How to Challenge ISIS Propaganda? Indonesia Shows the Way

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There is a spectre haunting the world. The spectre of ISIS. And the ideological challenge to the so-called ‘Islamic’ State is coming from within Islam itself.

The US, Europe, Russia and Syria along with an assortment of Arab countries continue to bomb parts of Syria and Iraq in the hope of decimating the world’s most dangerous terror organisation. Despite the efforts of the world’s best armies, ISIS was able to carry out the devastating attacks in Paris.

The terror organisation has also been able to recruit Muslim youth, through effective use of the internet and social media as propaganda tools. Western attempts to combat their propaganda machinery have met with mixed results at best.

Now, a powerful ideological challenge is being posed to the ISIS by the Nahdlatul Ulama, a Muslim organisation from Indonesia. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, and it’s fighting ISIS’ horrifying interpretation of Islam.

A Religious Attack on Islamic Fundamentalism

Indian Muslim organisations have condemned the ISIS as un-Islamic and even issued fatwas against them. In Indonesia though, a different strategy is being tried out.
The Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is an organisation of Muslims in Indonesia that has over 50 million members. According to a report in the New York Times, the Nahdlatul Ulama has released a 90 minute film, much of it using ISIS’ own footage.

But the visuals are not used to glorify the Islamic State, but rather point out how it is intolerant, anti-Islamic and, not to put too fine a point on it, evil.

*The spread of a shallow understanding of Islam renders this situation critical, as highly vocal elements within the Muslim population at large – extremist groups – justify their harsh and often savage behaviour 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 love and compassion, and foster the perfection of human nature.*

A Mustofa Bisri, Spiritual Head, Nahdlatul Ulama

The film is part of an ongoing campaign to combat ISIS and its potential to convert and corrupt the youth of the country. The NU stands for a tolerant, liberal Islam and is opposed to the fundamentalist interpretation of the Quran that both Wahabism and ISIS share. The question though, is whether their campaign will find resonance beyond Indonesia, where the group is most active.

**ISIS Most Disliked in Muslim Countries**

Movements and messages like those of NU, with a message of tolerance and brotherhood, may find resonance across countries with high Muslim populations. According to a survey published by Pew Research Centre, most people in 11 countries with high Muslim populations expressed
an active dislike for the ISIS. Pakistan was the only exception, where most people surveyed did not have an opinion.

With the general threat of extremism and fundamentalism growing, these numbers can be an encouraging sign. A part of the battle against ISIS has to be on the ideological front, and initiatives like those of the NU will go a long way in that fight.

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