Jakarta, to attend an *Istighosah* ceremony heralding

the arrival of Ramadan, the Islamic fasting month. Titled “Nurturing Spiritual Traditions; Safeguarding National Unity,” the ceremony was designed to launch a two-day national conference of NU religious scholars (*ulama*), who gathered to make final preparations for the quinquennial NU Congress to be held in Jombang, East Java, in early August of that year.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo delivered the keynote address at the ceremony, which was also attended by Said Aqil Siradj, chairman of the NU Executive Board; Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, a prominent NU theologian and Indonesian minister of religion; Nusron Wahid, chairman of Ansor, the NU’s young

adults organization; Ibu Sintia Nuriyah Wahid, the widow of former Indonesian president and NU chairman Abdurrahman Wahid; and Yahya Cholil Staquf, secretary for political and international affairs to the NU Supreme Council.

“The NU has the primary responsibility for preserving and promoting Islam Nusantara,” said Siradj during his introductory address. “Islam Nusantara was proselytized [by Muslim saints] who embraced local culture, strengthened and preserved local culture, respected local culture. They did not seek to destroy local culture [unlike Muslim extremists],” he later told BBC Indonesia in an interview.

In his keynote address, President Joko proclaimed: “I am profoundly concerned by the political upheavals and bloodshed in the Muslim Middle East. Syria and Iraq are being wrenched apart by devastating convulsions. Praise be to God, our Islam is Islam Nusantara. Islam that is gentle and polite. Islam that is civilized. That is Islam Nusantara – Islam full of tolerance.” His remarks, reported by hundreds of media outlets, quickly went viral, garnering massive public attention via print, broadcast and Internet social media.

Additional media reports soon emerged, stating that Islam Nusantara is “being unofficially supported by the government” (*Tempo* magazine, July 9, 2015). During a state visit to Britain in April of 2016, President Joko addressed the British Parliament, where he affirmed Indonesia’s commitment to become a nation that upholds the values of universal humanity, pluralism and tolerance, and expressed pride in the fact

that Islam in Indonesia has played a vital role in consolidating democracy, promoting moderation and opposing religious extremism and terror.

President Joko emphasized the role of soft power, including religious and cultural approaches, to counter Islamist extremism, and voiced his belief that Indonesia is destined to become a blessing (*rahmah*) for the entire world, by promoting peace and cooperation among civilizations.

### The role of Nahdlatul Ulama

Regardless of what policy the Indonesian government adopts, and what measures it may pursue in regard to the international crisis facing Islam, Nahdlatul Ulama is moving to address this crisis and will continue to do so by nurturing and widely propagating the values of Sunni Islam. For example, Nahdlatul Ulama is taking concrete steps to consolidate Sunni *ulama* throughout the world and to establish collaborative relationships with like-minded individuals, organizations and governments worldwide.

In Afghanistan, after a long and extremely difficult process, the NU succeeded in facilitating the establishment of a diverse, multiethnic group of Afghan Sunni *ulama* who subsequently chose to adopt the name “Nahdlatul Ulama Afghanistan.” These Afghan religious scholars agreed to embrace and adhere to the principles of *tawaasuth* (moderation), *tasaamuh* (tolerance), *tawaazun* (balance/objectivity), *i’tidaal* (justice) and *musyaarakah* (social solidarity), exactly as these principles are understood and practiced by Nahdlatul

Ulama.

In Europe, Nahdlatul Ulama has launched a pioneering initiative with the University of Vienna, under the leadership of Rüdiger Lohlker, the noted expert and professor, to establish the Vienna Observatory for Applied

hailed as “a relentless religious repudiation of the Islamic State and the opening salvo in a global campaign by the world’s largest Muslim group to challenge the ideology of the Islamic State head-on.”

The leadership of Ansor is closely



AFP PHOTO/JEFFREY TARRIGAN/ANADOLU AGENCY

Research on Terrorism and Extremism – known as Vortex – and thereby develop concrete strategies to address the threat posed by Islamist ideology and movements.

In Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim youth organization, GP Ansor (established 1934), opened its 15th National Congress on the morning of Nov. 26, 2015, with the screening of the film “The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam,” which *The New York Times*

aligned with the spiritual wing of its parent organization, Nahdlatul Ulama. Yaqut Cholil Qoumas was elected chairman of GP Ansor for the 2015-20 term. In his acceptance address, he said: “Islam Nusantara is at the very heart of our understanding of Islam, and our NU identity, as traditional Sunni Muslims. I believe you gentlemen are capable of safeguarding the universal love and compassion, and East Indies culture that lies at the heart of our Islam.”

To prolonged applause from thousands of Ansor delegates, Syafii Maarif, former chairman of the central board of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second-largest Islamic organization, declared: "Frankly, I am full of doubt concerning the development of Islam in Arab nations. With their countries being destroyed like this, they need to learn from Indonesia."

Yahya Cholil Staquf conveyed the essence of the NU's worldview, and its relationship with those of other faiths and cultures, when he described Islam Nusantara as "Islam that does not arrive seeking to conquer anyone. Islam that does not come to destroy like those [extremists] do. But rather, Islam that contributes to developing a better civilization for *all* humanity, for as our Prophet – may the peace and blessings of God be upon him – said: 'I was sent for no purpose other than to perfect noble character and morality.' This is jihad to *build*, not destroy, civilization."

In May 2016, the NU hosted the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) in Jakarta. Attended by approximately 400 traditional religious scholars from 30 nations, the event featured expert presentations and detailed discussion of the relationship between Islam and nationalism; the unchecked spread of religious extremism, terror, armed conflict in the Middle East and a rising tide of Islamophobia in the West; the role of certain Middle East governments in fostering the spread of sectarian hatred; and the need for an honest appraisal of, and response to, Islamist extremism and terror.

At the summit's conclusion, the Nahdlatul

Ulama's Central Board promulgated a 16-point declaration that affirmed the mainstream nature of the NU's understanding and practice of traditional Sunni Islam; identified the salient factors driving Islamist extremism and terror worldwide; and committed the NU to develop a global alliance capable of addressing the twin threats of Sunni and Shiite extremism.

Widely covered by international media, the summit and NU declaration explicitly identified "specific modes of interpreting Islam as the most significant factor causing the spread of religious extremism among Muslims" (point 8); cast a spotlight on Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran for their role in having "weaponize[d] sectarian differences ... nurtured religious extremism, and stimulated the spread of terrorism throughout the world" (point 9); identified religious extremism and terror, among Muslims, as "directly contributing to the rise of Islamophobia throughout the non-Muslim world" (point 10); called upon "people of good will of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus not to politicize Islam" (point 15); and explicitly affirmed that the NU "will strive to consolidate the global *ahlussunnah wal jamaah* (Sunni Muslim) community, in order to bring about a world in which Islam, and Muslims, are truly beneficent and contribute to the well-being of all humanity" (point 16).

Two days after the adoption of the ISOMIL Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish leaders gathered in Jakarta to attend a Global Unity Forum co-sponsored by the NU's young adults organization, Ansor, and Bayt ar-Rahmah. This daylong event featured expert presentations

and detailed discussion of the historic relationship between Muslims, classical Islamic law and those who adhere to other faiths.

As Yahya Cholil Staquf explained in his opening address, the Global Unity Forum was held as a direct follow-up to the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders. “In its [ISOMIL] declaration, the NU firmly and honestly identified the salient factors most responsible for the emergence of this global crisis – ie, factors rooted within specific elements of Islam itself ... [the] forum convened today ... represents a decisive ‘first step’ that demonstrates the NU is moving forward to implement its strategy. We shall not stop halfway nor abandon this path before we have reached our goal. We shall not return home [from the field of battle] until victory is in our hands.”

At the forum’s conclusion, Anzor issued a three-page declaration that included a call for religious scholars “to carefully examine and address those elements of *fiqh* [classical Islamic law] that encourage segregation, discrimination and/or violence toward those perceived to be ‘non-Muslim.’”

### International response

While some Western journalists initially viewed Islam Nusantara as a clever marketing slogan, the term actually refers to a deep-rooted sociocultural and religious (ie, phenomenological) reality that reflects the spiritual worldview embraced by the majority of Indonesian Muslims. As stated in the ISOMIL NU Declaration, “Nahdlatul Ulama offers the insights and experience of Islam

Nusantara [East Indies Islam] to the world, as a salutary paradigm of Islam in which religion contributes to civilization, by respecting preexisting cultures and prioritizing social harmony and peace” (point 1).

The declaration continues: “Within the worldview of Islam Nusantara, Islam does not enjoin its adherents to conquer the world, but rather, to engage in the continuous development of *akhlakul karimah*, or noble character and virtue, for it is only through *akhlakul karimah* that Islam can manifest as Divine Grace for all creation” (point 5).

With this in mind, it is easy to understand the appeal of Islam Nusantara in a world increasingly gripped by savage conflict and atrocities perpetrated in the name of religion. Hence, the widespread favorable coverage of Islam Nusantara that has appeared not only in Western media, but also the Arab Middle East:

As the Norwegian media outlet *Nettavisen* reported in April 2016: “While Islamic State has its base in the Middle East, the NU dominates the other side of the globe [ie, the Malay Archipelago].” In fact, the NU enjoys great influence even beyond Indonesia’s borders, says counterterrorism expert Magnus Ranstorp, director of Research at the Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies at Sweden’s National Defense College, as reported by *Nettavisen*. “This organization projects strategic influence far beyond Indonesia, by demonstrating resistance to the Islamic State as an ideology, and by visibly opposing extremist forces. They are highly resolute in their approach [to this global threat].”

In a CNN report on the ISOMIL conference, filed by senior correspondent



Ivan Watson, Ranstorp declared: “I don’t see any other Muslim leaders coming to Europe, standing up like a tower and saying, ‘Look, we are prepared to take this on.’” Ranstorp said Indonesian Muslim leaders are breaking new ground by proposing to make changes to Islamic law to better fit the modern era.

**I**n an article titled “Political Horizons for Indonesian Islam,” Muhammad Abul Fadel, deputy editor of *al-Abram*, one of the oldest and most influential newspapers in the Arab world, described how “various entities, capable of exercising broad geopolitical influence, have begun to search for a genuinely tolerant face of Islam that may serve as a shield against extremist currents, after the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood [and its long-term influence operation in the West].”

As Abul explains:

“It is obvious that many Western leaders and communities are experiencing a problem with Muslims – not with Islam – due to jihadist violence and the subversive political agenda of Muslim interlocutors who were long perceived as ‘moderates.’ These pseudo-moderates sought to undermine Western culture, which has developed through the accumulation of historical experience over a period of many centuries. They have done so by seeking to impose a new lifestyle upon their European hosts, subverting and supplanting the West’s hard-won values, such as individual freedom, tolerance, equality and justice, with their own lifestyle and values that [are based upon a narrow interpretation of Islamic law.]

“The spiritual essence of Islam does not reject the prevailing modes of government and

social organization embraced by many Western countries, particularly those that promote the values of freedom, equality and justice. However, Muslims who claim to implement the “pure” teachings of Islam through widely publicized acts of violence have provoked panic and revulsion toward Islam among the general population of the West. Fortunately, certain members of the Western elite who recognize the spiritual essence of religion believe that Islam is more open and tolerant than commonly perceived.

“It’s very difficult to exclude Islam from Western society, given that millions of European and North American citizens now adhere to this religion. Hence, the search has begun for a Muslim group whose understanding and practice of Islam constitutes a model of civilized behavior that does not contradict the fundamental values of Europe and the United States. The great Indonesian Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, which is also the world’s largest, with 70 million followers, has begun to expand its operations internationally to fill this gap. The NU represents the most tolerant face of Islam, which is compatible with Western societies’ values and traditions, and shows no sign of wishing to engage in conflict with the West.

“The Nahdlatul Ulama holds a view of Islam that its members describe as Islam Nusantara – East Indies Islam, or Indonesian Islam – which emphasizes the adaptation of religion to local culture, and firmly rejects the ideology of extremist movements that have produced such a negative image of Islam in the West. This tolerant face of Islam, in Indonesia, accepts all the different religions and cultures that exist

## **The spiritual essence of Islam does not reject the prevailing modes of government and social organization embraced by many Western countries.**

in the Malay Archipelago, and regards them as having a natural right to live side by side with Islam.

“Given the facts described above, the profoundly spiritual and tolerant worldview embodied in the term Islam Nusantara has begun to expand beyond its local framework to a global environment. Many lines of communication have been initiated between the Nahdlatul Ulama and various Western governments. Spiritual leaders within the NU have begun to establish working relationships and operational nodes in many countries, operating under the organizational name, Bayt ar-Rahmah [Home of Divine Grace]. Each operational node propagates the model of tolerance embraced by the Nahdlatul Ulama, such as peaceful coexistence with others and respect for individuals’ right to privacy, including freedom of thought and conscience.

And each seeks to accomplish this by leveraging the profound humane and spiritual values that underlie and animate all religions.”

These examples are merely the tip of the iceberg regarding what Nahdlatul Ulama has undertaken to date, and what must be accomplished if we hope to “defeat religious extremism and restore the majesty of Islamic teachings as a source of universal love and compassion (*rahmatan lil ‘alamin*), which represents a vital key to building a just, prosperous and peaceful world.” Whose words were these? Those of Abdurrahman Wahid, the late Indonesian president and revered Islamic cleric.

We invite others to join us in this effort, which we hold to be in service to God and humanity. I end by saying: “*WaLlahu A’lam*,” – or “God alone knows the truth of all things.” 🌟