Muslims in Indonesia Challenge ISIS Ideology

A Campaign to Repudiate Jihadist Violence

By JOE COCHRANE

JAKARTA, Indonesia — The scene was a strikingly familiar. Islamic State soldiers march a line of prisoners to a riverbank, treat them as if for drowning, then drown their bodies over a blood-soaked dock into the water.

But instead of the celebratory music and crowd of spectators in a jihadi video, the soundtrack features the former Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid, singing a Javanese mystical poem: "Many who memorize the Quran and Hadith love to condemn others as infidels while ignoring their own infidelities, to God, their hearts and minds still mired in filth."

That powerful scene is one of many in a 90-minute film that amounts to 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 its ideological head-on.

The challenge, perhaps surprisingly, comes from Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population but which lies thousands of miles away from the Islamic State's base in the Middle East.

The spread of a shallow understanding of the Islamic faith — a situation critical, as highly vocal elements within the Muslim population at large — extremist groups are using their harsh and often savage behavior by claiming to act in accord with God's commands, although they are grievously mistaken," said A. Mustofa Biorti, the spiritual leader of the group, Nahdlatul Ulama, an Indonesian Muslim organization that claims more than 50 mil-

lions members.

"According to the Sunni view of Islam," he said, "every aspect and expression of religion should be imbued with love and compassion, and foster the perfection of human nature.

This message of tolerance is at the heart of the group's campaign against jihadism, which will be carried out online, and in hotel conference rooms and convention centers from North America to Europe to Asia. The film was released Thursday at the start of a three-day congress by the organization's youth wing in the Central Java city of Yogyakarta.

As world leaders call for Muslims to take the lead in the ideological battle against a growing and increasingly violent offshoot of their own religion, analysts say the group's campaign is a welcome antidote to jihadism.

"I see the campaign as the only way that Western governments can deal with the ISIS propaganda, but there's no strategy right now," said Niso Proch, a research fellow at Kinger's College London, who analyzes the Islamic State's Arabic-language online propaganda.

And Western leaders often lack credibility with those most susceptible to jihadism's allure. "They have no Arab roots, they have never lived in the Muslim world," Mr. Proch said.

The campaign by Nahdlatul Ulama, known as N.U., for a liberal, pluralistic Islam also comes at a time when Islam is at war with itself over central theological questions of how the faith is defined in the modern era.

In a way, it should not be surprising that this message comes from Indonesia, the home of Islam Nasunata, widely seen as one of the most progressive Islamic movements in the world. The movement — its name is Indonesian for "East Indies Islam" — dates back more than 500 years and promotes a spiritual interpretation of Islam that stresses nonviolence, inclusiveness and respect for other religions.

Analysts say the theology developed organically in a place where Hinduism and Buddhism were the primary religions before Islam arrived around the 13th century. Indonesian Islam blend-

ed with local religious beliefs and traditions, creating a pluralistic society despite having a Muslim majority.

Indonesia today has more than 250 million Muslims but also has a secular government and influential Hindu and Buddhist minorities. Such liberalism poses a considerable challenge to the Islamic State, analysts said.

"We are directly challenging the ideology of ISIS, which wants Islam to be uniform, meaning that if there is any other idea of Islam that is not following their ideas, those people are infidels who must be killed," said Yahya Choli Stirli, general secretary to the N.U. supreme council. "We will show that is not the case with Islam.

N.U. has established a nonprofit organization, Bajri

in Winston-Salem, N.C., which will be the hub for international activities, including conferences and seminars to promote Indonesian Islam's tradition of nonviolence, pluralistic Islam, Mr. Yahya said.

N.U. is also working with the University of Vienna in Austria, which collects and analyzes Islamic State propaganda, to prepare responses to those messages, which N.U. will disseminate online and at conferences.

A prevention center based in Indonesia, expected to be operational by the end of the year, will train male and female Arabic-speaking students to engage with jihadist ideology and messaging under the guidance of N.U. theologians who are consulting Western academicians.

The film, "The Peaceful Arrival of East Indies Islam," has been translated into English and Ara-

bic for global distribution, including online. The film explores Islam's arrival and evolution in Indonesia, and includes interviews with Indonesian Islamic scholars.

In some scenes, they challenge and denounce the Islamic State's interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadith, the book of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings, as fatally wrong and perverse.

The Islamic State's theology, rooted in the fundamentalist Wahhabi movement, takes its cues from medieval Islamic jurisprudence, where slavery and execution of prisoners was accepted. The filmmakers counter the legitimacy of those positions for the time but argue that Islamic law needs to be updated to 21st-century norms.

Other sects and Muslim leaders have made this argument before. And non-Arab countries like Indonesia tend to have less influence on the practice of Islam, especially in the Middle East.

"The problem with Middle East Islam is they have what I call religious racism," said Azyumardi Azra, an Islamic scholar and former rector of the State Islamic University in Jakarta. "They feel that only the Arabs are real Muslims and the others are not." Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and the main source of financial support for Wahhabism worldwide, has had more success in imposing its interpretation and has even made inroads in Indo-

nese society, analysts say a steady flow of money from Persian Gulf coun-

ties, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, supports an active and growing Wahhabist movement in Indonesia.

There are also reservations here about the N.U. going global, rather than first tackling violent extremism at home. In recent years, Indonesia has suffered several deadly terrorist attacks by Islamic militants that have claimed hundreds, including bomb-

ings on the resort island of Bali in 2002 and 2005, and at five-star inter-

national hotels in Jakarta in 2003 and 2009.

The best known of the Indo-

nesian jihadist groups, Jamaah Islamiyah, a onetime Southeast Asian branch of al Qaeda, has been crushed, but splinter groups still exist, as well as other mil-

itant Muslim groups like the Is-

lamic Defenders Front, which oc-

casionally smash up bars and at-

tack religious minorities and their houses of worship.

Benar News, vice chairman for the executive board of the Setara Institute for Democ-

racy and Peace in Jakarta, said N.U.'s campaign applied equally to local radicals.

"They want to show to Indo-

nesian society, 'Look, we are Is-

lamic and we have universal val-

eues, but we also respect local cul-

tures," he said. "We are not like Islam in the Middle East." Others say the international public discourse has to start somewhere, even if it is thou-

sends of miles away from Syria and Iraq.

Hedidah Miftahudin, president of the World Organization for Re-

source Development and Educa-

tion, an organization based in Washingto

that works to combat extreamism, said that, accord-

ing to open source data, support-

er groups of the Islamic State were sending an average of 1.4 million messages a day to their followers on Twitter.

"Who's going to counter that?" she asked.

"It's what they are doing in Indonesia, it's what we are doing in the U.S., and in other places," she said. "You flood the space, and you hope people get the right messages.

The home of one of the most progressive Islamic movements in the world.

Friday Prayer at 7:00 pm at a mosque in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. The country has the world's largest Muslim population.