



Humanitarian Islam: Fostering shared civilizational values to revitalize a rules-based international order

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In an [essay](#) recently published in Indonesia’s top foreign affairs journal, Timothy Shah, RFI’s Vice President for Strategy and International Research and Director of its South and Southeast Asia Action Team, discusses the global impact and influence of the world’s largest Muslim organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Specifically, Shah notes how the NU is spearheading a mass, grassroots, multi-faith campaign to revitalize the post-World War II rules-based international order and forge a positive role for Islam upon the world stage. The centerpiece of this [campaign](#) is a movement for what the NU’s spiritual leaders refer to as “Humanitarian Islam,” a form of the Islamic faith that is in sharp contrast to a harsh, repressive, and all-too-often violent understanding of Islam that has been promulgated by Middle Eastern autocrats for decades.

Shah’s essay features a detailed analysis of the global Humanitarian Islam movement, and is co-authored with Thomas Dinham. Mr. Dinham heads the [Bayt ar-Rahmah](#) Center for Humanitarian Islam in the UK and serves as an advisor to Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, the NU’s young adults movement. In their essay, “Humanitarian Islam: Fostering shared civilizational values to revitalize a rules-based international order,” Shah and Dinham observe that:

The post-World War II rules-based international order is under severe stress, challenged by the emergence of ‘authoritarian, civilizationist states that do not accept this order, whether in terms of human rights, rule of law, democracy or respect for international borders and the sovereignty of other nations.’ What also distinguishes “civilizationist” states—including Communist China and Putin’s Russia—is the weaponization of ethnic, religious and/or cultural identities, including their history and symbols, in order to consolidate and wield power vis-à-vis both internal and external enemies.

“Civilizationism” is part of a global resurgence of identity-based, supremacist politics unfolding in tandem with profound shifts in economic and geopolitical power in the 21st century. Simultaneously, socio-cultural and political developments in recent decades have precipitated a crisis of confidence in Europe and North America regarding the traditional values and legitimacy of Western civilization. These developments have profoundly undermined the philosophical, spiritual and moral foundation upon which the post-war international order was built. . . .

Humanity thus stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, cumulative and rapidly accelerating scientific, technological and economic progress have created an historically unparalleled opportunity for the collective flourishing of humanity, particularly when accompanied by a rules-based international order that safeguards national sovereignty and policies founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being. On the other hand, civilizationist leaders—who instrumentalize and mobilize tribal identity, political and economic power, and technology to tyrannize others—pose an immense threat to the future of humanity.

According to Shah and Dinham, Humanitarian Islam is a compelling and powerful response to this multi-pronged global threat. Spiritual leaders of the NU, which has over 90 million followers in Indonesia, believe that the Humanitarian Islam movement can help safeguard human dignity and build independent pillars of social-cultural, religious, and political support for the post-World War II rules-based international order. This order—whose philosophical and ethical foundations are grounded in the belief that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”—is being progressively undermined by an abdication of Western moral and political leadership in the face of a global resurgence of identity-based, supremacist politics.

The essay by Shah and Dinham is [conjoined](#) with a *Strategic Review* [essay](#) authored by the Chairman of Indonesia’s largest Islamic political party, H. Muhaimin Iskandar, who also serves as Deputy Speaker of Indonesia’s House of Representatives. Titled “The future of civilization: Indonesia’s contribution,” the essay proposes that the world community adopt “a set of universal principles” identified by Indonesia’s founding fathers, which “can illuminate the path out of darkness and avert the cataclysm that would inevitably accompany a global clash of civilizations.”

Mr. Iskander’s essay is adapted from a January 2020 keynote speech he delivered to a gathering of international dignitaries in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in conjunction with a meeting of the world’s largest political network, Centrist Democrat International (CDI), and the CDI Eurasia Forum. Participants included Indonesia’s Vice President, the Prime Minister of Hungary, the President of CDI, the Secretary General of CDI and of the European People’s Party, the National General Secretary of India’s governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and key foreign policy advisors to German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

In his essay, Mr. Iskandar advocates the adoption of four principles that are key to international peace and security:

First, to treat others justly and as equals—without regard to ethnicity or religion; without enmity or hatred; and without seeking to marginalize or eliminate others.

Second, to accept and respect the sovereign nation state as a political system that binds the people of each and every nation, without propagating or pursuing a supremacist agenda vis-à-vis other nations.

Third, to accept and respect a nation's laws as binding upon all its inhabitants, which provides no space for anyone to cite religion as justification for inciting violence and/or participating in armed rebellion against the duly constituted authority of the nation state. As the 2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars decreed, in a ruling that also abolished the legal category of infidel (kafir) within the modern nation state: "If it is concluded that any element of positive (i.e., statutory and/or regulatory) law contravenes the highest principles and purposes of religion, this should be—and may only be—corrected by constitutional means. The existence of such laws and regulations may not be employed as a justification for defying a legitimate government."

Fourth, to preserve and strengthen a rules-based international order founded upon justice, freedom and enduring peace.

If the governments, religions and people of the world are prepared to accept these four principles as the common ground for our life together, then we will be able to find a peaceful solution to whatever differences we may have, without violence or destruction.

What we need now is a genuine, sincere and concrete effort to offer these principles to the world, and invite people of every faith and nation to accept these principles as the cornerstone of a truly global civilization that fosters cooperation, mutual respect and the blossoming of human creativity throughout the world.

Allow me to take this opportunity to say that the National Awakening Party is determined to ensure that Indonesia plays its full part in this effort, and that PKB will carry the banner of Indonesia's contribution, for the future of humanity and global civilization.

The NU-affiliated National Awakening Party, PKB, is already promoting Humanitarian Islam internationally in partnership with NU spiritual leaders and Centrist Democrat International, which PKB joined in 2018. A coalition of center-right parties from across the globe, CDI includes the largest and most influential political network in the European Union, the European People's Party (EPP), as well as ruling political parties across Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa. CDI has adopted three distinct PKB resolutions that endorse Humanitarian Islam, affirm that "Western humanism, Christian democracy and Humanitarian Islam are kindred traditions," and call for "a 21st century alliance to promote a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values."

Read the full article: ["Humanitarian Islam: Fostering shared civilizational values to revitalize a rules-based international order"](#)

Learn more:

- [POLITICAL COMMUNIQUÉ: 2020_07_08_Nahdlatul Ulama Poised for Global Leadership: *Strategic Review* \(issued by Bayt ar-Rahmah\)](#)
- [“Responding to a Fundamental Crisis Within Islam Itself” by Yahya Cholil Staquf](#)
- [“Muslims and Evangelicals Form Joint Working Group to Counter Extremism” by Paul Marshall](#)