

THE ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS IN COMBATING ISLAMIC RADICALISM: THE 2016 ISOMIL INITIATIVE BY NAHDLATUL ULAMA, INDONESIA

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Abstract:

The role of non-state actors (NSAs) in international relations should be connected to two major theories of IR: liberalism and constructivism. Both theories not only emphasize the importance of cooperation among states but also share a fundamental unit of analysis: human beings. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) of Indonesia, the largest Islamic organization in the world with more than 50 million members, should be recognized as a non-state actor (NSA) capable of playing a significant role in countering one of the most pressing global threats today: terrorism and Islamic radicalism. The International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL), organized by Nahdlatul Ulama in May 2016 in Jakarta and attended by 300 Muslim leaders from more than 30 countries, is particularly interesting to examine in terms of its influence as a major Islamic organization. This paper will discuss the brief history of Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia, its role in combating Islamic radicalism within the country, and its efforts to promote moderate Islam globally through ISOMIL. The aim of this paper is not to idealize the role of non-state actors in comparison to governments or state actors but rather to highlight the significance of their contributions in countering Islamic radicalism through people-to-people engagement in international cooperation.

Keywords : Non State Actor (NSA), Nahdlatul Ulama, ISOMIL, Islamic Radicalism

Introduction :

At the preface of his work, Kegley (2007) stated that in the twenty-first century, much discussion has centered on the prospects of a "new world order," including concerns that terrorism and civil wars might become the defining characteristics of the new millennium. While many people look forward to the promise of a stable global future, others fear the persistence of chronic global instability¹.

In recent years, the emergence of the Islamic State and other radical entities — within Muslim communities — has posed a serious threat to security and regional

¹ Charles W. Kegley, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, 11th ed. (University of South Carolina: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), xix.

stability, not only in the Middle East but also across the world, including Europe and Southeast Asia.

The International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL), organized by Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, in May 2016 in Jakarta, was attended by 300 Muslim leaders from 33 countries. This event is particularly relevant for discussion in relation to the role of non-state actors in combating religious radicalism across nations.

This paper will examine the brief history of Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia, its role in countering Islamic extremism within the country, and its efforts to promote moderate Islam globally through ISOMIL.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:

In general, one of the core principles of the liberal tradition in international thought is a strong faith in human reason. According to liberal theorists, human beings are capable of shaping their own destiny, including influencing international relations and mitigating the negative consequences of the absence of a world government (Jorgensen, 2010)².

After the end of the Cold War, one of the key players in international relations has been the non-governmental organization (NGO), which is considered the most influential non-state actor. An increasing number of NGOs are now addressing economic, social, and cultural rights that extend beyond national borders³.

The study of non-state actors in relation to religious movements can be found in one chapter of Kegley's work, *Nonstate Actors in the System of States*⁴. At the beginning of this chapter, Kegley provides several important quotations, including those from Samuel Huntington and Colin Powell, regarding the role of non-state actors in international politics. As a realist theorist, Huntington stated the following:

There is no reason why, in addition to states, nationalities, diasporas, religious communities, and other groups should not be treated as legitimate actors. In emerging

² Knud Erik Jorgensen, *International Relations Theory: A New Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 57.

³ Chris Jochnick, "Confronting the Impunity of Non-State Actors: New Fields for the Promotion of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1999): 57.

⁴ Charles W. Kegley, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, 11th ed. (University of South Carolina: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 166–214

*global politics, however, state sovereignty and authority are weakening, and no alternative, such as a system of world government, is poised to fill the vacuum*⁵.

In their writings, Louis Turner and Nicholas Dungan stated that during the Cold War, states dominated global events. However, fifteen years later, non-state actors—powerful groups, institutions, and individuals acting independently and on their own behalf—had assumed an influence that was both unexpected and immeasurable. Francis Fukuyama's review of Thomas Risse-Kappen's work noted that transnational actors, from multinational corporations to international non-governmental organizations, have grown in importance since the 1970s and have had an impact in areas ranging from trade policy to security⁶.

Nevertheless, theoretically, the importance of non-state actors (NSAs) in global affairs can be found in Fidler's work on what he calls 'open-source anarchy'⁷. He argues not only that non-state actors can influence the world of ideas, interests, and preferences but also seeks to explain how and why non-state actors have gained material power and what consequences for anarchy arise from developments in international relations⁸.

Furthermore, he provides a key example to support his theory: no better illustration of the growth and use of material power by a non-state actor can be found than the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, whose repeated attacks against the United States have dramatically impacted U.S. national security and foreign policy at every level of government⁹.

Nahdlatul Ulama is the world's largest Muslim organization, founded in January 1926 as a socio-religious movement that later became an effective NGO in community development (Canland, 2000). Nahdlatul Ulama explains its outlook and motivation for community development activities by referring to *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* (the blessing bestowed by Allah upon the entire universe) and *Kulliyat al-Khomsah* (the five principles), which form the basis of its political philosophy¹⁰.

Kulliyat al-Khomsah, derived by Imam Ghazali¹¹ from the Quran and the Hadith, consists of five fundamental rights: the right to religion (*hifdz ad-dien*), the right to

⁵ See Jorgensen, *International Relations Theory*, 167.

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, "Review Work(s)," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (1996): 137.

⁷ David P. Fidler, "A Theory of Open Source Anarchy," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008):

⁸ *Ibid.*, 271

⁹ *Ibid.*, 278

¹⁰ Christopher Candland, "Faith as Social Capital: Religion and Community Development in Southern Asia," *Policy Sciences* 33, no. 3–4 (2000):

¹¹ Imam Ghazali is widely regarded as one of the most influential Muslim scholars after the Prophet Muhammad. Recognized as a Mujaddid (faith renewer), he played a crucial role in shaping Islamic thought. His critiques of early Islamic Neoplatonism led to its decline, while his work bridged orthodox theology (kalam) and Sufism,

independent thought (*hifdz al-'aql*), the right to life (*hifdz an-nafs*), the right to livelihood and profession (*hifdz al-mal*), and the right to family (*hifdz an-nasl*)¹².

Nahdlatul Ulama, which began as a legalistic reaction to Wahhabism and Islamic reform movements, has successfully aligned itself with the non-Muslim nativist traditions of the Indonesian people, particularly in Java. This has contributed to the more nationalistic and, at times, xenophobic aspects of Indonesian nationalism today¹³.

According to Qurtuby (2013), NU today serves as one of Indonesia's leading Muslim institutions, committed not only to preserving the traditional values and practices of Islam but also to promoting citizenship, democratic civility, inter-group conciliation, religious tolerance, and the public good.

The role of Nahdlatul Ulama as an Islamic community contrasts with Fukuyama's argument that Islam, like Christianity, establishes the principle of universal human equality but is often difficult to reconcile with liberalism and the recognition of universal rights, particularly freedom of conscience and religion¹⁴.

Additionally, Nahdlatul Ulama is known for its anti-communist stance and was heavily involved in the elimination of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) during the 1965–1966 period¹⁵.

The International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL), hosted by Nahdlatul Ulama from May 9 to 11, 2016, in Jakarta, produced The Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration, aimed at eliminating Islamic radicalism across Muslim-majority countries.

The Declaration consists of sixteen points. First, Nahdlatul Ulama offers the insights and experience of *Islam Nusantara* (East Indies Islam) to the world as a positive model of Islam—one in which religion contributes to civilization by respecting pre-existing cultures and prioritizing social harmony and peace.

Second, Nahdlatul Ulama does not seek to 'export' Islam Nusantara to other regions. Rather, it invites others to reflect on the beauty and dynamism that emerged from the historic encounter between the spirit and teachings of Islam and local

fostering mutual appreciation between the two. Although some argue that his opposition to certain Islamic philosophies hindered scientific progress, he advocated for the separation of philosophy and science. His contributions earned him the honorific title *Hujjat al-Islam*.

¹²Ibid., 134

¹³ Justus M. Van Der Kroef, "The Role of Islam in Indonesian Nationalism and Politics," *The Western Political Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1958): 53.

¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 217.

¹⁵ Greg Fealy and Katharine McGregor, "Nahdlatul Ulama and the Killings of 1965-66: Religion, Politics, and Remembrance," *Indonesia*, no. 89 (April 2010): 37–60, published by Southeast Asia Program Publications at Cornell University.

cultures worldwide. This synthesis gave birth to numerous great civilizations, including that of the East Indies, or the Malay Archipelago.

Third, Islam Nusantara is not a new or distinct religion. Rather, it is an expression of Islam that naturally flourished amid the culture of Nusantara and does not conflict with Islamic *shari'a*, as understood, taught, and practiced by the traditional *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Sunni Muslim) community worldwide.

Fourth, from the perspective of Islam Nusantara, there is no conflict between religion and nationalism. *Hubbul wathan minal iman* – “Patriotism is integral to faith.” Whoever lacks patriotism either has no native land or is devoid of attachment to it. Those who lack a native land are also devoid of history.

Fifth, within the worldview of Islam Nusantara, Islam does not command its adherents to conquer the world but rather to engage in the continuous development of *akhlaqul karimah* (noble character and virtue). Only through *akhlaqul karimah* can Islam manifest as Divine Grace for all creation.

Sixth, Islam Nusantara firmly upholds and embodies the fundamental teachings and values of Islam, including *tawassuth* (moderation), *tawaazun* (balance and harmony), *tasaamuh* (gentleness and tolerance rather than harshness and coercion), and *i'tidaal* (justice).

Seventh, as the world's largest *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Sunni Muslim) organization, Nahdlatul Ulama shares the concerns of the vast majority of Muslims and non-Muslims regarding the unchecked spread of religious extremism, terrorism, conflict in the Middle East, and the rising tide of Islamophobia in the West.

Eighth, Nahdlatul Ulama regards certain interpretations of Islam (tafsir) as the primary factor contributing to the spread of religious extremism among Muslims.

Ninth, for many decades, various governments in the Middle East have exploited religious differences and historical sectarian conflicts without considering their consequences for humanity. By 'weaponizing' sectarian divisions, these governments have sought to exercise both soft and hard power, exporting their conflicts globally. These sectarian propaganda campaigns have deliberately fostered religious extremism and fueled the spread of terrorism worldwide.

Tenth, the spread of religious extremism and terrorism is directly contributing to the rise of Islamophobia throughout the non-Muslim world.

Eleventh, certain governments in the Middle East derive their political legitimacy from precisely those problematic interpretations of Islam that underlie and animate religious extremism and terror. These governments need to develop an

alternative source of political legitimacy if the world is to overcome the threat of religious extremism and terror.

Twelfth, the Nahdlatul Ulama is prepared to assist in this effort.

Thirteenth, the realities of economic and political injustice also contribute to the spread of religious extremism and terror. Mass poverty and injustice are often cited to legitimize the propaganda narratives of extremist and terrorist groups, both to justify their existence and to make their illusory promises of a better future more appealing to others. Thus, issues of poverty and injustice cannot be separated from any comprehensive effort to address religious extremism and terrorism.

Fourteenth, although the widespread conflicts that afflict countless human beings in the Middle East may seem nearly insoluble, we must not turn our backs on the problem or abandon those who are suffering. The Nahdlatul Ulama urges the Indonesian government to play an active and constructive role in seeking a resolution to the multifaceted crises raging in the Middle East.

Fifteenth, the Nahdlatul Ulama calls upon people of goodwill, regardless of faith or nationality, to join in building a global consensus to prevent the politicization of Islam and to marginalize those who exploit Islam in ways that harm others.

Lastly, the Nahdlatul Ulama will strive to consolidate the global Ahlusunnah wal Jamaah (Sunni Muslim) community in order to foster a world in which Islam and Muslims contribute positively to the well-being of all humanity.

As an outcome of ISOMIL, the Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration will be discussed to generate beneficial strategies for eliminating Islamic radicalism among participating countries.

Analysis: ISOMIL and the Fight Against International Terrorism

What was the significance of ISOMIL in fighting against international terrorism? This question requires some analytical consideration, at least of two aspects: the 'size' of participants from Muslim-majority countries and the output of ISOMIL through the Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration. Both will be examined to determine whether ISOMIL had any significant impact in addressing international terrorism, which Kegley described as "the threat or use of violence as a tactic of terrorism against targets in other countries¹⁶." First, Nahdlatul Ulama and the participants of ISOMIL 2016 represented religious movements from 33 countries. All

¹⁶ Charles W. Kegley, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, 11th ed. (University of South Carolina: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 202

of them aimed to eliminate Islamic radicalism worldwide through international cooperation.

ISOMIL might have significance in terms of the 'size' of its participants, including Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority country, in the fight against international terrorism. Although Islamism and jihadism remain minority phenomena in Indonesia, the threat of terrorist groups still persists latently.

Indonesia, as the most populous Muslim-majority country and the host of ISOMIL, should serve as a model of international cooperation in eliminating Islamic radicalism. In other words, ISOMIL, led by Nahdlatul Ulama, should be seen as a form of self-deterrence by Muslim non-state actors to combat Islamic radicalism through international cooperation.

Today, Islamic radicalism is not only a problem for Western countries targeted by terrorist groups but also for Muslim-majority countries, as terrorism has spread globally. The 2015 Global Terrorism Index highlights that terrorism continues to rise, with the majority of deaths – over 78% – occurring in just five countries, where most of the population is Muslim: Iraq, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria.

The fight against Islamic radicalism led by Muslim-majority countries might be more effective and 'legitimate' because it can be seen as a 'solution from within.' It is important to note that the involvement of Indonesian government officials in ISOMIL could enhance international cooperation in the fight against terrorism through Indonesia's foreign policy. Hudson (2014) described how national attributes may influence foreign policy decisions¹⁷.

National attributes often include elements such as natural resources, geography, size, and population characteristics¹⁸. As the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world, Indonesia has Nahdlatul Ulama – widely recognized as the largest Islamic organization in the world – which hosted ISOMIL in 2016. This should further legitimize ISOMIL among Muslim-majority countries as a platform to strengthen international cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

The discussion on international cooperation in combating terrorism can be found in one chapter, *Confronting the New Terrorism*, in Neumann's book. He stated that the era of new terrorism requires greater and more demanding interaction with foreign countries. Furthermore, he explained that international cooperation on counterterrorism issues will continue to rely on informal and ad hoc forums.

¹⁷ Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 162

In this regard, ISOMIL, organized by Nahdlatul Ulama, functioned as an informal forum, and The Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration became an important document representing non-state actors from Muslim-majority countries in the effort to eliminate Islamic radicalism and terrorism.

Second, the output of ISOMIL – The Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration – should serve as a tool to measure the significance of this event. Four out of the sixteen points in The Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration of ISOMIL explicitly address the intention to eliminate Islamic radicalism and terrorism through Islamic insights and teachings. These points are the ninth to the twelfth.

ISOMIL criticized various governments in the Middle East for exploiting religious differences and historical sectarian enmities as propaganda for religious extremism, thereby stimulating the spread of terrorism worldwide. ISOMIL also warned that the spread of religious extremism and terrorism is directly contributing to the rise of Islamophobia in non-Muslim societies.

Furthermore, ISOMIL highlighted that certain governments in the Middle East derive their political legitimacy from problematic interpretations of Islam that fuel religious extremism and terrorism. It emphasized that these governments must develop an alternative source of political legitimacy if the world is to overcome the threat of religious extremism and terror.

Theoretically, religion would seem to be a natural worldwide force for global unity and harmony¹⁹. However, Kegley posed an important question: Are religious movements causes of war or sources of transnational harmony?

He argued that while many believe terrorist attacks are motivated by religious fanatics within Islamic global terrorist organizations, the world's major religions advocate universal principles of peaceful relations among people. The former represents Islamic radicalism, while the latter represents moderate Muslims.

In this regard, ISOMIL might represent the existence of moderate Muslims who seek to spread peaceful Islam.

ISOMIL also promoted the fundamental teachings and values of Islam, including *tawassuth* (following the middle path, i.e., the path of moderation), *tawaazun* (balance; harmony), *tasaamuh* (gentle and loving rather than harsh and violent behavior, i.e., tolerance rather than compulsion), and *i'tidaal* (justice), to counter Islamic radicalism and extremist teachings.

The discussion on the connection between Islamic radicalism and 'holy texts' is crucial in understanding why and how radical Islamist movements, including jihadist

¹⁹ Charles W. Kegley, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, 11th ed. (University of South Carolina: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 195

terrorist groups within Muslim-majority countries, emerge. In highlighting this issue, David C. Rapoport, in his chapter *A Contemporary Example from Islam*, examined the Egyptian terrorist group Al Jihad, which justified its actions using a 'holy text' called *Al-Faridah al-Gha'ibah* (The Neglected Duty). This text advocated for Egypt to be governed by Islamic sacred law (*shari'a*)²⁰.

In Indonesia, Aman Abdurrahman, known as a central figure of Al-Qaeda Indonesia and a supporter of ISIS, has been spreading extremist ideology from Nusakambangan Prison. He has used 'holy texts' such as the Takfiri Doctrine²¹ to recruit jihadist terrorists among Indonesian Muslims. He also authored a series of *tauhid* (monotheism) materials, including *Tauhid for Greatest Happiness* and *Tauhid and Jihad*, totaling 177 pages. These writings function as ideological texts and key tools for indoctrinating Islamic radicals and fundamentalists in Indonesia.

Marty (1998) stated that religious fundamentalism is inherently anti-evolutionary and anti-developmental. In relation to religious texts, fundamentalism is consistently anti-hermeneutical, resisting interpretative approaches that allow for contextual understanding.

Fundamentalists, whether militant or not, uniformly see themselves as agents of a sacred power, person, or force that gives life to their group. The participants of ISOMIL could promote Islamic moderation values to counter fundamentalists in their respective countries, particularly by producing counter-narratives to challenge extremist interpretations of holy texts.

Conclusion:

Theoretically, non-state actors, including religious movements, have recognition in international affairs. Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization, has become a model of a moderate Islamic group that can play a constructive role in international relations.

ISOMIL should be seen as a symbol of the Muslim community's fight against terrorism. The fight against Islamic radicalism led by Muslim-majority countries might be more effective and legitimate because it represents a 'solution from within.' The Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration was an important document issued by non-state

²⁰ Walter Reich, *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, State of Mind* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1990).

²¹ Rendy A. Witular, "The Rise of Aman Abdurrahman, IS Master Ideologue," *The Jakarta Post*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/01/25/the-rise-aman-abdurrahman-is-master-ideologue.html>.

actors from Muslim-majority countries in the effort to eliminate Islamic radicalism and terrorism.

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