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Trends in  
Southeast Asia

ISLAM NUSANTARA AS A PROMISING  
RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS  
INTOLERANCE AND RADICALISM

AHMAD NAJIB BURHANI

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

# Trends in Southeast Asia



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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism

By Ahmad Najib Burhani

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Indonesian government has tried to defeat terrorist groups and uproot radicalism, both through military and cultural-ideological approaches. The recent attack at Mako Brimob Depok, West Java, and the bombing in Surabaya, East Java, however, have shown that radical Islam and terrorist groups are not defeated yet.
- Killing terrorist does not always mean killing terrorism. It could even have the opposite impact, i.e., strengthening and fertilizing the radical ideology. The government, being aware of this, has been supporting Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in promoting Islam Nusantara, widely believed to be the ideological antidote for radicalism and terrorism.
- Proponents of Islam Nusantara believe that radical ideology contradicts the character traits of Islam Nusantara, i.e., peaceful, smiling, tolerant, moderate, and accommodative to culture. Radicalism and intolerance are commonly seen in NU circles as being disseminated by transnational movements such as Hizbut Tahrir and Salafi-Wahhabi groups. Though not terrorist groups, they do teach intolerant and exclusive religiosity which provides a breeding ground for terrorism.
- Among Indonesian Muslims, including NU, Islam Nusantara has received varied responses and been met by resistance. The emergence of NU *Garis Lurus* and the concerted efforts to debunk Islam Nusantara by some preachers are among the forms of activities that seek to undermine Islam Nusantara.



- The introduction of Islam Nusantara is further hampered by the attitude of some of its proponents who emphasize its exclusivity by identifying Islam Nusantara only with NU.
- Barring its current limits, Islam Nusantara has the potential to become an exceptional form of Islam or a template for tolerant Islam that can be emulated by Muslims in other parts of the world, especially in terms of its ability to accommodate local culture and multiculturalism.

# Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism

By Ahmad Najib Burhani<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of Islam Nusantara has recently gained new currency in Indonesian discourse after the official rejection by the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) of West Sumatera and Banten of this idea. This currency was further strengthened after President Joko Widodo chose Ma'ruf Amin, the supreme leader (*rois 'am*) of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and an active proponent of Islam Nusantara, as his running mate for the 2019 presidential election.

Activists and scholars have discussed and debated the meaning of this currently controversial term.<sup>2</sup> In general, as elaborated by Said Aqil Siradj, the chairman of NU, Islam Nusantara is not a new and distinct religion or a new school or stream in Islam and it does not contradict Islamic shari'a.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani is Visiting Fellow under the Indonesia Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. He would like to thank Leo Suryadinata, Alex R. Arifianto and Quinton Temby for their useful comments. Nevertheless, he is solely responsible for the contents of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> See Akhmad Sahal and Munawir Aziz, eds, *Islam Nusantara dari ushūl fiqh hingga konsep historis* (Bandung: Mizan, 2015); Mirjam Lucking, "Beyond Islam Nusantara and 'Arabization' — Capitalizing 'Arabness' in Madura, East Java", *Asien* 139 (2016): 5–24; Glora Eliraz, "Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama: A Tolerant, Inclusive Message to the Arab Middle East", *Middle East Institute*, 14 October 2016 <<http://www.mei.edu/content/map/indonesia-s-nahdlatul-ulama-tolerant-inclusive-message>> (accessed 3 October 2018).

<sup>3</sup> "Islam Nusantara Bukan Agama Baru", [republika.or.id](http://republika.or.id), 4 July 2015 <<https://www.republika.co.id/berita/dunia-islam/islam-nusantara/15/07/04/nqx19p-islam-nusantara-bukan-agama-baru>> (accessed 3 October 2018).

It is instead an interpretation and implementation of Islam that features a harmonious integration between Islamic teachings and local cultures. It takes the substance of Islam and then frames it within the local context. One of the main purposes of introducing and promoting Islam Nusantara is to counteract radicalism and terrorism, which have penetrated some elements of Indonesian society.<sup>4</sup> “Through Islam Nusantara, or ‘Islam of the Archipelago’, Nahdlatul Ulama believes it can offer a counter-narrative to the rigid and violent ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)”, said Nadirsyah Hosen, the most brilliant and, at the same time, critical proponent of Islam Nusantara.<sup>5</sup>

The statement by Hosen, who also has a position as the chair of the advisory board for the Australia-New Zealand branch of NU, was agreed upon and supported by Indonesian dignitaries, including President Joko Widodo, Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi, Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakiem Saifuddin, and Chief of National Police General Tito Karnavian.<sup>6</sup> They all underline the importance of

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<sup>4</sup> It is said that Islam Nusantara grew from the political campaign of Said Aqil Siradj to be re-elected during the 2015 Congress of NU in Jombang. Although this accusation can be true, it does not change the fact that this concept has been accepted as the official brand and project of NU. I would like to thank Dr Alex R. Arifianto for providing me with this information and with the information that Hasyim Muzadi’s group’s rejection, particularly in East Java, of the idea of Islam Nusantara.

<sup>5</sup> Nadirsyah Hosen, “Islam Nusantara: a local Islam with global ambitions?” *New Mandala*, 26 February 2016. <http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/islam-nusantara-a-local-islam-with-global-ambitions/>

<sup>6</sup> “Kapolri: Islam Nusantara Bisa Menangkal Radikalisme” <<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2017/01/19/17525891/kapolri.islam.nusantara.bisa.menangkal.radikalisme>>; “Ketum PBNU: Islam Nusantara Mencegah Radikalisme” <<http://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2015/07/04/ketumpbnu-islam-nusantara-mencegah-radikalisme>>, “Said Agil Siradj: Islam Nusantara Mencegah Radikalisme” <<https://www.suara.com/wawancara/2015/06/29/070000/said-agil-siradj-islam-nusantara-mencegah-radikalisme>>, “Cegah Radikalisme, Kemenag Kampanyekan Islam Nusantara” <<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20160203214507-20-108718/cegah-radikalisme-kemenag-kampanyekan-islam-nusantara>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

using Islam Nusantara as a cultural and ideological mechanism, the “soft approach”, as stated by Indonesia’s senior security minister Luhut Panjaitan, the counterpart of the hard power or direct armed confrontation strategy to counter terrorism and radicalism.<sup>7</sup>

Although the government has used a “comprehensive” strategy, combining hard and soft approaches, to undermine radicalism and terrorism, terrorists’ teachings and spirits are still far from dead. The attack on the National Police Mobile Brigade headquarters (Mako Brimob) in Depok on 10 May 2018 and the bombing of three churches in Surabaya, East Java, on 13 May 2018 show that radical Islam and terrorist groups are not defeated yet. This article addresses the origins of Islam Nusantara, its developments, its problems outside and within NU, and its possibility in counterbalancing radicalism and terrorism in Indonesia and the Muslim world.

## THE EMERGENCE OF ISLAM NUSANTARA

The term “Islam Nusantara” officially became a new brand for NU when it was adopted as the theme of NU’s 33rd Congress held in Jombang, East Java, on 1–5 August 2015, namely as the way towards “Affirming Islam Nusantara for Indonesian and World Civilization” (*Meneguhkan Islam Nusantara untuk Peradaban Indonesia dan Dunia*). After the launch of Islam Nusantara as the theme of the Congress, several activities took place which were related, directly or indirectly, to Islam Nusantara. Among them are the controversial recitation of the Qur’an using *langgam Nusantara* (Nusantara style), the campaign of *ayo mondok* (let’s study in *pondok* [Islamic boarding school]), and the launch of the movie entitled *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* (the Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara).

The above one-and-a-half hour movie *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* underlines Islam Nusantara ability to provide a counter-narrative or

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Alford, “Nahdlatul Ulama: Indonesia’s antidote to Islamism’s feral fringe”, *The Australian*, 12 December 2015 <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/nahdlatul-ulama-indonesias-antidote-to-islamisms-feral-fringe/news-story/f6f2bba635a1883a0e38d0d6c0d961c8>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

counter-ideology to radicalism and terrorism. As revealed by Ahmad Mustofa Bisri, an influential figure of NU and the executive producer of the movie, “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”.<sup>8</sup> The documentary movie emphasizes the peaceful and tolerant characters of Islam in Indonesia, and the threat of Wahhabism and Daesh (*Daulah Islamiyya*) or Islamic State. Although conservative Muslims will probably see various segments in the movie as examples of syncretic and corrupted Islam, the movie tries to convince its audience that Islam Nusantara is an antidote to religious extremism and radicalism and an alternative model of authentic Islam that can be followed by other Muslims everywhere.<sup>9</sup>

The background for the emergence and promotion of Islam Nusantara, as indicated by the leading figures of NU and also the opening of the movie, are the acts of terrorism carried out in the name of Islam, the establishment of Daesh, the rise of Islamic radicalism, the intolerance towards religious minorities, and the growth of the *takfiri* attitude — easily blaming those who have different religious ideas and position as *kafir* (infidel).<sup>10</sup> This kind of religiosity is believed to be foreign to Islam

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<sup>8</sup> “From Indonesia, a Muslim Challenge to the Ideology of the Islamic State” <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/27/world/asia/indonesia-islam-nahdlatul-ulama.html>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

<sup>9</sup> The trailer and full movie of *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* can be seen at these links: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLEi5ED\\_-Xw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLEi5ED_-Xw)> and <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLqaJITjA5Y>> (accessed 27 July 2018). The translation of *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* in the movie into “East Indies Islam as an Expression of Divine Grace” seems odd. East Indies is the term used during colonial times referring to the islands that now make up Indonesia. The Dutch and other Europeans assumed that Indonesia or Nusantara was eastern India.

<sup>10</sup> <<https://www.suara.com/wawancara/2015/06/29/070000/said-agil-siradj-islam-nusantara-mencegah-radikalisme>> and <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/27/world/asia/indonesia-islam-nahdlatul-ulama.html>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

in Indonesia, which is tolerant to differences, friendly to non-Muslims, accepting of religious diversity, and accommodative of local culture.<sup>11</sup>

The questions asked was, “From where have all these new horrifying religiosities come from?” Some leaders of NU believe that this model of religion was brought from the Middle East, either as part of a proxy war between religious groups there or as part of the impact of globalization. This view seems to be a bit simplistic and overlooks the complexity of the issue. The rise of conservatism in Indonesia is a complicated issue; it is partly influenced by the democratic process and also part of oligarchic politics utilizing politics of identity. However, as a movement, NU sees a reason that is more tangible from its religious perspective as the main factor of radicalism and terrorism — the influence of Middle East Islam.

The main actors for the changing tone of public Muslim discourse and the transmission of this extreme religiosity are commonly believed to be transnational movements such as Hizbut Tahrir, Ikhwanul Muslimin, and Salafi-Wahhabi groups.<sup>12</sup> These movements were not only accused of transmitting conflict from Arab countries to Indonesia, but they, particularly Salafi Wahhabi, were also accused of being agents of “Arabization”. They benefitted from the introduction of democracy in Indonesia, after the fall of Soeharto’s regime in 1998, by rising, growing, and then successfully controlling public Muslim discourse or “becoming the dominant voices, setting the terms of debate”.<sup>13</sup> Using Yahya Cholil Staquf’s expression, “The rising tide of Islamism in post-Soeharto

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<sup>11</sup> Azyumardi Azra, “Cultural Pluralism in Indonesia: Continuous Reinventing of Indonesian Islam in Local, National, and Global Context”, paper presented at the 10th Annual Conference of Islamic Studies (ACIS), Banjarmasin, 1–4 November 2010.

<sup>12</sup> “KH. Said Aqil Siradj Sebut Semua Teroris di RI Wahabi” <<http://www.moslemtoday.com/kh-said-aqil-siradj-sebut-semua-teroris-di-ri-wahabi/>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, “Indonesian Muslims in a Globalizing World: Westernisation, Arabisation, and Indigenising Responses”, *RSIS Working Paper*, No. 311, 2018, p. 4 <<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/WP311.pdf>>.

Indonesia may thus be said to constitute a ‘rebound’ of the perennial Islamist aspiration” after they were suppressed during the New Order regime.<sup>14</sup>

These new movements did not only establish network and organization as a platform for working together with people of the same vision and goals, but they also established schools and *pesantrens*. Besides, as an effective method for disseminating their ideas and vision, schools and *pesantrens* have become a systematic way to create cadres, sustain their vision and challenge the one established and managed by NU and Muhammadiyah. Furthermore, these new movements are very active in utilizing communication and information technology such as TV, radio, website, and social media to win the hearts and minds of Indonesian Muslims. They have challenged the business and activities that NU and Muhammadiyah had been good at and gone into areas not covered by the old organizations.

Some of these new movements and preachers have promoted what has been perceived as a radical, intolerant, and sectarian understanding of Islam. Therefore, the growth of these new local and transnational Islamic movements have been perceived as contributing to religious intolerance, bringing radicalism and conflict from the Middle East to Indonesia, and undermining Indonesia’s unity and rich culture by promoting a sectarian understanding of Islam. It is in this context that Islam Nusantara emerged in Indonesia.

## **INTELLECTUAL ROOTS AND GENEALOGY**

Although Islam Nusantara has just recently become an “official” brand for NU, its embryo and intellectual roots can be traced back to before 2015. The term Islam Nusantara, for instance, had been used quite frequently in NU community in the last decades. The *Journal of Tasywirul Afkar*, published by Lakpesdam NU, has used this theme for its publication no. 26 in 2008. This term was also popularized by intellectuals such

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<sup>14</sup> Yahya Cholil Staquf, “Islamist politics in ‘reformasi’ Indonesia”, *Jakarta Post*, 22 May 2018 <<http://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2018/05/22/islamist-politics-in-reformasi-indonesia.html>>.

as Azyumardi Azra and used as the title of his book *Islam Nusantara: Jaringan Global dan Lokal* (2002).<sup>15</sup>

The intellectual roots of Islam Nusantara are strongly related to Abdurrahman Wahid's idea of *pribumisasi Islam* (nativization or indigenization of Islam) which he introduced in the 1980s. The aim of *pribumisasi Islam*, as stated by Wahid is "maintaining the roots of local culture that have embodied Islam in this country".<sup>16</sup> With this idea, Gus Dur intended to keep Indonesian cultural identity while adopting the values and religion of Islam. Wahid also tried to convince people that Indonesian local culture has already been Islamized and become compatible with Islam. Therefore, there is no need to be hostile or to consider it non-Islamic.

Besides being accommodative to local culture, *pribumisasi Islam* also indicates that there is no need to drop local terms in designating certain religious concepts such as changing *langgar* and *kyai* into Arabic, i.e., *mushalla* and *ustadz*. For Wahid, changing indigenous vocabulary into Arabic has only contributed to the uprooting of Islam from its local identity or distancing Islam from its followers. Similarly, there is no need to change Indonesian religious dress codes into an Arabic one, such as from *blangkon* to *kafiyeh*. "What is 'indigenized' is only the manifestation of Islamic life, not Islamic doctrines on faith and rituals ... Islam is always Islam, wherever it is. It does not mean, however, that its outward appearances must be homogenized."<sup>17</sup>

Reading Wahid's article, one can infer that the intention of the introduction of *pribumisasi Islam* goes far beyond the matter of terms, symbols, and outward appearances. It is a criticism of cultural encroachment from the Middle East, or Arabization; and is an attempt to draw a line between Arab culture and Islam, and a process to strengthen

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<sup>15</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara: Jaringan Global dan Lokal* (Bandung: Mizan, 2002). The meaning of Islam Nusantara here denotes Islam as practised in Southeast Asia. Therefore, it is a geographical category of Islam.

<sup>16</sup> In the original language: "melestarikan akar-akar budaya lokal yang telah memiliki Islam di negeri ini". See Abdurrahman Wahid, "Salahkah Jika Dipribumikan?", *Tempo*, 16 July 1983.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



local and national identity. Wahid's idea of *pribumisasi Islam*, therefore, can be seen as an expression of Indonesian Islamic identity, religious orthodoxy, and authenticity. It can also be seen as a justification and strategic move to raise the confidence of NU members about their religious tradition and practices.

*Pribumisasi Islam* is not only a starting point for cultural awareness. It is also a protest against the old perception of Islam in Indonesia. Some Western scholars had characterized Indonesian Islam as syncretic Islam, combining elements of Islam with Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous beliefs. In this perspective, Islam was only a thin and easily flaking veneer on top of a solid body of traditional beliefs, which was a mixture of animism and Hinduism/Buddhism. In this view, the core of Javanese ideas and practices remained non-Islamic.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, this view was often echoed by some Indonesian Muslims, who tended to show a sense of inferiority before their religious brothers from South Asia and Arab countries. This could be seen from the way they venerated Arab people and culture. The Arabs and South Asian Muslims interestingly also treated Southeast Asian Muslims as their younger brothers and believed them to be less knowledgeable about Islam, and in need of being Islamized or a subject for re-Islamization.

Critique for this old paradigm has been stated by Marshal G. Hodgson in his book, *The Venture of Islam*. He says, "how very little has survived from the Hindu past even in inner Java" and that "the triumph of Islam was so complete".<sup>19</sup> This statement is frequently quoted by Nurcholish

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<sup>18</sup> C.L.M. Penders, *Indonesia: Selected Documents on Colonialism and Nationalism, 1830-1942* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1977), pp. 236-37.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall G. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Vol. 2 (of three volumes) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 551, f. 2. A similar conclusion is also stated by Paul Stange in his study on *kebatinan* (Javanese mysticism). He said: "When we approach Islam as a mode of discourse and inner orientation, rather than in strictly doctrinal and ritual terms, it becomes evident that the Islamization of Java has reached farther into the recesses of Javanese spiritual life than we would otherwise suspect." See Paul D. Stange, "'Legitimate' Mysticism in Indonesia", *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 2 (Summer 1986): 107.

Madjid to strengthen his argument that Clifford Geertz was wrong in perceiving that beneath the surface, the religion of people in Java is not Islam.<sup>20</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid moved further by making a move to prove and show the authenticity of Islam in Indonesia through his idea of *pribumisasi Islam*.<sup>21</sup>

The difference between the current Islam Nusantara and *pribumisasi Islam* is that the latter was perceived as an outlier, or something abnormal. It was not only resisted but also seen as odd. Furthermore, *pribumisasi Islam* has nothing to do with terrorism, which became a global issue only after the 9/11 tragedy. It can also be said that what Wahid had done was build the foundation for Islam Nusantara or reawaken cultural awareness of Islam in Indonesia; thus the 1980s was the period for the formation of Islam Nusantara identity. The difference now is that Islam Nusantara is now not seen as something strange, but as the true identity of Islam in Indonesia. It is accepted as normal and even with pride by the majority of NU members. It is now fully embraced as the identity of, and a brand name for NU, while other forms of Islam are conversely seen as foreign. In short, Islam Nusantara is the expression of NU as an organization based on Wahid's idea on *pribumisasi Islam*.

Besides *pribumisasi Islam*, the intellectual roots of Islam Nusantara can also be traced back to the idea of “Indonesian *fiqh*” from Hasbi al-Shiddique, “National Mazhab” from Hazairin, and “contextualization” from Munawir Sjadzali.<sup>22</sup> Following Hanafi's school of Islamic law,

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Madjid's article entitled “Islamic Roots of Modern Pluralism: Indonesian Experience”, *Studia Islamika* 1, no. 1 (1994): 55–77.

<sup>21</sup> Compared to Geertz, Hodgson perhaps has less authority in talking about Islam in Southeast Asia. First, he is not a scholar on Southeast Asia. Second, he seems to be confused between Indonesia and Malaysia by mentioning that Geertz' book *The Religion of Java* is “the most important study of Islam in Malaysia”. See Marshall G. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, p. 552, f. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Defining Indonesian Islam: An Examination of the Construction of National Islamic Identity of Traditionalist and Modernist Muslims”, in *Islam in Indonesia: Contrasting Images and Interpretations*, edited by Jajat Burhanuddin and C. van Dijk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press and ICAS, 2013), pp. 25–48.

this “Indonesian fiqh” see ‘urf or custom as useable as the basis of law. Based on the Islamic legal maxim (*qawā'id al-fiqhiyya*) that *al-‘ādah muḥakkama*, cultural usage, shall have the weight of law, “Indonesian fiqh” synchronizes *adat* law (Ar. ‘*ādah* or ‘urf), or custom, with Islamic law. An example of this is the law of inheritance. In the Javanese system of inheritance, there is a property famously called *gono-gini*, a household property obtained together by husband and wife. When one spouse dies, this *gono-gini* property must be divided equally into two before they are inherited. Half of the property would be distributed to the heirs according to Islamic inheritance law, while the other half is to be given to the husband or wife who is still alive.<sup>23</sup>

If the embryo and intellectual roots of Islam Nusantara can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s, the proponents of Islam Nusantara are then able to claim that this kind of Islam in fact originated hundreds of years ago in the time of *Walisongo* (Nine Saints), the semi-mythical figures of saints who successfully converted the people of Java to Islam.<sup>24</sup> They are believed to have successfully converted Javanese people from Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous religions into Islam not through military conquest, but by cultural methods. It is believed that there was no blood spilled during this process; there was no destruction of old religious symbols and statues. Instead of changing culture and tradition, *Walisongo* adopted Javanese culture and inserted Islam in it. Chief among *Walisongo*, who became the symbolic figure and icon of Islam Nusantara, was Sunan Kalijogo. Different from the other *Walisongo*, Kalijogo was the only saint who had no Arabic blood. He was a native Javanese and in several legendary stories, was always depicted wearing traditional Javanese dress code, such as *blangkon* and *beskap*, instead of Arab garb.

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<sup>23</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, “Pribumisasi Islam”, in *Islam Indonesia menatap masa depan*, edited by Muntaha Azhari and Abdul Mun'im Saleh (Jakarta: Perhimpunan Pengembangan Pesantren dan Masyarakat, 1989), p. 84.

<sup>24</sup> Ahmad Baso, *Islam Nusantara: Ijtihad jenius dan ijma' ulama Indonesia*, Jilid 1 (Jakarta: Pustaka Afid, 2015) and Zainul Milal Bizawie, *Masterpiece Islam Nusantara: Sanad dan jejaring ulama-santri, 1830–1945* (Ciputat, Tangerang: Pustaka Compass, 2016).

## CONTROVERSIES: DEFINITION, ANTI-ARAB, AND TRANSNATIONAL ISLAM

Since its introduction as the theme of the 33rd Congress of the NU, Islam Nusantara has raised controversies. The most recent opposition to Islam Nusantara came from the MUI of West Sumatera and a group of *ulama* from Banten. These are not only the two first cases of official resistance to Islam Nusantara, but also the first elaborate response. Three issues, at least, have become subjects of continuous debate, discussion, and argument: the definition and scope of Islam Nusantara; the alleged dichotomy between Islam Nusantara and Arab Islam; and opposition to transnational Islam.

### *Meaning and Scope*

In Indonesian parlance, the meaning of Nusantara is *kepulauan Indonesia* or the name for the entire territory of the Indonesian archipelago.<sup>25</sup> In Malaysia, however, Nusantara means *kepulauan Melayu* (Malay Archipelago).<sup>26</sup> Among the earliest documents containing the term Nusantara is the book of *Pararaton*, a Javanese chronicle on the kings of Singosari and Majapahit. It is reported that Gadjah Mada, *mahapatih* (chief minister) of the Majapahit Kingdom, made an oath that “he would refrain from using spices with his food until a number of kingdoms in the Nusantara on the fringes of the Majapahit Empire were subdued”.<sup>27</sup> This oath is known as *sumpah palapa*. Before Indonesian independence

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<sup>25</sup> See W.J.S. Purwadarminta, *Kamus Umum Bahasa Indonesia* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1976), p. 679. *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI) translates Nusantara as “sebutan (nama) bagi seluruh wilayah kepulauan (termasuk bahasa) Indonesia”. See Tim Penyusun, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1989), p. 619.

<sup>26</sup> See Awang Sudjai Hairul, *Kamus Lengkap* (Petaling Jaya: Pustaka Zaman, 1980), p. 734 and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, *Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 2005), p. 1087.

<sup>27</sup> Hans-Dieter Evers, “Nusantara: History of a Concept”, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 89, no. 1 (2016): 3–14.

in 1945, the term Nusantara was proposed by Ki Hajar Dewantara as the name for Indonesia.

The combination of Islam and Nusantara, in its minimalist definition, therefore, refers to the followers of Islam in Nusantara. It designates the geographical location of the Muslim community in Nusantara. There is no controversy in this definition. The controversy of the recent use of the term Islam Nusantara comes exactly from the fact that it does not follow that logic. Islam Nusantara refers to a kind of distinctive Islam in Nusantara. Islam Nusantara, as stated by Said Aqil Siradj, is “an Islam that developed in the eastern islands which is very different from the Islam of the Middle East”.<sup>28</sup>

The introduction of the new meaning of Islam Nusantara beyond the geographical understanding of the term is in line with the classification of Muslim civilizations proposed by Azyumardi Azra. He elaborated that Islam in Nusantara has certain characteristics that differ from the rest of the Muslim world. Based on its cultural distinctiveness and geography, he classified Islamic civilization into eight categories: Persian-Iran, Turkey, Indian subcontinent, Nusantara, China or East Asia, African Sudan/Black Africa/sub-Saharan, and the West.<sup>29</sup> From here, it can be said that Islam Nusantara moved from a simple geographical definition referring to the Muslim community in certain area, i.e., Nusantara, to become a cultural and sociological distinction.

Compared to Azra’s concept, the definition of Islam Nusantara provided by NU seems to be narrower and more exclusive. As explained by Hosen, the Congress of NU in Jombang actually failed to come up with a definitive concept of Islam Nusantara, but from various definitions of this term provided by its proponents, it can be inferred that most of the authors anchor their definition of Islam Nusantara as a religiosity

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<sup>28</sup> Keith Loveard, “Daesh, Islam Nusantara and shades of grey”, *New Mandala*, 14 January 2016 <<http://www.newmandala.org/daesh-islam-nusantara-and-shades-of-grey/>>.

<sup>29</sup> Azyumardi Azra, “Jaringan Ulama Nusantara”, in *Islam Nusantara*, edited by Akhmad Sahal and Munawir Aziz, p. 172.

commonly practised in NU.<sup>30</sup> Ma'ruf Amin, for instance, defines Islam Nusantara as “a unique and distinctive kind of Sunni Islam (*ahlus sunnah wa al-jama'ah* or Aswaja) adopted and implemented by the founders and *ulama* of NU. Islam Nusantara is a term proactively used by members of NU to show their distinctive religious practices.”<sup>31</sup> It is also in line with this definition that Islam Nusantara is often written as Islam NUSantara, i.e., with N and U in capital letters.

This exclusive definition of Islam Nusantara has stimulated criticisms from some people, including from within NU. Instead of representing Indonesian Islam, it actually only represents NU's Islam, and mostly only NU in Java.<sup>32</sup> This definition excludes the kind of Islam practised by Muhammadiyah, Persatuan Islam (Persis), and Nahdlatul Wathan (NW), and also the Islam of neighbouring countries like Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Nadirsyah Hosen, “Islam Nusantara: Islam Lokal yang Menuju Islam Global?”, *Gatra*, 2 March 2016, pp. 60–61 and Akhmad Sahal and Munawir Aziz, eds., *Islam Nusantara*.

<sup>31</sup> Ma'ruf Amin uses a complicated and confusing language in defining Islam Nusantara. Originally, he defines Islam Nusantara as: “Cara dan sekaligus identitas Aswaja yang dipahami dan dipraktikkan para *mu'assis* (pendiri) dan ulama NU. Islam Nusantara adalah cara proaktif warga NU dalam mengidentifikasi kekhususan-kekhususan yang ada pada diri mereka guna mengiktibarkan karakteristik-karakteristik ke-NU-an”. See Ma'ruf Amin, “Khitah Islam Nusantara”, *Kompas*, Op-ed, 29 August 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Mohamad Shohibuddin, “Mewujudkan (Kembali) Islam Nusantara sebagai Identitas Terbuka”, *Koran Sindo*, 24 January 2017.

<sup>33</sup> In Malaysia, Islam Nusantara is used, for instance to rebrand and rename ISTAC. Previously, ISTAC stood for International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization. Since 2017, the IIUM (International Islamic University Malaysia), under the leadership of Rais Yatim, retained the acronym ISTAC, but gave it a new meaning, namely International Institute of Islamic Civilisation and Malay World. See Hafiz Zakariya and Suryadi, “The Experiences of the International Institute of Islamic Civilization & Malay World (ISTAC), International Islamic University of Malaysia in Empowering the Malay World & Islamic Civilization”, *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 6, no. 2 (2017): 221–36. With this new branding, ISTAC aims to give more emphasis to the study of Islam in the Malay World rather than being too oriented towards the

## *Islam Nusantara vs. Arab Islam?*

There are statements from some proponents of Islam Nusantara which can be twisted into a false assumption of their anti-Arab stance. A news item at nu.or.id, for instance, used a title “Gus Mus: Islam Kita Bukan ‘Islam Saudi Arabia’” (Gus Mus: Our Islam is not ‘Saudi Arabian Islam’).<sup>34</sup> Similar to this, Detik.com also used a dichotomistic title “Said Aqil Siradj: Islam Indonesia Bukan Islam Arab”.<sup>35</sup> Although they have explained prior to that statement that Islam Nusantara is not anti-Arab, in this post-truth era surrounded by various hoaxes, those kinds of statements can be tailored or manipulated by those who opposed to it. The contrasting description between Islam in the Arab world and Islam in Nusantara, i.e., harsh and bloody vs. peaceful and tolerant Islam, further strengthens the above assumption. As widely distributed through flyers, posters, and meme, without having proper source, the differences between Islam Nusantara and Arab Islam are underlined and emphasized. “Islam Klepon vs. Islam Korma” is one of the terms used to dichotomize these two kinds of Islam.

The proponents of Islam Nusantara were also quick in rebutting the common view that this kind of Islam is against Arab Islam. Nadirsyah Hosen, for instance, explains that studying Arabic has strong roots in NU tradition and can be found in various *pesantrens* and madrasahs in Indonesia. He says, “It is impossible to say that we are against the

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Middle East as previously promoted by Syed Naquib al-Attas. “Malay World (Nusantara) Studies” and “Islam in the Malay World” were even offered as fields of specialization in the postgraduate programmes at that institute. To signify this change of orientation, IIUM has even replaced the symbolic statue at the IIUM gate and fountain from a book to a *keris* (dagger).

<sup>34</sup> “Gus Mus: Islam Kita Bukan ‘Islam Saudi Arabia’” <<http://www.nu.or.id/post/read/47444/gus-mus-islam-kita-bukan-islam-saudi-arabia>>. A similar title can be found at: “Gus Mus: Islam di Indonesia Beda dengan di Arab Saudi” <<http://www.satuharapan.com/read-detail/read/gus-mus-islam-di-indonesia-beda-dengan-di-arab-saudi>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

<sup>35</sup> “Said Aqil Siradj: Islam Indonesia Bukan Islam Arab” <<https://news.detik.com/wawancara/2978479/said-aqil-siradj-islam-indonesia-bukan-islam-arab>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

Arabic language. A lot of students in *pesantren* understand grammatical Arabic deeply. How can we then be accused of being anti-Arabs? ... This is certainly a false accusation that reflects their incomprehension of the idea of Islamic Nusantara.”<sup>36</sup>

Although some proponents of Islam Nusantara reject the view that they are anti-Arabs, there are others who often emphasize the distinction between Islam Nusantara and Arab Islam. Said Aqil Siradj is among those who has frequently stated that Islam Nusantara “is very different to the Islam of the Middle East”.<sup>37</sup> For him, Islam Nusantara is characterized by peace and tolerance, while Islam in the Middle East cannot avoid persistent sectarian conflicts. Saudi Islam, as elaborated by Ahmad Mustofa Bisri, is “a grasping and materialistic Islam, coarse, cruel and savage. The Wahhabi view is just a ghoulish nightmare that keeps the world awake at night, trembling in horror.”<sup>38</sup> As admitted by Syafiq Hasyim, just like other ideas formulated in binary or dichotomist narratives, the way some proponents of Islam Nusantara demean and disavow Arab Islam has become the weakness of this idea.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Nadirsyah Hosen, “Islam Nusantara dan Tuduhan Anti-Arab”, nu.or.id, 7 February 2017 <<http://www.nu.or.id/post/read/75237/islam-nusantara-dan-tuduhan-anti-arab>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Keith Loveard, “Daesh, Islam Nusantara and shades of grey”.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid and “Said Aqil sebut Islam Nusantara damai, beda dengan Timur Tengah” <<https://www.merdeka.com/politik/said-aqil-sebut-islam-nusantara-damai-beda-dengan-timur-tengah.html>> and “Jokowi Bicara Soal Beda Islam di Indonesia dan Timur Tengah” <<https://nasional.tempo.co/read/674930/jokowi-bicara-soal-beda-islam-di-indonesia-dan-timur-tengah>> (accessed 27 July 2018). Interestingly, elaboration on the cultural differences between Islam Nusantara and Arab Islam does not come from leaders of the NU, but is provided by Azyumardi Azra. See Azyumardi Azra, “Cultural Pluralism in Indonesia” and Heyder Affan, “Polemik di balik istilah ‘Islam Nusantara’”, *BBC News*, 15 June 2015 <[https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita\\_indonesia/2015/06/150614\\_indonesia\\_islam\\_nusantara](https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2015/06/150614_indonesia_islam_nusantara)> (accessed 27 July 2018). A brilliant elaboration on this controversy is provided by Mirjam Lucking (2016).

<sup>39</sup> Syafiq Hasyim, “‘Islam Nusantara’ and its Discontents”, *RSIS Commentary*, No. 134, 8 August 2018.



In the controversy on whether Islam Nusantara is against Arab Islam, there are two things agreed upon in NU: First, Arabization mostly refers to Wahhabization. When someone talks about the threat of “Arabization”, the term clearly refers to the threat of “Wahhabization”.<sup>40</sup> The anti-Wahhabization of NU has been the character and identity of this organization since its establishment in 1926. As elaborated by van Bruinessen, the main reason why some ulama in Java in the 1920s organized themselves and then founded NU was to oppose the plan of Saudi Arabia, guided by Wahhabi ideology, to destroy graves and other cultural traditions in Mecca and Medina.<sup>41</sup> Nowadays, similar statements can be heard from some leaders of NU, that the establishment of NU was mainly to respond to the victory of Saudi-Wahhabi in 1924.<sup>42</sup> The opposition of NU to Wahhabism has been consistent throughout. This can also be understood from the statement made by Yahya Tsaqf during the launching of the movie *Rahmat Islam Nusantara* when talking about Wahhabi Islam. He said, “We know who these people are, we have been fighting them for 90 years.”<sup>43</sup>

The second meaning of Arabization, as elaborated in Wahid’s article on “Pribumisasi Islam”, is cultural encroachment. It is almost equivalent

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<sup>40</sup> “KH Said Aqil Siradj: Saya Bukan Menentang Arab Saudi, tapi Wahabi” <<http://www.muslimoderat.net/2017/02/kh-said-aqil-siradj-saya-bukan-menentang-arab-tapi-wahabi.html>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *NU: Tradisi, relasi-relasi kuasa, pencarian wacana baru* (Yogyakarta: LKiS and Pustaka Pelajar, 1994), pp. 28–34. There were certainly other factors behind the establishment of NU, such as challenges from modernist or reformist organizations, particularly Muhammadiyah. However, the main trigger for the establishment of this organization in 1926 was the rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>42</sup> The history of the establishment of NU as a response to Wahhabization can be read in van Bruinessen, *NU: Tradisi, relasi-relasi kuasa, pencarian wacana baru*. For the definition of Islam Nusantara as not being anti-Arab, see “KH Said Aqil Siradj: Islam Nusantara Bukanlah Anti Arab, Tapi Islam Yang Santun Dan Berbudaya” <<http://www.muslimoderat.net/2018/03/kh-said-aqil-siradj-islam-nusantara.html>>.

<sup>43</sup> Keith Loveard, “Daesh, Islam Nusantara and shades of grey”.

to the “threat” of Westernization, but this time the threat comes from Arab culture. Just like Westernization, Arabization indicates a foreign cultural threat to what is perceived to be local or national identity. No doubt, it is a generalization and simplification. When talking about Westernization, people usually do not refer to everything from the West. Even Ismail Yusanto, spokesperson of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), during the interview with the author, classified the products from the West into two categories — *hadharah* (closely related to culture and civilization) and *madaniyah* (physical and industrial products). He rejected what is included in the category of *hadharah* and accepted the aspect of *madaniyah*. Westernization is commonly associated with “free-sex” — a pejorative term for loose sexual relationship — and etiquette between old and young people. Arabization, as understood and rejected by Islam Nusantara, mostly refers to the changing of Indonesian cultural identity.

### *Against Transnational Islam*

In his Twitter account on 8 July 2018, Nadirsyah Hosen indicated that the reason for the resistance to “Islam Nusantara” is because of its capability to attack the heart of transnational Islam, such as represented by the likes of the Salafi-Wahhabi, Ikhwanī or Tarbiyah movements spearheaded by Ikhwanul Muslimin, Daesh or ISIS or ISIL, and HTI. The capability of Islam Nusantara to block transnational Islam has irritated some conservative Muslims and made them oppose it.

The meaning of transnational movements here cannot be understood in the general sense since the opposition of NU was not directed at all of them. If “anti-Arabization” mostly refers to “anti-Salafization and Wahhabization”, the meaning of transnational movement mostly refers to the Hizbut Tahrir, Ikhwanul Muslimin, and Salafi-Wahhabi groups. Other transnational movements, such as Ghulen and Ahmadiyah, are often excluded, either because these groups are not seen as a threat to Nusantara identity or because they do not propagate the use of violence in achieving their goals.

The opposition of NU to the Hizbut Tahrir and its idea of caliphate was reflected in its strong support to the decision of the government to

ban HTI. Said Aqil Siradj, the chairman of NU, even publicly admitted that the initiative to ban HTI originally came from NU. Due to strong support from this organization, the Indonesian government finally issued the regulation in lieu of law (Perppu) No. 2/2017 and then revoked the legal status of HTI.<sup>44</sup> The idea of a caliphate held by the HTI was not only seen to be against the concept of the nation-state, it was also seen to be opposed to the distinctive identity of Islam Nusantara which celebrates and heralds plurality and diversity in Islam against a monolithic outlook for the religion.

The opposition of NU to HTI even moved to the point of threatening to halt the preaching activities of preachers who had been influenced by the ideas of HTI, such as Felix Siauw. The religious gatherings (*pengajian*), in Sukoharjo on 17 July 2017, in Garut on 11 November 2017, and in Karanganyar on 19 November 2017 are three examples where NU, with the Banser (Barisan Anzor Serbaguna, or Multipurpose Anzor Front) as the main actor, threatened to halt the preaching of Felix Siauw. The method used by the Banser to oppose HTI reminds people of the methods commonly used by the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam or FPI) in threatening those who have different religious ideas, i.e., halting and disbanding their activities. These two activities — the initiative to ban HTI and the halting of the activities of HTI-affiliated preachers — have become hugely controversial.

## **RESPONSE AND RESISTANCE TO ISLAM NUSANTARA**

More than three years after it was introduced, Islam Nusantara continues to face opposition and resistance.<sup>45</sup> More so, radical and conservative

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<sup>44</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, “The Banning of Hizbut Tahrir and the Consolidation of Democracy in Indonesia”, *ISEAS Perspective* No. 71/2017, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 19 September 2017.

<sup>45</sup> The recent opposition to Islam Nusantara from MUI of West Sumatera includes detailed arguments for the rejection. Issued during the district plenary meeting on 21 July 2018, this response was written in a form similar to that of a

Muslims remain strong and seem not to have receded or decreased their voice in the public sphere. The 212 Action has shown that they are persistently active or even growing in strength. Defying NU's efforts to undermine them and to promote tolerant Islam, hardline Muslims seem to be more and more dominant in the public sphere. Transnational movements like HTI and PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera [Prosperous Justice Party]), and conservative Muslims have, as expected, been most vigorous in resisting Islam Nusantara. Some televangelists and celebrity preachers have also earnestly joined in throwing criticisms at Islam Nusantara.<sup>46</sup> Surprisingly, some factions within NU are also opposed to the idea and have joined opponents of Islam Nusantara in attacking their associational brothers.

To understand the response from within NU to the idea of Islam Nusantara, this article discusses the arguments of three interesting groups: *NU Garis Lurus* (NU's Straight Path),<sup>47</sup> fanatical-ideological proponents, and critical proponents. Certainly, these three groups are not the only critical responses coming from within NU.

### *NU Garis Lurus*

The arguments used by *NU Garis Lurus* are quite similar to those of other opponents of Islam Nusantara. As stated by Kyai Idrus Ramli, *NU Garis*

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*fatwa*. See "MUI Sumatera Barat Tolak 'Islam Nusantara'" <[https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4133086/mui-sumatera-barat-tolak-islam-nusantara?\\_ga=2.131845263.1486874145.1533429303-11543875.1464598168](https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4133086/mui-sumatera-barat-tolak-islam-nusantara?_ga=2.131845263.1486874145.1533429303-11543875.1464598168)> and "Heboh Islam Nusantara" <[https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4133868/heboh-islam-nusantara?\\_ga=2.131845263.1486874145.1533429303-11543875.1464598168](https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4133868/heboh-islam-nusantara?_ga=2.131845263.1486874145.1533429303-11543875.1464598168)> (accessed 5 August 2018).

<sup>46</sup> "Mamah Dedeh Tolak Islam Nusantara" <<https://suaranasional.com/2018/07/03/mamah-dedeh-tolak-islam-nusantara/>> and "Permohonan Maaf Langsung Mamah Dedeh soal Islam Nusantara" <<https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/92442/permohonan-maaf-langsung-mamah-dedeh-soal-islam-nusantara>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

<sup>47</sup> The literal meaning of *garis lurus* is "straight path". In Indonesian and Islamic terminology, however, "straight path" is understood as "true path" or "correct path".

*Lurus* wants to protect the original aim and principles of NU as *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah*.<sup>48</sup> For them, “Islam is one” or there is only “one universal Islam” that can be applied perfectly everywhere and, therefore, it does not need to be “localized” or “Indonesianized”. They reject any adjectives to the term of Islam as they want “only Islam” or “pure Islam”. This is quite similar to the claim of Salafi-Wahhabi who declare themselves *muwahhidūn* (unitarians or upholders of strict monotheism), while at the same time accusing other Muslims of being polytheists. They believe that Islam is only one, and at the same time they reject sociological impacts on the diversity of Islam — cultural, nationality, ethnicity, and so on — and try where they can to dissolve that plurality or achieve a monolithic Islam.

They go one step further by arguing that Islam Nusantara has deviated from Islam and intentionally corrupted Islam by legitimizing syncretic practices, which are at odds with Islamic teachings. The derogatory acronym that they use for the proponents of Islam Nusantara is JIN (Jemaah Islam Nusantara), in reference to the Arabic word “jinn”, which broadly means “demons”.<sup>49</sup> They even accuse Islam Nusantara of being invented by liberal Muslims like Ulil Abshar Abdalla, or of being a continuation of JIL (Jaringan Islam Liberal [Liberal Islam Network]), particularly after that group recently declined in standing.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, just like JIL, proponents of Islam Nusantara are perceived as deviant Muslims and their idea of Islam Nusantara is seen as “a form

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<sup>48</sup> Alexander R. Arifianto, “Islam Nusantara & Its Critics: The Rise of NU’s Young Clerics”, *RSIS Commentary*, No. 018, 23 January 2017 <<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CO17018.pdf>>.

<sup>49</sup> The general meaning of “jinn” is actually “spirit” or genie. However, the use of the term JIN in the discourse of Islam Nusantara is closer to the meaning of “demons” rather than to “spirits”.

<sup>50</sup> See “Kontroversi Islam Nusantara” <<http://islamlib.com/gagasan/islamnusantara/kontroversi-islam-nusantara/>>, “Habis Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL), Terbitlah Jamaat Islam Nusantara (JIN)” <<https://mojok.co/edi/esai/habis-jaringan-islam-liberal-jil-terbitlah-jamaat-islam-nusantara-jin/>>, “Islam Nusantara Penerus Islam Liberal” <<http://asysyariah.com/islam-nusantara-penerus-islam-liberal/>> (accessed 1 June 2018).

of theological heresy”.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, they are also accused as stooges of the West who work to vilify and defeat Islam and to disseminate liberalism and secularism in Indonesia. This faction of NU often works in partnership with hardline Muslims such as the FPI. They were among the actors behind the massive participation of NU in the *Aksi Bali Islam* rallies in 2016 and 2017.<sup>52</sup>

The claim that Islam Nusantara was invented by JIL is of course not confirmed. In one of his statements, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, one of the influential and controversial figures of NU and a founder of JIL, revealed that there are two “enemies” or targets of Islam Nusantara, namely: Liberal Islam and radical Islam. This statement is in line with Said Aqil Siradj, the chairman of the NU, who frequently emphasizes that Islam Nusantara can protect Indonesian Muslims from the influence of liberalism and radicalism.<sup>53</sup> The opposition of Islam Nusantara to Liberal Islam, however, is not as obvious as its opposition to radical Islam. There is no clear programme or campaign in the NU to counteract liberalism.<sup>54</sup>

The opposition of Islam Nusantara to Liberal Islam may not be clear, but its fight against religious radicalism, intolerance, and discrimination is all the more obvious. It can be inferred from the statements of leading

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<sup>51</sup> Alex Arifianto, “Nahdlatul Ulama is home to its own hardliners”, *New Mandala*, 8 August 2018 <<http://www.newmandala.org/nahdlatul-ulama-home-hardliners/>> (accessed 3 October 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Greg Fealy, “Bigger than Ahok: Explaining the 2 December Mass Rally”, *Indonesia at Melbourne*, 7 December 2016 <<http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/bigger-than-ahok-explaining-jakartas-2-december-mass-rally/>>.

<sup>53</sup> “Konsep Islam Nusantara Solusi Menangkal Paham Radikal Maupun Liberal” <<http://www.radiosuarabekasi.com/berita-seputar-bekasi-roya/headline-news-pagi/1494-konsep-islam-nusantara-solusi-menangkal-paham-radikal-maupun-liberal>>, “Said Agil Siradj: Islam Nusantara Mencegah Radikalisme” <<https://www.suara.com/wawancara/2015/06/29/070000/said-agil-siradj-islam-nusantara-mencegah-radikalisme--page-2>> and “Kh Said Aqil Siradj Islam Nusantara Menangkal Islam Radikal Dan Liberal” <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzDK\\_x84784](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzDK_x84784)> (accessed 27 July 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Except during the previous Congress in Makassar in 2010; and that event was not organized by “NU Garis Lurus”.

figures of NU such as Said Aqil Siradj, Ma'ruf Amin and Ahmad Mustofa Bisri that radicalism and terrorism are not the characteristics of Islam in Indonesia. These traits are in fact contrary to Islam in the region, which is peaceful, tolerant, friendly, *tawassut* (moderate), and accommodative to culture.<sup>55</sup>

### *Fanatical-Ideological Proponents*

One of the pillars of *Islam Nusantara*, as stated by its proponents, is unwavering support for Pancasila and NKRI (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia) and it is implemented, among others, by opposing the caliphate and Islamic state.<sup>56</sup> In a few cases, this stance made some of them fall into the trap of revisionism. In his note, Kevin Fogg, for instance, calls Yahya Cholil Staquf a “revisionist of NU history” for his elaboration that NU leaders in the 1950s “blocked Masyumi from restoring the Jakarta Charter and transforming Indonesia into an Islamic state”.<sup>57</sup> This was done by Staquf possibly to show the unwavering support the NU has for the state of Indonesia and its strong opposition to transnational and conservative Islam. However, this kind of statement is tweaking history, i.e., revising the historical fact that NU at that time was also a supporter of Islamic state.

This revisionist perspective is also adopted in the articles on Islam Nusantara that try to show the peaceful and tolerant characteristics of

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<sup>55</sup> In an effort to show the peaceful characters of Islam Nusantara, NU leaders have on several occasions slipped to become revisionist, essentialist and supremacist. Bizawie, for instance, states, “Islam is not only compatible with Nusantara people, but it is also appropriate to influence Nusantara culture in order to implement its accommodative character, i.e., *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*” (*Islam bukan hanya cocok diterima orang Nusantara, tetapi juga pantas mewarnai budaya Nusantara untuk mewujudkan sifat akomodatifnya yakni rahmatan lil ‘alamin*). See Zainul Milal Bizawie, *Masterpiece Islam Nusantara*, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Kevin W. Fogg, “Revisionist NU History”, [www.kevinwfogg.net/blog/4570569437/Revisionist-NU-History/11301801](http://www.kevinwfogg.net/blog/4570569437/Revisionist-NU-History/11301801) (accessed 27 July 2018) and Yahya Cholil Staquf, “Islamist politics in ‘reformasi’ Indonesia”.

Islam in Indonesia and the opposite characteristics of Islam in the Arab world. As stated by Martin van Bruinessen, “The talk of Arabization versus Westernization implicitly assumes an essentialized, homogenized Arab world, or an equally monolithic West, impinging upon a vulnerable and malleable Indonesian Islamic community.”<sup>58</sup> It is commonly accepted that *Walisongo*, the mythical figures of Islam Nusantara, were accommodative to culture. Instead of destroying them, they used local traditions to disseminate Islam. They were, however, mostly from Java and the history of Islam in Java cannot be seen as the history of Islam in Indonesia in general. In Aceh, for example, elimination of those considered heretics did take place. The conflict between Hamzah al-Fansuri and Nuruddin al-Raniry illustrates that the process of Islamization in Indonesia was not always peaceful.<sup>59</sup>

### *Critical Proponents*

The critical attitude of the proponents of Islam Nusantara is represented, for instance, by the view of Nadirsyah Hosen on the possibility of exporting Islam Nusantara to other countries. Although President Joko Widodo has promoted Islam Nusantara in various international meetings and Yahya Cholil Staquf has established Islam Nusantara’s outreach named Bayt al-Rahman in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Hosen raised his doubt on the idea of internationalizing Islam Nusantara. Hosen, undoubtedly one of the staunchest proponents of Islam Nusantara, says, “If the emphasis is on promoting the product, not the method, then efforts to promote Islam Nusantara on the other side of the world will undoubtedly fail.”<sup>60</sup> The issue brought by transnational movements has global relevance, while the issue promoted by Islam Nusantara is only

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<sup>58</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, “Indonesian Muslims in a Globalizing World”, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> I.A. Mansurnoor, “Revivalism and Radicalism in Southeast Asian Islam: A Pattern or an Anomaly?”, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 222–62.

<sup>60</sup> Nadirsyah Hosen, “Islam Nusantara: Islam Lokal yang Menuju Islam Global?”, *Gatra*, 2 March 2016, pp. 60–61.



cultural. The global influence provided by Islam Nusantara, although limited, according to Hosen, is “its method, or *manhaj*, of an Islam that accommodates local culture” or “how local culture, wherever it may be, can interact positively with Islamic teachings”. Hosen further explains that there are a number of norms or principles in Islam supporting this methods, such as: (1) *al-‘ādah muhakkama* (cultural usage shall have the weight of law); (2) *al-ma’rūf ‘urfan ka al-masyrūt syartan* (matters that have been accepted through ‘urf are the same as matters that have been agreed upon by conditions); (3) *al-tsābit bi al-dalāla al-‘urf ka al-tsābit bi al-dalāla al-nash* (what is decreed based on custom has the same status as what is decreed based on the guidance of the texts); and (4) *ma ra’āhu al-muslimūn hasanan fa huwa ‘indallāhi hasan* (what is considered good by Muslims then in the sight of Allah is also considered good).<sup>61</sup>

Another critical view on Islam Nusantara is stated by Mohamad Shohibuddin.<sup>62</sup> While successfully organizing the international conference on Islam Nusantara on foreign soil, the Netherlands,<sup>63</sup> Shohibuddin underlines that the idea of Islam Nusantara has been restricted in its development by the attitude of some of its proponents. Using his own term, “Islam Nusantara has been obscured by NU members or ‘*mahjūbun bin nahdliyyīn*’.” His statement refers to the exclusive attitude of some proponents of Islam Nusantara that excludes other Indonesian Muslims from this category, i.e., Islam Nusantara is exclusively “NU Islam”. He says, “Islam Nusantara must be seen (again) as a broader regional identity rather than a particular group identity.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> “Ustadz Hilmi Firdausi Tolak Islam Nusantara, Gus Nadir Jawab dengan Cerdas” <<https://bangkitmedia.com/ustadz-hilmi-firdausi-tolak-islam-nusantara-gus-nadir-jawab-dengan-cerdas/>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

<sup>62</sup> Mohamad Shohibuddin, “Dua Wajah Islam Nusantara”, *Koran Sindo*, 12 April 2017 and Mohamad Shohibuddin, “Mewujudkan (Kembali) Islam Nusantara”.

<sup>63</sup> The theme of the conference was “Rethinking Indonesia’s Islam Nusantara: From Local Relevance to Global Significance”. It was organized by the Netherland’s Special Branch of the NU on 27 March 2017 in Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.

<sup>64</sup> Mohamad Shohibuddin, “Mewujudkan (Kembali) Islam Nusantara”.

The narrow-mindedness of some proponents of Islam Nusantara, according to Shohibuddin, is expressed, for instance, by them still not acknowledging the “constitutional *ijtihad*” promoted by Muhammadiyah on various issues, including the issue of environment and natural resources, as part of the achievement of Islam Nusantara. For Shohibuddin, the current exclusivity of some proponents of Islam Nusantara is counter-productive to the development of Islam Nusantara itself. It represents the myopic vision of those who could lead Islam Nusantara towards a different end from its initial ideals, i.e. a tolerant and peaceful Islam.

## **COUNTERING RADICALISM AND TERRORISM**

The Indonesian authorities have taken various measures to tackle radicalism and terrorism, including the establishment of BNPT (National Agency for Combating Terrorism), the Indonesian Special Forces counter-terrorism squad (Special Detachment 88), and most recently a new law on terrorism, passed in the aftermath of Surabaya Bombing in May 2018. The authorities, however, seem to be aware that the battleground is not only militaristic and security in nature, but also cultural and ideological. It is from this awareness that the government has become the main supporter of Islam Nusantara, particularly as a way to counteract the ideology of radicalists and terrorists. President Joko Widodo has promoted Islam Nusantara in several international fora and seen it as an alternative model for religious tolerance and an antidote to the extremism of Daesh or Islamic State.<sup>65</sup> Several government agencies, including BNPT, and ministries, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have incorporated Islam Nusantara in their programmes and involved the proponent of Islam Nusantara in their activities.

The question is whether Islam Nusantara is capable of being utilized as a mechanism to counteract radicalism and terrorism? How far will

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<sup>65</sup> Greg Fealy, “Nahdlatul Ulama and the politics trap”, *New Mandala*, 11 July 2018 <<http://www.newmandala.org/nahdlatul-ulama-politics-trap/>>.

the influence and effectiveness of Islam Nusantara be in undermining extremism in Indonesia? Although aimed at the stronghold of NU, the recent bombing in Surabaya, East Java, cannot be blamed or associated with the failure or success of Islam Nusantara's cultural and ideological programmes. However, the sectarian anti-Shi'a sentiment in East Java indicates that the spirit of tolerance, moderation, and peace promoted by Islam Nusantara have not been adopted fully by some members of the NU, let alone Indonesian Muslims in general.

During my field research in East Java, mostly in Surabaya, in 2016, the song entitled *Syi'ir Tanpo Waton*, also known as *Syi'ir Gus Dur*, can be heard from almost every mosque there and some mosques even played this song five times daily, before each of the five daily prayers. This song teaches tolerance and asks people to refrain themselves from easily and recklessly accusing those who have different religious view as *kafir* (infidel). The song contains admonitions in the Javanese language, such as: "Many who memorize the Quran and Hadith love to condemn others as infidels while ignoring their own infidelity to God, their hearts and minds still mired in filth."<sup>66</sup> Although many people in East Java have heard this song frequently, shockingly, each MUI branch in East Java, excluding Bondowoso, has issued fatwa against Shi'a. Furthermore, the Shi'i community has been displaced from their houses in Sampang, Madura since 2012 and some of them still live in shelters (Puspa Agro) in Sidoarjo, near Surabaya. This portrays the contrast between tolerance promoted by Islam Nusantara and the attitude of some member of the NU in East Java.

Some analysts, such as Sidney Jones, raise doubt on the possibility of using Islam Nusantara as a way to domesticate radicalists and terrorists. For her, radicalists and terrorists would never be attracted to the idea of Islam Nusantara. Jones says, as reported by Scott, "the claim

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<sup>66</sup> This English translation can be found in Joe Cochrane "From Indonesia, a Muslim Challenge to the Ideology of the Islamic State", *New York Times*, 26 November 2015 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/27/world/asia/indonesia-islam-nahdlatul-ulama.html>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

of NU leaders that Islam Nusantara can challenge the Islamic State is absurd”.<sup>67</sup> Jones’s view seems to be too pessimistic. The impact of Islam Nusantara has certainly not been obvious, even within NU. Furthermore, controversies have persistently surrounded this idea. However, it seems unfair to see Islam Nusantara as a fully formed ideology to counteract radicalism. It is still in the making. Although its influence still needs to be studied or measured objectively, at least, bearing in mind its weaknesses, it has been campaigning for religious tolerance, enjoining people to respect differences, and with its “*ayo mondok*” programme, enjoining people to study religion from authoritative sources using authoritative methods. Furthermore, abandoning Islam Nusantara as a counter-ideology to radicalism will leave Indonesian Muslims with no alternative or with very limited alternative. Therefore, despite its shortcomings, Islam Nusantara is an unavoidable tool to resist the encroachment of religious extremism.

The issue of radicalism and terrorism aside, Islam Nusantara has successfully imbued Indonesian Muslims with a feeling of pride in their unique religiosity. Previously, they were often seen as inferior before their religious brothers and sisters from other countries. There was no record of Indonesian Muslims having achieved something comparable to Muslims in Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or even Pakistan. With Islam Nusantara, they have something to be proud of and that allows them equal standing with Muslims from other countries. Islam Nusantara is not only an empty slogan, it has motivated its proponents to emphasize and codify certain characteristics and *manhaj* (methodologies) of Islamic jurisprudence and theology. More than that, it becomes a spirit of tolerance and a spirit for vertical movement among Indonesian Muslims. The proponents of Islam Nusantara have started to feel that their Islam is exceptional. In short, Islam Nusantara provides an opportunity for Indonesian Muslims to create an exceptional Islam characterized by tolerance, peace, and respect for religious diversity and multiculturalism.

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<sup>67</sup> Margaret Scott, “Indonesia: The Battle over Islam”, *New York Southeast Asian Network*, 26 May 2016 <<http://nysean.org/post/indonesia-battle-over-islam>> (accessed 27 July 2018).

## CONCLUSION

As a cultural and ideological project, the goals of Islam Nusantara cannot be achieved in an instant. Perhaps, it needs more than a decade to create a religiously smiling, peaceful and tolerant Indonesia again. Currently, the efforts of Islam Nusantara to eradicate radicalism and extremism are still hampered by controversies and opposition, both from within NU and other Muslim groups. Besides its attack on various transnational projects, such as the caliphate, Arabization and uniform Islam, resistance to Islam Nusantara has been also stimulated by the attitude of some of its proponents who emphasize the exclusive categorical designation of this idea, i.e., Islam Nusantara is the Islam of NU. Islam Nusantara, which was initially intended to be an inclusive concept, at least geographically covering the entire Indonesian archipelago, is currently still an exclusive concept, limiting its scope only to NU tradition and culture.

Besides the meaning and scope, the controversy also revolves around the meaning of Arabization and anti-Arabization. The meaning of “anti-Arabization” frequently encompassed in the concept of Islam Nusantara is no other than “anti-Wahhabization” and is against cultural encroachment from Arab countries. This is a continuation of the objective for the establishment of NU in 1926. Unfortunately, the dichotomy between Islam Nusantara and Middle Eastern or Arab Islam, frequently mentioned by the leading figures of NU, does not help Islam Nusantara win the hearts of other Muslims and may instead become a point of severe disagreement.

The main achievement of Islam Nusantara in the current condition is its ability to strengthen the confidence and pride of Indonesian Muslims in their religious identity, with its unique characteristics and distinctiveness. It successfully alleviated the inferiority complex of Indonesian Muslims borne of their peripheral position in the Muslim world and their allegedly syncretic religious beliefs and practices. Indonesian Islam, previously seen as less orthodox and less authentic Islam, is now introduced as a template of tolerant and peace, and is even perceived as an antidote for religious radicalism and extremism.

The future of Islam Nusantara can go one way or another. It can be trapped into a government project with its main function being to

help the government in its war on terror. Various indications can lead to this assumption with the regime of Joko Widodo seeming to be the only supporters of this project and the tendency of dichotomizing Islam Nusantara vs. the rest of Indonesian Muslims. The fate of Islam Nusantara could be similar to that of Islam Hadhari in Malaysia during the time of Prime Minister Ahmad Badawi, which is now almost forgotten or neglected.

Islam Nusantara can be a template of peaceful and tolerant Islam and even become an embryo for an exceptional Islam supported by other Muslim groups in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. This condition certainly needs the proponents of Islam Nusantara to move beyond slogan and superficial and non-substantial controversies into more emphasis on its inclusive nature — reflecting its claim of openness and tolerance — and on the epistemology and methodology of Islam Nusantara.

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