Current Trends
IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

VOLUME 30

April 2022

■ HOW CHINA COOPTED TURKEY TO FORSAKE THE UYGHURS
   Mustafa Akyol

■ MAKING SENSE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE’S WAR ON THE AFGHAN TALIBAN
   Abdul Sayed, Charlie Winter, and Pieter Van Ostaeyen

■ TANZANIA AND THE POLITICAL CONTAINMENT OF TERROR
   Peter Bofin

■ THE RISE OF “WOKE” ISLAMISM IN THE WEST
   Lorenzo Vidino

■ THE CIVILIZATIONAL ORIGINS OF INDONESIA’S NAHDLATUL ULAMA AND ITS HUMANITARIAN ISLAM MOVEMENT
   K. H. Yahya Cholil Staquf and C. Holland Taylor

■ NUSANTARA ISLAM: SEEKING A NEW BALANCE IN THE MUSLIM WORLD
   Rumadi Ahmad

Hudson Institute
Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World
Current Trends
IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

VOLUME 30

Edited by
Hillel Fradkin,
Husain Haqqani,
Eric Brown,
and James Barnett

Hudson Institute
Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World
ABOUT HUDSON INSTITUTE

Hudson Institute is a nonpartisan, independent policy research organization dedicated to innovative research and analysis that promotes global security, prosperity, and freedom. Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law. With offices in Washington and New York, Hudson seeks to guide public policymakers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings, and recommendations. Hudson Institute is a 501(c)(3) organization financed by tax-deductible contributions from private individuals, corporations, foundations, and by government grants.

Visit www.hudson.org for more information.

ABOUT THE CENTER ON ISLAM, DEMOCRACY, AND THE FUTURE OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

Hudson Institute’s Center on Islam conducts a wide-ranging program of research and analysis addressed to the political, religious, social, and other dynamics within majority Muslim countries and Muslim populations around the world. A principal focus of the Center’s work is the ideological dynamic within Islam and the connected issue of how this political and religious debate impacts both Islamic radicalism and the Muslim search for moderate and democratic alternatives. Through its research, which includes collaboration with partners throughout the Muslim world and elsewhere, the Center aims to contribute to the development of effective policy options and strategies to win the worldwide struggle against radical Islam.

For more information, visit www.CurrentTrends.org
Contents

How China Co-opted Turkey to Forsake the Uyghurs / 5
Mustafa Akyol

Making Sense of the Islamic State’s War / 19
on the Afghan Taliban
Abdul Sayed, Charlie Winter,
and Pieter Van Ostaeyen

Tanzania and the Political Containment of Terror / 35
Peter Bofin

The Rise of “Woke” Islamism in the West / 57
Lorenzo Vidino

The Civilizational Origins of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul / 76
Ulama and its Humanitarian Islam Movement
K. H. Yahya Cholil Staquf
and C. Holland Taylor

Nusantara Islam: Seeking a New Balance / 95
in the Muslim World
Rumadi Ahmad
How China Coopted Turkey to Forsake the Uyghurs

By Mustafa Akyol

On Jan 7, 2021, Daily Sabah, one of Turkey’s largest newspapers, came out with a full-page story penned by the Chinese ambassador to Ankara, Liu Shaobin: “The Century-Old Glorious History of the Chinese Communist Party and Its Codes of Success.” It was an ode to the “miracles” of the CCP, decorated with a commanding photo of President Xi, another photo showing China’s technological progress, and smiling kids. It also included a strong emphasis on the CCP’s determination to advance “the Chinese-Turkish strategic relationship.”

What made this unabashed Chinese propaganda especially notable is that Daily Sabah is no ordinary paper: It is the “flagship” of Turkey’s pro-Erdoğan media empire, which had grown aggressively in the past decade, devouring and transforming what used to be independent newspapers and TV stations. So, whatever appears in this media, in particular Sabah, is not mere news and opinion. It rather reflects the attitudes and strategies of Turkey’s current regime.

Those who are familiar with Turkey’s trajectory would probably not have a hard time deciphering the attitude and strategy in question here. Because, as a Turkish academic observed, since the mid 2010s, there has been a “blossoming of Turkey’s relations with China... against the backdrop of Turkey’s apparent strategic estrangement from the West.” This was, in part, based on pragmatic grounds,
as cooperation with China, the world’s rising economic power, came with obvious benefits. But there was also an ideological element: After the mass anti-government protests and a politically motivated corruption investigation that shook him in 2013, Erdoğan became convinced of a Western conspiracy targeting his rule. So, he began seeking out non-Western allies. Russia and China were the obvious options—and they seemed willing to lure Turkey to their side, too.

In the same period, Erdoğan’s propaganda machine began to praise Turkey’s detachment from the West as “full independence.” But this “road from Brussels to Shanghai,” as I put it back in 2016, rather implied dependence on Russia and China. The latter, especially, had ambitious demands from Turkey, which was made obvious by none other than Turkey’s foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, during an official visit to Beijing in Aug 2017, where he said:

> We’ll regard China’s security as our own security. We’ll never allow any activities that threaten China’s sovereignty and security on our territory or the region we are in. We’ll eliminate any media reports targeting China.

Arguably, the first promise above—that Turkey would respect China’s sovereignty and security—was fair. All countries expect that from each other. But the second promise—that Turkey would “eliminate any media reports targeting China”—was bizarre, as democratic countries don’t ask for such censorship from each other. Yet apparently the Turkey of 2017 was gearing towards a new club—a club of dictatorships—which had its own peculiar rules.

One wonders: What were those “media reports” in Turkey that could possibly “target China”? What could they be about?

“The Ethnic Policy in Xinjiang”

An article in The Global Times, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, gave the answer openly in an Aug 2018 editorial on “China-Turkey ties.” These ties should get better, the editors noted, but:

> What’s most unacceptable is that Turkey was adding fuel to the Xinjiang question. Some elements in Turkey encouraged separatist
sentiment, helped some radicals from Xinjiang illicitly enter the Middle East, and made irresponsible remarks on the ethnic policy in Xinjiang.5

So, Turkey had to silence those domestic “elements” that opposed “the ethnic policy in Xinjiang,” or the Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwestern China. This was exactly the time when Beijing was elevating its persecution of Uyghurs to a genocidal level: Labor camps were established, hundreds of thousands were being enslaved, and a policy of enforced abortion and sterilization was gaining steam. Meanwhile, reports beginning to appear in Western media on why “China Is Treating Islam Like a Mental Illness,” and how “China Is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers.”6

If Turkey’s leadership took these reports seriously, Turkey could have emerged as the global champion of the Uyghur cause. That is because, historically, Turkey used to be the key champion of the Uyghur cause. This is mainly due to cultural and historical ties. Uyghurs are a “Turkic” people, which means they share an ethnic origin with the Turkish-speaking people of modern-day Turkey. Their language is largely intelligible to Turks, and their tradition of Sunni Islam—Hanafism, with Sufi influences—is also similar to that of Turkey. Turkey is also the host of the second largest Uyghur diaspora after Kazakhstan, and used to be the base of the Uyghur opposition in exile, founded by Uyghurs who fled China after the Maoist Revolution. That is why, growing up in Turkey’s Islamic and nationalist circles, I repeatedly heard about the persecution of “our brothers in East Turkestan.” (The latter is the common term in Turkey for what China calls “Xinjiang,” or “new territory.”)

Thanks to these deep cultural and religious ties, in 2009, the then Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan had emerged as the most vocal champion of the Uyghurs, when China suppressed the riots in Ürümqi with brutality. Then Erdoğan, in his typically hyperbolic tone, went as far as condemning Beijing for “genocide.”7 But it was a very different time with a very different Erdoğan: Turkey was on a promising path to join the European union, and Erdoğan was still gaining credit in Western capitals as a “moderate Islamist” accomplishing liberal reforms.

Yet the same Erdoğan would not say anything significant, to date, in the late 2010s when China initiated a real genocide against Uyghurs. Quite the contrary, when he visited Beijing in July 2019, the Chinese state media reported that he said: “It is a fact that the people of all ethnicities in Xinjiang are leading a happy life amid China’s development and prosperity.” In the face of reactions, Turkish officials noted that the paraphrase was “mistranslated,” and what Erdoğan meant
was “hopes that the peoples of China’s Xinjiang live happily in peace and prosperity.” In any case, it was painfully clear that Erdoğan was extremely careful to not offend China.

Agent-Provocateurs Against Turkey

At this time, there also emerged “reports” in Turkey’s pro-Erdoğan media suggesting that the Uyghurs were doing perfectly fine—and all the reports about their persecution was nothing but Western lies. A first sign was a headline in daily Star in July 2015, which condemned “provocateurs that target Turkish-China relations by using allegations about East Turkistan.” In 2019, a reporter from ATV, the TV network of the Sabah group, visited Xinjiang on a trip arranged by Chinese authorities, only to report back that Uyghurs are quite happy and the only problem is “capitalist and imperialist propaganda” against China. Around the same time, the editor-in-chief of Yeni Şafak, an infamously creative conspiracy theorist, wrote, “the Uyghur campaign is a CIA operation.”

This was, apparently, a common view among pro-Erdoğan Islamists, as Akif Beki, a former-Erdoğan-advisor-turned-critic, put in his column in daily Karar, one of the few remaining independent newspapers in Turkey. “There are those who see the critics of China as agent-provocateurs against Turkey,” Beki wrote in Jan 2019, with astonishment. “There are government propagandists who justify China-style fascism.”

To be fair, Turkish authorities also have made some remarks in favor of Uyghurs. First, in Feb 2019, the Turkish foreign ministry posted a written statement “regarding serious human rights violations perpetrated against Uighur Turks.” Soon after, government spokesman Ömer Çelik voiced “concern” over Uyghurs’ plight in China.” In March 2021, when his Chinese counterpart visited Ankara, Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu this time noted that he conveyed “our sensitivity and thoughts on Uighur Turks.” And in April 2021, when the Chinese ambassador in Ankara lashed out against two Turkish opposition politicians who spoke on behalf of Uyghurs, Ankara summoned the ambassador, “in a rare show of displeasure with Beijing.”

My sense is that these measured official declarations of concern about Uyghurs was the government’s effort to “do something,” or at least appear so, in the light of growing public awareness in Turkey—especially in some Islamic and nationalist
circles—about the ongoing brutality against Uyghurs. A Turkish analyst, Selçuk Çolakoğlu, makes the same point when he reminds that the Turkish foreign ministry statement mentioned above came only after “opposition parties, primarily the nationalist Iyi [Good] Party and the Islamist Saadet [Felicity] Party, initiated a public campaign in early 2019 to support Turkic Muslim minorities in China and put pressure on Turkey’s ruling coalition.” Moreover, the government may have responded to this pressure right at that time, because it was the wake of the local elections of March 31, 2019—the latest Turkish elections to date.

Yet, at the same time, the same government took great pains to keep Beijing unoffended, as Uyghur activist Kuzzat Altay put in a piece on “Why Erdoğan Has Abandoned the Uyghurs”:

Most Uyghurs have found it much harder to get resident permits or citizenship after 2014. They can’t make a living but risk being interned if they go back to Xinjiang. China also refused to renew their passports. Gradually, a Turkish government that was supposed to offer them freedom is now raiding Uyghur homes, arresting hundreds of people, and coordinating deportations with Beijing.17

This make-China-happy policy included the banning of rallies and demonstrations in Ankara, the Turkish capital, or Istanbul. In March 2021, during a visit to Ankara by the Chinese foreign minister, the longtime leader of the Uyghur cause in Turkey, Seyit Tümtürk, was put under house arrest, using pandemic lockdowns as a pretext.18 Apparently, the promise the Turkish foreign minister gave in Beijing 2017—that no anti-China “activity” or “report” would be allowed in Turkey—was still valid four years later.

The Rise of Turkish Maoists

It is not an accident that during the Erdoğan regime’s rapprochement with China, an unexpected political figure in Turkey gained new power and prestige: Doğu Perinçek, the founder of Turkish Maoism, a life-long anti-American and anti-NATO polemicist, and the leader of a small political faction: Patriotic Party, which was formerly named Worker’s Party, whose slogan read, “Independence, Revolution, Socialism!”
The interesting irony is that in the early 2010s, when Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) seemed to be on the path to the European Union, Perinçek was among their fiercest opponents. He was even arrested and jailed in 2008, in the “Ergenekon” investigation spearheaded by a clique which was then the AKP’s best ally: the “Gülenists,” or the followers of the self-exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, who had a covert network within the police, judiciary and military. But in early 2014, the decade-old alliance between the AKP and the Gülenists turned into a deadly enmity, marking a political earthquake that led to new political alignments. Soon, Perinçek went out of jail, sided with the AKP, condemned Gülenists as a Trojan Horse of “imperialism,” and began advocating, “No US, no EU, just fully independent Turkey.”

In this post-2014 period, despite their miniscule electoral support (0.23 percent, according to 2018 general elections) Perinçek and his Patriotic Party became an implicit ally of Erdoğan’s “People’s Alliance,” formerly established between the AKP and the far-right MHP (Nationalist Action Party.) Perinçek regularly appeared in the pro-Erdoğan media, and praised the “golden age of Turkish judiciary,” at a time when it became a draconian handmaiden of an authoritarian executive.¹⁹ (There were even rumors of a pro-Perinçek clique in the judiciary.) To those who are surprised by this convergence, Perinçek gave an explanation which was arguably accurate: “Erdoğan came to our side, not that we went to his side.”²⁰ In 2019, he also stated, “We are a partner of the government, we are partly steering it.”²¹

It also seems that the Maoist veteran has used this newfound prestige in Erdoğan’s “New Turkey” to drive it further towards China, where he visited to speak at state-organized conferences as a “special guest.” His newspaper, Aydınlık, routinely published stories denying the persecution of Uyghurs as “imperialist lies.”²² What China is really doing, Aydınlık also kept arguing, is “Enlightenment mobilization, as in our Atatürk Revolution.”²³ Such Kemalist language—including Perinçek’s vocal atheism—could normally irk Turkey’s Islamic conservatives. Yet instead, Perinçek received praises from some prominent Islamic figures in the pro-Erdoğan camp, such as popular tele-imam Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü, as a genuine “patriot.”²⁴
A Silver Lining: The Turkish Opposition

It is no surprise that in the face of such subservience to China by the Erdoğan regime, it is Turkey’s opposition parties who have stood up for the Uyghurs. These include the main opposition CHP (the longtime standard-bearer of secularism), the second largest Good Party (a new claimant for Turkish nationalism), the small Islamist Saadet (Felicity) Party, as well as two new parties founded by former AKP ministers disillusioned by Erdoğan: Deva (Remedy) Party and Gelecek (Future) Party.

The Good Party, led by its charismatic female leader Meral Akşener, is especially important. The party represents mainstream Turkish nationalism, which has always had a heart for the “oppressed Turks” abroad, including the Uyghurs. It was founded in 2017, as a splinter group from the Nationalist Action Party, whose longtime leader, Devlet Bahçeli, consolidated his alliance with Erdoğan. Since then, Akşener’s party emerged as a new voice in Turkey, at times disturbingly nativist (against Syrian refugees, for example), but also helpfully defiant against the authoritarianism and corruption of those in power.

The Good Party also took a notable step in March 2021, by calling for a parliamentary motion “to investigate the inhumane and cruel acts of the People’s Republic of China against the Uyghur people.” But the Turkish parliament denied this appeal by the votes of—guess whom—Erdoğan’s AKP. A month before, Meral Akşener also gave her platform to an Uyghur activist, Nursima Abduraşid, who told about the plight of her family and her people to Turkish parliament. Yet while Abduraşid was speaking, TBMM TV, the official channel parliament of the Turkish parliament, stopped its broadcast.25 (It is a channel controlled by, of course, the AKP.)

In December 2021, the Good Party also launched The Human Rights Report on China Uyghur Autonomous Region, which may be the most significant study of Uyghur genocide published in any-Muslim majority country so far.26 Prepared by four analysts and published in four different languages (English, Turkish, Uyghur and Chinese) the 108-page report is really a must-read for anyone who wants to understand what China is actually doing to Uyghurs. With “interviews conducted with 53 persons, some of whom are directly victims of concentration camps,” chilling details are told: torture and rape in the camps, organ harvesting
from deceased inmates, destruction of mosques, banning of religious practices, “Sinicization” of Uyghur children seized from their families, forced sterilizations, compulsory birth control and abortions, and a totalitarian control over millions of people.

In the last days of 2021, I spoke to one of the authors of the report, Hüseyin Raşit Yılmaz, a Turkish analyst based in Ankara. He was genuinely saddened and revulsed by the torment of the Uyghurs, and was hoping that his report would help bring more attention to it both in Turkey and the world. I asked him why Erdoğan’s AKP has been so silent on this burning tragedy—despite their claim to be the defenders of the oppressed Muslims around the world. His answer was, “China is good at buying silence.” The “AKP politburo,” he also explained, had long decided to cozy up with China for “economic reasons.” Meanwhile, he said, the party’s rank-and-file had three lines of thinking:

The first group believes, “If something needs to be said, Erdoğan will say it,” and nothing else matters. The second group believes, “China may be doing some wrongs to the Uyghurs, but Western powers have their own game against China and we will not join them. The third group has not even heard about the plight of Uyghurs—as the pro-government media that they follow says not much about it.

Yılmaz also believed that Turkey would not take a strong stance for the Uyghurs as long as the AKP was in power. But if the opposition were to come to power—which he sees as a real possibly in the next general elections scheduled for 2023—Turkish policy and rhetoric could change “180 degrees.” Turkey could be, in other words, free from subservience to China.

Such a potential shift was also signaled by the leader of the Future Party, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who used to be an ally of Erdoğan as his prime minister until the in-party purge in 2016. In Dec 2021, Davutoğlu publicly defied “those in Ankara, who pretend to be the defender of the oppressed, although their hearts and consciences have turned silent against this persecution.” “Enough,” he called on to them, “raise your voice.” And the best way to do that, he added, would be to boycott the Beijing Olympics.27
A Trouble Beyond Turkey

THE ERDOĞAN REGIME’S STANCE ON THE FACE OF UYGHUR GENOCIDE IS TRAGIC. But it is also emblematic of a much larger problem in the whole Muslim world. That’s because Turkey is not the only Muslim-majority country that has decided to turn a blind eye to China’s cruelty against Muslims. Quite the contrary, the blindness seems to be the norm. In fact, Turkey has done much better than those who went out of their way to explicitly support China. Among these are Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen, who all signed a lavishly pro-China declaration at the United Nations General Assembly in October 2020. They praised China’s “response to threats of terrorism and extremism,” and even supported actions taken to “safeguard the human rights of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang.”  

Why is this the case? Why are virtually all Muslim leaders so negligent of the Uyghurs—when many of them never mince words about other “oppressed Muslims” elsewhere?

I believe there are three reasons. One is economic: friendship with China, the world’s second-largest economic power, is not easy to risk. China is the top trading partner of 20 of the 57 member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, a huge path of commercial and transportation infrastructure intended to pass through much of the Middle East, offers big opportunities for many Muslim nations. There are also countries already deeply reliant on China, such as Pakistan, especially in its historical rivalry with India. So, it is not a matter of mere opportunism, but also obligation. As the former ambassador of the United States to Beijing, Terry Branstad, put it fairly, many Muslim countries are just “too intimidated by China’s economic, military strength.”

The second reason is political: most Muslim nations are ruled by autocratic states. These regimes are frequently criticized by Western media, NGOs, and sometimes governments for their human rights violations. In return, these regimes depict—and probably really perceive—these criticisms as nefarious lies, if not heinous conspiracies. They also say that it should be nobody’s business to criticize their “domestic affairs.” Which is all exactly what China is saying about the “U.S. conspiracy behind the Xinjiang allegations.” In other words, while justifying its brutality with a language of sovereignty, China is speaking a language that Muslim autocrats know well, use well, and also probably believe in.
The third reason is ideological: For more than a century, Islamic movements around the world, especially in the Middle East, have perceived “the West” as the main adversary. That is due to geostrategic confrontations such as European colonialism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and more lately the excessive “War on Terror” after 9/11. It is also due to cultural tensions, such as the Western advocacy of secular governance, individual freedom, or women’s rights, which Islamists or even traditional conservatives perceive as the main challenge to Islam in the modern world. In the meantime, non-Western powers are often seen as allies or at least lesser evils.

This ideological bias has led to the demonization of the Western civilization in darkest terms, creating an “Islamist Occidentalism”—a mirror image of the “Orientalism” that Muslims often complain about. It is unmistakable in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where, since the 1979 revolution, the United States has been the “great Satan,” “Westoxification” has been the worst sin, and the regime has incessantly advocated for the mustazaf (“the oppressed”) who are defined, exclusively, as the victims of Western powers or Israel.

A similarly Occidentalist narrative has become dominant in Erdoğan’s Turkey, too, despite the country’s continued presence in Western institutions such as NATO and the Council of Europe. As early as 2014, speaking of the West, Erdoğan said: “They want us dead, they like seeing our children die.” Two years later, he also made it clear that he believed in the opposite of what “the West” says: During an official visit to Belarus, he praised the Lukashenko dictatorship, only to add, “If they [Westerners] call somebody a dictator, that person is good in my eyes.”

That is also why Turkey’s pro-Erdoğan media often shares good news about a post-Western world. Erdoğan’s statements on how the “centuries-old hegemony of West is over” are carried to headlines, while pro-regime intellectuals impatiently ask, “Who is going to strike the final blow on Western hegemony? China or Turkey?”

The blindspot in all such excited gushing about a post-Western world is the presumption that non-Western powers will somehow be better for Muslims, as well as the rest of humanity. China’s genocide against the Muslim Uyghurs clearly goes against this presumption—and that is precisely why, it seems, it is being ignored.
What is Really Good for Muslims?

As a Muslim myself, here is my take: a post-Western world, where powers such as China and Russia will be more assertive and definitive, may indeed be good news for Muslim autocrats: It will be a world where economic benefits will flow without any questions about human rights. These autocrats will be able to crush their dissidents, and dominate their societies, in a system where state sovereignty is the highest value and the ideas of Carl Schmitt, the notorious German political thinker who helped inspire the rise of Nazism, once again sets the tone.33

One can say that many Muslim autocrats already crush their domestic opponents, while Western capitals hypocritically look the other way, prioritizing their narrow interests. That is a very valid and important criticism. But the very basis of this criticism is the liberal values that the West at least claims to uphold: human rights, freedom of speech, democracy, rule of law. Thanks to the same values, hypocrisies of Western governments are routinely criticized by their own civil society, media, and ordinary citizens. And thanks to these criticisms, policies may change, violations may be checked, wrongs may be corrected. Yet when a fully authoritarian and highly technologically advanced state like China turns against a minority, such as Uyghurs and other Muslims, there is nothing to stop it: the CCP does not recognize any value above the state, nor does it allow any criticism of the state. It silences criticism, with its long arms, even abroad.

For comparison, look at France. In the 2010s, the country was targeted by a series of terrorist attacks by Islamist militants affiliated with ISIS or Al-Qaeda. In return, in February 2021, the French government passed a controversial law against “Islamist separatism,” which allows closing down mosques or religious organizations for “hate speech,” limiting home-schooling, or banning foreign funding. Such measures, besides other deep-seated religious liberty deficits of French secularism such as bans on “religious symbols,” have been criticized by many, including myself.34

Yet none of these French measures are comparable to what China is doing to the Uyghurs, which were also sparked by a terrorist threat, albeit a less severe and in fact much exaggerated one. French Muslims are not enslaved and tortured in concentration camps, criminalized for merely fasting in Ramadan, or separated from their children who end up in state “orphanages.”

That is why Muslims who are understandably worried about Islamophobia in France, and other Western liberal democracies, should also wake up to the much
greater threat on the other side of the planet: China shows what horrors can come from a totalitarian regime which adopts Islamophobia as state policy. It also shows that the same totalitarian regime can buy the silence, if not the compliance or sycophancy, of Muslim governments around the world. It shows a dark dystopian future that we Muslims should really worry out—and stand up against.

NOTES


27. Post in Ahmet Davutoğlu’s official Twitter account: https://twitter.com/Ahmet_Davutoglu/status/1471078701559435267?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.


18 CURRENT TRENDS IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY / VOL. 30
On September 18, 2021, the Islamic State’s affiliate in Afghanistan, which calls itself wilayat khurasan (literally, “Khurasan Province,” hence the label “ISKP”), simultaneously bombed seven Taliban positions in the city of Jalalabad, Nangarhar province, in eastern Afghanistan. These attacks kick-started its months-long campaign to destabilize the Taliban’s new government, which had been established in early September following the fall of Kabul on August 15. Between September and January, ISKP had deployed some 136 operations as part of this campaign, with 96 of them targeting Taliban officials or security forces. Given that, across the same period the previous year, it launched just 46 attacks, with only two targeting the Taliban, this made for a stark escalation in its operations in Afghanistan.

Through this surge in attacks, ISKP has been attempting to degrade the Taliban’s new regime by denying it the ability to claim that it has brought an end to war in Afghanistan. ISKP’s aim is not, in the near term at least, to overthrow the Taliban
government; rather, it is trying to assert itself as a lasting powerbroker in this “new” Afghanistan and, in the process, demonstrate its strategic resolve and capabilities. Moreover, its anti-Taliban stance is a way to assert its “righteous” rejection of al-Qa’eda’s (at least nominal) allegiance to the Taliban’s supreme leader. The fact is that violence is the only way the Islamic State can respond to the relationship between al-Qa’eda and the Taliban—which, even if only symbolic, implicitly denies its doctrinal legitimacy as a self-proclaimed caliphate.

Figure 1: ISKP attacks in Afghanistan following the Taliban’s victory in Kabul (August 15, 2021 to March 14, 2022). Notice the operational pause immediately before ISKP’s September campaign.

Figure 2: Map of ISKP attacks since September 18, 2021, when its new campaign was launched.
To these ends, ISKP has gone to great lengths to destabilize the newly incumbent Taliban. In October 2021, for example, it targeted the funeral prayers of the mother of Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid and in early November it launched a complex suicide assault on Kabul’s largest military hospital, leaving one of the Taliban’s senior-most military commanders dead. While neither of these targets is strictly out of bounds in terms of what is theologically permissible (according to the Islamic State’s telling of jihad), they are both controversial, and, accordingly, it would appear that ISKP has been trying to push the boundaries of its war to the limits and provoke an outsized and ultimately counterproductive reaction from the Taliban.

Whatever the outcome and impact of its recent operations, ISKP appears to have a single overarching strategy in mind: to act as a roadblock to the Taliban’s efforts to transition from insurgent force to conventional state and, in doing so, provoke more coercive and indiscriminate policies towards Afghanistan’s Salafist community, ISKP’s principal recruitment pool. The more it succeeds in this, the more appealing its brand and the better its strategic prospects in the region.

However, while important, these pragmatic concerns are not the only reason behind ISKP’s war with the Taliban. Rather, at the heart of this conflict is a religio-political rivalry that has been playing out since the 1980s, a rivalry that, while indigenous to Afghanistan, has been shaped and in many ways defined by the global war between the Islamic State and al-Qa’eda. In this article, we explore the evolution of this conflict, identifying its historical and ethnoreligious foundations, tracking how it has been impacted by the global Salafi-jihadist “civil war,” and assessing what that means for Afghanistan today.

The Arab Afghans and the Emergence of Internecine Rivalry

While ISKP and the Taliban are ideologically similar in a number of ways, they are doctrinally distinct. ISKP is (at least nominally) Salafist in orientation, while the Taliban is Deobandi-Hanafi. One of the principal doctrinal differences between Salafists and Hanafis relates to the issue of taqlid, or the notion that Muslims should follow one particular school of jurisprudence. Hard-line adherents of Salafism are generally against the belief that Muslims should follow one
particular *imam*, declaring this practice a source of discord that divides the *ummah* (Islamic community) and limits Muslims from “properly” practicing Islam.¹ Hanafis, on the other hand, explicitly call for Muslims to adopt the theological positions of the eighth-century imam Abu Hanifa.²

That being said, violent conflict between Salafist and Hanafi Muslims is by no means inevitable; it is Salafi-jihadism that gives rise to that. Not all Salafists are Salafi-jihadist (although all supporters of ISKP are). Generally, Salafists are against *khuruj* (violent revolt or rebellion) against Muslim rulers and, as part of this, exert great caution when engaging in politics and especially when applying the doctrine of *takfir* (excommunication). By contrast, Salafi-jihadists, especially supporters of the Islamic State, engage in *takfir* liberally, using it against Sunni Muslim opponents to simultaneously delegitimize and justify violence against them.

Despite this important distinction between Salafism and Salafi-jihadism, these dynamics mean that while ISKP has in the past had some attraction to wayward members of the Deobandi-Hanafi Taliban, its principal recruitment pool in Afghanistan has historically been the country’s Salafist community. Accordingly, to understand ISKP’s place in Afghanistan today, we have to first understand the history of Afghan Salafism.

Afghanistan’s Salafist community dates back to the mid-nineteenth century and the time of Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi and Shah Ismail Shahid.³ However, the community blossomed in the 1980s with the arrival of Arab foreign fighters who had travelled to the country in order to fight against the Soviet Red Army. These fighters were relatively few in number, but their influence and capabilities were disproportionate, mainly on account of the backing they received from wealthy Salafist donors in the Arabian Peninsula. With time, certain aspects of the then-diverse Afghan resistance fell into their orbit, something that eventually gave rise to the establishment of the first-ever Afghan Salafist militant group, *Jama‘at Da’wa li-l-Qur’an w-al-Sunna* (JDQS) in 1985.⁴ JDQS’s operations were almost exclusively confined to the northeastern provinces of Kunar and Nuristan, where, in May 1990,⁵ Shaykh Jamil al-Rahman, the group’s leader, declared an Islamic emirate, establishing the first ever militant Salafist pseudo-state in modern history.⁶

In the wake of this grandiose declaration, JDQS’s prospects soon soured. Just over a year after its establishment, it was routed and ultimately eliminated by the then largest Afghan mujahidin faction, the Hanafi-dominated Hizb-i-Islami Hikmatyar (HIK). Just a few weeks after the group’s demise, an Egyptian foreign fighter assassinated Shaykh Jamil in August 1991 on the grounds that he had caused discord in the ranks of the foreign mujahidin.⁷

The JDQS episode was a cautionary tale for Afghanistan’s Salafist community,
which reacted to the group's demise by focusing on more apolitical and non-militant approaches to propagating Salafism in the region. In the years that followed, Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's north-western Khyber Pukhtunkhawa province (which is adjacent to Kunar and Nangarhar in Afghanistan), became a center of gravity for Afghan Salafists. There, with foreign backing, they founded several large and comparatively well-resourced seminaries specifically with a view to popularizing Salafism among the large Afghan refugee population that resided there due to the Soviet invasion. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, hundreds of Afghans graduated annually from these seminaries before travelling back across the border to Afghanistan to proselytise.

In this manner, the propagation of the Salafist community in Afghanistan remained largely unfettered until the Taliban took control of the country in 1995. As mentioned above, the Taliban is mostly composed of Deobandi-Hanafis. Consequently, its rank-and-file and leadership opposed the rise of Salafist Islam in Afghanistan. Once in power, the Taliban thus banned Salafist seminaries across the country, along with several books that were fundamental to Salafism, alleging that they were “deviant.” This crackdown caused a rift between the Salafists and the Taliban, something that prompted several prominent Salafist activists and foundations to start publishing propaganda materials that set out to challenge the credentials of the Taliban’s new Islamic emirate. These materials, which framed the Taliban as a “deviant” group of “grave-worshiping polytheists” who had banned “real” Islam in Afghanistan, became popular in Islamist networks worldwide, including among wealthy donor-activists in the Arabian Peninsula, some of whom were important backers of the Taliban. It was at around this time that the Taliban doubled down on—and began to instrumentalize—its hitherto ambiguous relationship with al-Qa’eda.

The Taliban and Salafi-Jihadists: From Marriage of Convenience to Cooptation

THE PERCEPTION ISSUES FROM WHICH THE TALIBAN SUFFERED BECAUSE OF ITS Salafist detractors, which were at risk of damaging its popularity among donors in the Arabian Peninsula, were by no means the only thing that drove it to firm up its
alliance with al-Qa’eda in the late 1990s. However, they were a prominent factor. Besides the numerous political, military, and economic benefits that the Taliban could accrue by hosting the al-Qa’eda network in Afghanistan—which was itself a critical source of funding and, by some accounts, military support—there were other, more cynical motivations at play. By agreeing to host foreign Salafi-jihadists (many but not all of them associated with al-Qa’eda), the Taliban could tap into a forceful and highly vocal community of supporters that were willing to come forward to defend the theological credentials of its emirate. In return, these same Salafi-jihadists, now pariahs in their home countries, would be afforded freedom of movement and a base of operations.

Al-Qa’eda’s founder, Usama bin Ladin, played a central role in cementing this relationship by pledging allegiance to the Taliban’s then supreme leader, Mullah Umar, in 1999. While in some ways this move detracted from al-Qa’eda’s overarching ideological offering—alienating many of the Taliban’s more ardent Salafist critics, both inside Afghanistan and beyond—it afforded its network the use of Afghanistan as a safe haven and center of gravity, meaning that it could bring Salafist youth from around the world to train at its camps with relative freedom.

To push back on claims that he had allied with “grave-worshippers and polytheists,” bin Ladin and his increasingly well-resourced media cadre began publishing pro-Taliban propaganda that, using Salafist talking points, defended the Taliban’s status as an emirate and, by extension, defended al-Qa’eda as a legitimate advocate of the global Muslim community. In addition to this, bin Ladin personally invited Salafist scholars from across the Middle East to Afghanistan so that they could witness that the Taliban had implemented “true shari’a governance” in the country and, in the course of doing so, convince them that defending Afghanistan was an important religious duty. This worked to bin Ladin’s advantage as it meant he could defend his collaboration with “polytheists,” while the Taliban, through bin Ladin’s diplomatic entreaties, could simultaneously proclaim to be working with the global Salafist community even as it was marginalizing Salafists within Afghanistan.

With the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 and the NATO invasion of Afghanistan that followed, most (but not all) Salafist critics of the Taliban set aside their ideological differences and rallied behind its new defensive jihad. This saw them lining up to back their former rivals and participate in the Taliban’s greater war against the “Crusader” campaign. To hasten this closing of ranks, al-Qa’eda and the Afghan Salafi-jihadists with which it was allied doubled down in their outreach efforts, ultimately playing a central role in convincing Afghan Salafists to fight alongside the Taliban and provide it with political, economic,
and military support.\textsuperscript{15} So it was that Afghanistan’s Salafist community came to play a formative role in the Taliban’s post-9/11 insurgency.

However, shortly after the Afghan Taliban began consolidating its insurgency in 2007, the Taliban recognized—and began to act against—the increasing potency of the Afghan Salafists, who initially fought independently but were soon subsumed into its ranks. To avoid a situation in which its regional hegemony would be contested, the Taliban started trying to confine them to the margins of the war. With continued mediation—and, though it was something of a contradiction, buy-in from al-Qa’eda—the Taliban afforded its former Afghan Salafist rivals menial tasks, confining Salafist leaders to village- or at most district-level positions of command instead of allowing them to rise to governorships.\textsuperscript{16}

As al-Qa’eda’s leadership perished in U.S. strikes or fled Afghanistan, the remaining Salafist insurgents floundered, fulfilling their “responsibility” to fight against the “Crusaders” but failing to ascend to prominence within the ranks of the Taliban. As a result, the Taliban was able to establish a de facto monopoly on Afghanistan’s \textit{jihad} and, for a time, sustainably subjugate the country’s Salafist militant networks.

The Emergence of ISKP

\textbf{ACROSS THE BORDER IN PAKISTAN, THE SALAFI-JIHADIST EXPERIENCE WAS PROFOUNDLY DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF AFGHANISTAN.} While the \textit{Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan} (TTP) was (and is) structured along similar doctrinal lines to those of the Afghan Taliban, the Salafists in its ranks had far more clout.\textsuperscript{17} This is due to the fact that the TTP is not a centralized group like the Afghan Taliban. Rather, it is more of an umbrella organization where various groups from different parts of the country have joined together under a single banner, with each enjoying a measure of independence depending on their size and strength.

One of the TTP’s strongest factions at the time that Islamic State declared itself a global caliphate in 2014 was the Salafist-dominated Orakzai chapter; this was the same faction that—under the instruction of its \textit{amir}, Hafiz Sa’id Khan—defected to ISKP in late 2014 (the group was not formally announced as an Islamic State affiliate until January 2015). At the time of its defection, the TTP was at a low ebb, with most of its other chapters having lost their influence in places like Bajaur, Mohmand, South Waziristan, North Waziristan, and Kurram due to...
Pakistani military pressure. Thus, by the time of ISKP’s declaration, the TTP had already become increasingly reliant on its Salafi-jihadist network in Orakzai, a network that the TTP’s amir from 2009 to 2013, Hakim Ullah Mehsud, had also long favored. Consequently, in spite of its Salafist orientation, the Orakzai chapter had accrued for itself an enviable position in the TTP.

The birth of ISKP, which was inspired by the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, was ultimately the work of these Pakistani Salafists. In October 2014, a few months after the Islamic State declared its caliphate (see subsequent section for more detail), Hafiz Sa’id Khan along with several other senior-ranking TTP Salafists (including the TTP’s central spokesperson Shahidullah Shahid aka Shaikh Maqbul), publicly defected from the TTP and established ISKP, with Hafiz Sa’id Khan named as its first wali (governor) and Maqbul its spokesperson. When it was inaugurated, Khan declared that ISKP would revitalise the TTP’s stagnating war in Pakistan and called on members of the TTP to join his new group, a show of strength that simultaneously attracted a number of Afghan Salafist militants to the cause despite being initially Pakistan-focused. This all happened at an especially opportune moment for ISKP: At the time, the TTP was suffering from major internal rifts due to disagreements regarding its terms of engagement with the Pakistani government. As a result, hundreds of TTP members ended up defecting to join ISKP in the weeks that followed.

When, the Pakistani military deployed a slew of aggressive military operations against the TTP within a matter of weeks of these defections (although not because of them), ISKP shifted its headquarters to the Afghan side of the border, specifically Nangarhar province and adjacent Kunar province. There, it picked up a large number of disenfranchised Salafist militants that were until then in the ranks of the Afghan Taliban.

By May 2015—that is, less than six months after its relocation to Afghanistan—ISKP had shifted its focus once more and declared war on the Afghan Taliban, accusing it of being a stooge of the regional “tawaghit” (tyrannical regimes) of Pakistan and Iran and of deviating from the “true path of shari’a.” Per ISKP’s then leader, Hafiz Sa’id Khan, the war on the Taliban was necessary due to the Taliban’s persistently unjust and belligerent stance towards ISKP supporters that had fled from Pakistan earlier in the year. Whatever the actual cause, its defiant anti-Taliban stance attracted a number of influential scholars from Kunar and Nangarhar’s Salafist seminaries as well as from further afield. Prominent among them was Shaykh Jalaluddin, who originally hailed from Kunar but had for years been based at a large Salafist seminary in Peshawar.

This gradual Afghanization of ISKP was accelerated by the targeting of its
Pakistani leadership in drone strikes and joint raids of US and Afghan forces, operations that were augmented by increasingly aggressive counter-ISKP posturing from the Taliban. This saw ISKP transforming just one year on from its formal and public establishment in January 2015 into an Afghan-centric movement with the non-militant Salafi Afghan scholar Shaykh Jalaluddin acting as its chief ideologue and another Afghan Salafist scholar, Abdul Hasib Lughari, succeeding Hafiz Sa’id Khan as wali (Khan was killed in July 2016 in a US drone strike). This transformation attracted yet more Afghans to its ranks. Indeed, ISKP came to be seen as a vehicle to establish Salafist supremacy in Afghanistan, something to which Shaykh Jalaluddin directly alluded in August 2015 when he stated that ISKP was fighting for the same goal as Shaykh Jamil’s JDQS in the 1980s.23

However, it was not all plain-sailing. After flourishing briefly in 2016 and 2017, ISKP lost momentum due to setbacks caused by mounting pressure from US and Afghan forces on the one hand and the Taliban on the other. Though there was no coordination between these two blocs (which were at war with each other), the combined effect of their separate anti-ISKP operations was to leave ISKP “defeated” in Nangarhar and Kunar in early 2020.24 Hundreds of ISKP fighters were killed, with hundreds more arrested by or surrendering to the Afghan government. This period of territorial decline, leadership decapitation, and sustained degradation of the rank-and-file did not, however, mark the end of ISKP. On the contrary, in June 2020, ISKP entered into a period of resurgence following the appointment of Dr. Shahab al-Muhajir—a defector of the Afghan Taliban and veteran of urban

Figure 3: Graph showing intensification of ISKP attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021. NB: Shahab al-Muhajir was appointed ISKP wali in June 2020.
insurgency—as its new wali.\textsuperscript{25} Under his leadership, ISKP stopped trying to seize and hold territory and instead began to focus on the deployment of sustained (and more sustainable) terroristic violence against civilians, predominantly concentrated in Kabul and Jalalabad. This saw ISKP become almost exponentially more active over 2021 (see Figure 3 on previous page).

\section*{The Globalization of Salafist Opposition to the Taliban}

These local, community-level dynamics to one side, the story of ISKP’s enmity for the Taliban cannot be told without also discussing the broader position of the Islamic State towards the Taliban. After all, were ISKP’s war with the Taliban not something that the Islamic State’s leadership also bought into, ISKP would risk being excommunicated from the global caliphal project. Besides financial and logistical support from the Islamic State’s central operational apparatus—something that we know to exist, although the extent of it remains shrouded in mystery—ISKP would lose access to the force-multiplier that is the Islamic State’s Central Media Diwan.\textsuperscript{26} This would sap its regional momentum and blunt any hopes ISKP may have to mobilize regional and extra-regional foreign fighters.

Just like its ISKP subsidiary, the Islamic State is fundamentally opposed to the Taliban, but the reasons behind its opposition as a global movement are different to those that motivate ISKP’s Afghan rank-and-file. Instead of being driven by grievances established in the course of decades’ worth of local political marginalization and military subordination, the Islamic State’s animus for the Taliban today is borne of fundamentally ideological matters, a dynamic that has been shaped by its broader relationship with al-Qa’eda.

To track how this dynamic bore out, we have to go back to Syria in 2011 and the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring and, with it, the origins of the war between al-Qa’eda and the Islamic State.\textsuperscript{27} When revolutionary fervour took hold of Syria in 2011, it quickly descended into full-fledged civil conflict. Before the end of the year, Salafi-jihadists, both from Syria and abroad, were deploying in the country to fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Among them was a delegation of fighters initially dispatched by what was then known as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)—a nominal, but increasingly wayward, ally of al-Qa’eda—who were led by
Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, a Syrian ISI official directly appointed by ISI’s then leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Calling itself Jabhat al-Nusra, ISI’s Syrian pilot branch experienced spectacular growth in its heyday between 2012 and early 2014, attracting thousands of foreign fighters from countries worldwide. So rapid was its expansion that, within the space of two years, Baghdadi determined that it would work to his advantage to declare Jawlani’s group a direct logistical and bureaucratic extension of ISI. Thus, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) was formally established in 2013.

Critically, the public declaration of ISIS by its Iraqi leadership was not something that had buy-in from Jawlani, who refused to re-subordinate himself to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and instead asserted his group’s independence as a Syria-based al-Qa’eda franchise by declaring allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qa’eda’s global leader. This clash, which was framed by both ISIS and al-Qa’eda as doctrinal even though it was also in large part driven by power disputes, ultimately descended into overt civil war in early 2014 despite many bungled attempts at mediation (the most notable by the likes of al-Qa’eda veteran Abu Khalid al-Suri, whom ISIS is believed to have assassinated in February 2014).

The fate of the relationship between the Islamic State and al-Qa’eda (and, by extension, the Taliban, with which al-Qa’eda remained tied due to Ayman al-Zawahiri’s 2011 oath of allegiance to its leader) was sealed when the Islamic State declared itself a caliphate on June 29, 2014. By definition, this solidified its split from al-Qa’eda because it necessitated annulling its by then nominal oath of allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Umar (who, unbeknownst to the rest of the world, was dead while this dispute was playing out). On that basis, unless the entire global al-Qa’eda movement opted to also break its oath to Mullah Umar and pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a break from and subsequently a war with, the Islamic State was set in stone.

The key detail in this saga—and the main political factor that drives the Islamic State’s enmity for the Taliban today—is that al-Qa’eda opted to stand by the Taliban instead of joining Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s new caliphate. This forced the Islamic State’s hand; the only way it could respond to this implicit denial of its legitimacy was to attack al-Qa’eda’s ideological credentials. And one of al-Qa’eda’s principal vulnerabilities, at least as the Islamic State saw it, was the fact that this Salafi-jihadist movement had opted to remain loyal to the “heretical sect” of the Deobandi Taliban. In the eyes of the Islamic State, this alone was cause enough for excommunication from the fold of Islam.

In view of this, the Islamic State’s opposition to the Taliban is not just incidental, it is existential. It has no choice but to adopt a position of utmost hostility
towards the Taliban because in doing so it delegitimizes al-Qa’eda’s claims and annuls any allegations that its “caliphate” is itself illegitimate. On this basis, ISKP’s war with the Taliban today is not just about advancing the Islamic State’s strategic position in Central Asia. Rather, it is an expression of the Islamic State’s sense of its own global supremacy.

Conclusion

THIS ARTICLE HAS DEMONSTRATED THAT ISKP’S WAR ON THE AFGHAN TALIBAN TODAY results from a toxic convergence of local intra-Islamist grievances and global jihadist dynamics. On the one hand, ISKP’s anti-Taliban agenda is defined by the ideological rift that has existed between Afghanistan’s Salafist community and Deobandi-dominated Taliban since the 1980s. On the other, it has been shaped by forces external to Afghanistan, namely the rise of the Islamic State and its subsequent war with al-Qa’eda, which was seized on by Salafist militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan as a pretext to fight back against years of political and military subordination at the hands of the Taliban.

While the intensity of its anti-Taliban campaign has tapered off since September 2021, as shown in Figure 4 opposite, ISKP will continue in its efforts to deploy destabilizing violence across Afghanistan in months and years to come. Besides the Taliban, it will likely target Shi’ite Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, whom the Taliban has assured it will protect, as well as journalists, activists, former government officials, and humanitarian groups. This strategy is orientated around two goals. First, to demonstrate that the Taliban cannot provide the security it has been promising Afghans since first signing its peace deal with the U.S. in 2020 (itself a “crime” against Islam according to ISKP), thereby undermining its rule and degrading its governing credibility. Second, to frame itself as a relevant and capable actor in Afghan politics, a resistance movement that is pursuing an inexorable agenda of opposition to Taliban rule.

To this end, ISKP has publicly stated that it has no intention of seizing and holding territory in Afghanistan, at least for the time being, and that its current priority is to force the “apostate” Taliban to show its true colors while “winning the hearts and minds of the local population.” Accordingly, as the Taliban tries to further consolidate its position in Afghanistan, ISKP is certain to continue to try
to undermine it. The more pressure ISKP’s covert networks exert, the harder it will be for the Taliban’s nascent government to maintain centrifugal force and, crucially, restraint. By provoking more indiscriminate security policies, especially in Afghanistan’s eastern provinces, ISKP’s hope appears to be that it will further entrench Salafist discontent in the face of Taliban rule, something that in the long term will play into the Islamic State’s hands.

To be sure, this campaign has already paid dividends. On multiple occasions now, ISKP has managed to provoke blunt and ill-conceived responses from the Taliban including collective punishment and tit-for-tat brutality—sometimes even public beheadings of ISKP suspects. Instead of thinking long-term, the Taliban’s go-to response was initially to try to force ISKP’s rank-and-file supporters into submission and, ultimately, surrender. Its security forces stormed Salafist communities, shut down prominent mosques and seminaries, rounded up and arrested thousands, and killed dozens of Salafists alleged to be ISKP-connected (including several major ideologues like Abu Ubaydullah Mutawakkil).31

That being said, it seems clear that ISKP’s militancy is not about establishing Afghanistan as a new core of the Islamic State caliphate—at least not yet. It is about demonstrating presence, defiance, and intent, and shaping the terrain for future insurgency. ISKP has reiterated this repeatedly since August 2021. For example, its local media outlet, Khalid Media, has published several videos attacking the Taliban for its alleged betrayal of Sunni Muslims—not just in Afghanistan but the world over—stating that it is ISKP and ISKP alone that stands to rectify, through violence, the errors the Taliban has committed. These videos have been

![Figure 4: ISKP attacks against Taliban officials and security forces, January 1, 2020 to February 28, 2021.](image)
careful to caveat that, notwithstanding this fundamentally revolutionary agenda, the road ahead is long and difficult. It requires war against not only the “apostate” Taliban, but also the infidels now backing the Taliban’s new government—including both the U.S. (with which the Taliban reached a negotiated peace), regional powers like Pakistan and India, and the global “tyrans” China and Russia. Only time will tell whether this is more than just rhetoric, but there is one thing we can be sure of: Afghanistan has not seen the last of ISKP’s savagery.

NOTES

1. For details see Shaikh Abu Muhammad Ameen Ulah Peshawari, The reality of Taqlid and kinds of Muqalideen, 3rd Ed. (In Urdu), (Peshawar, Pakistan: Maktabah Muhammedia, 2008). Belonging to the Eastern Afghanistan Kunar province but based in Peshawar for decades, Peshawari is known as the spiritual father of the current Afghan Salafist generation. Several of Peshawari’s students achieved top leadership position in ISKP, among them the top ISKP ideologue Shaikh Jalaluddin, although Peshawari did not publicly endorse ISKP until late in the group’s history.

2. For details see Muhammad Ameen Safdar Okarvi, Manifestations of Safdar, 3rd ed. (In Urdu) (Multan, Pakistan: Maktabah Imdadia, 1997).


7. Muslimdost and Badr. & Sands and Qazizai.

9. Muslimdost and Badr.
18. Tahir Khan, “TTP spokesperson, five other leaders declare allegiance to Islamic State,” The Express Tribune, October 14, 2014. See also “Bay’ah from the leaders of the mujahideen in Khorasan to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” Wilayat Khorasan Media, January 10, 2015, available at jihadology.net.
22. Abdul Sayed, “Peshawar Seminary Attack.”
23. Shaikh Jalaluddin, “Why we are fighting against the Taliban?” Khurasan Studio, August 2015.
28. The group’s full name is Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham or “Front of the Supporters of the People of the Levant.”
29. Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, “This is the Promise of Allah,” Furqan Foundation, June 29, 2014.
In the 23 years since the Al-Qaeda bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania’s authorities have successfully prevented sustained terrorist activity within their territory. This is a notable achievement, given that Islamist non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in Somalia, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Mozambique have, to varying extents, relied on networks that are based in or run through Tanzania for financing, recruitment, logistics, as well as ideological reproduction. Tanzania’s government has succeeded through a combination of security-related, political, and administrative measures that are, for the most part, determined within the state security apparatus and rarely subject to public debate or scrutiny.

The state’s policies are only one side of the equation, however. Politically active Muslim organisations in Tanzania, many associated with reform movements along the lines of Salafism or Wahabism, and some of which have at times accused of ties to terrorism, have sought a political arrangement that allows them to operate within the constraints of the nation-state and its institutions. This is not an easy arrangement. The state continues to focus on religious leaders and institutions in its fight against Islamist extremism. For their part, Muslim leaders and institutions that have never been wholly aligned with the state seek to distance...
themselves from the regional Islamist terror threat while simultaneously advancing a domestic agenda of promoting Islam in society.

While these political arrangements have restricted the space afforded such elements to organize against the Tanzanian state, they remain an important factor in supporting jihadist NSAGs in the region, most notably in Cabo Delgado province across the border in Mozambique. Tanzania has suffered only two major attacks from and a number of smaller raids for provisions from Cabo Delgado, but extensive support networks in Tanzania’s Mtwar region, which borders Cabo Delgado, present a real security threat. These support networks have been targeted by extensive security operations over the past three years, while the Tanzania People’s Defence Force (TPDF) has been deployed in Cabo Delgado as part of the Southern African Development Community’s Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM). Tanzania’s domestic settlement between the government and Islamists is thus facing its greatest threat as the state engages more kinetically with regional extremist groups.

Independence, Islamic Reform, and Foundations of Resilience

Islamic thought, practice, and political disposition have been re-shaped by Wahhabist-influenced, reformist Islam worldwide over the past half-century, shaping how Muslim communities engage with the state and reshaping Muslim institutions. In East Africa, as elsewhere, this has been understood through an historical focus on the relationships between individual states and Muslim communities.

With up to half of Tanzania’s population being Muslim, the place of Islam, its institutions, and leaders has been central to the country’s politics in both the colonial and post-colonial periods. The dominant Qadriyya and Shadiliyya Sufi brotherhoods were critical to the development of Muslim institutions in the pre-colonial era and also sought to shape the independence movement and the emergent state of Tanganyika. Some leaders, such as Sheikh Hassan Bin Ameir of the Qadriyya, participated actively in the independence movement through mobilising nationwide affiliates in the 1950s and early 1960s. As a leading Qadriyya cleric, effective Mufti of Tanganyika, and leader of the East African
Muslim Welfare Society (EAMWS), he had particular influence through the 1960s. Yet even at this stage, East Africa’s religious cleavages were apparent. Sheikh Hassan Bin Ameir’s considerable efforts at strengthening Islam across East Africa from 1940 onwards were in conscious opposition to the spread of Christianity that had been central to the colonial project. The independence movement could accommodate such figures as Sheikh Hassan, but for an independent state inheriting a colonial administration, such accommodation was more problematic. By 1964, three years after independence, the then ruling Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) had taken a socialist path and was avowedly secular but led by a devout Catholic, Julius Nyerere, and had inherited an education system built out of the missionary movement.

A turning point in relations between this young state and Islam came in 1968 with the dissolution of EAMWS, which has shaped relations between the state and Islam ever since. EAMWS’s perceived capitalist orientation in an increasingly socialist state, its strength in Muslim communities through leaders such as Sheikh Hassan Bin Ameir, and its access to foreign ideas and finance through its transnational structure were seen as a threat to TANU’s rule. TANU, the forerunner of the current ruling party (Chama Cha Mapinduzi or CCM), finessed EAMWS’s dissolution, replacing it with the more compliant Baraza Kuu la Waislam Tanzania (“National Muslim Council of Tanzania,” known by its Swahili acronym, Bakwata) and deporting Sheikh Hassan to Zanzibar. Bakwata remains to this day the favoured representative body of Tanzanian Muslims, enjoying material support from the government and providing political support to the ruling party in return.

The dissolution of EAMWS has been characterized as the end point of a “de-Islamization” of TANU, and as an effort to “contain Muslims as a political force.” This did not involve a purge of Muslims from TANU as the phrase suggests, but rather an effort to curb a potential political threat in the form of an independent and organized Islamic political movement. Bakwata was the means of doing so. Bakwata was (and continues to be) a nominally independent organisation whose compliance could be assured through funding, access to property (it inherited EAMWS assets in a questionable manner), and access to rents through, for example, having a monopoly on hajj travel business. Through undermining EAMWS, Bakwata would satisfy TANU’s desire that, as Vice President Abeid Karume, later president of Zanzibar, put it at the time, “the leadership of the Muslim religion must be in the hands of the people themselves, without any attachment to pretenders from the outside.”

Karume’s ambition would not be met. Bakwata proved to be both incompetent and corrupt, unable to address the serious educational challenges the Muslim
Coupled with the collapse of Tanzania’s socialist experiment in the 1980s, opportunities emerged for organisations from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and elsewhere to establish themselves in Tanzania, supporting new generations of religious leaders and institutions. These “pretenders from outside” were still regarded as a security threat, but the wider political upheaval from the 1980s onwards helped enable compromise.

The career of the cleric Abas Mustafa Maqbul illustrates this. Maqbul, originally from Sudan, was funded by Saudi Arabian religious authorities to strengthen Islam in Tanzania in the 1970s and 1980s. He established scholarship programmes that continue to this day for Tanzanians to study in Sudan and Saudi Arabia and helped grow a new generation of Muslim clerics that would become internationally connected through funding from Arab governments and institutions. In doing so, Maqbul had to contend with a state suspicious of “Muslims as a political force” to use Mohamed Said’s words. “At that time [the late 1970s], Muslim organisations and activities were under close surveillance by state security,” Maqbul later recalled.

Crucial to establishing scholarship programmes was the support of then President of Zanzibar, Aboud Jumbe, successor as President of Zanzibar to Abeid Karume. As well as being supportive to Maqbul, he also granted permission in the early 1980s (he served until 1982) to Munadhamat Al-Da’awah Al-Islamia to establish itself in Zanzibar. The organization funds scholarships for religious studies in Khartoum and elsewhere. Under President Ali Hassan Mwinyi, who succeeded Julius Nyerere as president of Tanzania in 1985, Munadhamat’s established an additional branch in Dar es Salaam. African Muslims Agency from Kuwait, active across the continent, also established operations under President Mwinyi. It remains a significant funder of Muslim institutions and now operates the Muslim University of Morogoro.

Some of the new generation of Muslim clerics generated by the transnational networks planted by Maqbul and others would go on to shape how Muslim leaders who were not aligned with both the state and Bakwata would confront longstanding issues about the place of Islam in the Tanzanian state. They would also have to confront this ecosystem of international funding agencies, while an emerging generation of Salafist clerics could address violent threats against the Tanzanian state and society.

By the time that al-Qaeda bombed the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in August 1998, relations between the Tanzanian state and ruling party on the one hand and non-aligned Muslim leaders and organisations on the other were at an all-time low. In February of that year, a police assault on Dar es Salaam’s
Mwembechai Mosque had sparked rioting at the mosque and across surrounding neighbourhoods that targeted police, government, and ruling party property and led to the arrest of leaders associated with the mosque. Contemporaneous framing of the dispute as being between youth radicalized by “Arab states” pushing an “extremist” agenda and their moderate elders conflated two quite different and intertwined processes.

The network of international organizations willing to support da’wa (Islamic proselytization) and education through individual and institutional support was well established in Tanzania by 1998. Funding since at least the 1980s from organisations such as African Muslims Agency, originally based in Kuwait, and al-Haramain Foundation, a network of organisations originating in Pakistan before moving to Saudi Arabia, had supported Tanzanian mosques, schools, organizations and individual activists. Al-Haramain Foundation also, allegedly, supported al-Qaeda in planning the August 1998 attack.

These international organizations operated in a space in which a clearly defined historical view and political agenda was pursued through new organizations established in opposition to Bakwata. Anti-establishment scholars constructed the evidence base for the domestic political agenda while individual cleric-leaders, through loose organizational networks and media outlets, pressed it. At the heart of this political agenda were grievances regarding the perceived lack of educational opportunities for Muslims, the favouring of Christians in the post-colonial state, and, later, the use of the “war on terror” as a means of suppressing Muslim demands.

The 1990s saw Muslim activists reinterpreting historical debates that were particularly salient given Tanzanian politics of the time. The side-lining of Muslim activists in TANU’s liberation campaign in the 1950s and 1960s was first presented in detail by Mohamed Said in his 1998 work The Life and Times of Abdulwahid Sykes. Based in Dar es Salaam after a career in the public service in Tanga Region, Said operates outside the academy. Through essays distributed in print and social media and conference papers, he remains a hugely influential figure amongst public intellectuals and the Muslim community more broadly. Other figures outside the academy such as Hussein Bashir Abdallah sought to reclaim the history of the 1905–07 Maji Maji Revoltt as a jihad against colonialism by a predominantly Muslim population. Academic Hamza Mustafa Njozi of the Muslim University of Morogoro is another figure of influence whose analyses have focused on the regulation of worship, discrimination in education and employment, and the framing of Muslim political activism in the context of the U.S. push against terrorism since 2001.
In public campaigning, clerics such as Sheikh Ilunga Hassan Kapungu encapsulated these grievances in the idea of *mfumo kristo*, or Christian hegemony, as underpinning the Tanzanian state. These anti-state messages were disseminated in mass meetings, weekly *khutba* (sermons), and mass media such as Tanzania Islamic Foundation’s Radio Imaan and the weekly newspaper *An Nuur*. Indeed, Radio Imaan was suspended for six months in 2013 for inciting a boycott of the previous year’s census. The conception of *Mfumo kristo* expressed in these various channels was encapsulated well by the Sheikh Ilunga of coastal Kibiti district in 2011:

> There is nowhere you can go in this country and not find the Christian system. The Christians in this country have dominated decision-making positions and Rufiji and the entire coastal religion is made up of 99 percent by Muslims. But who is an agricultural officer or OCD [Officer Commanding District] here? All the government officials are Christians even though 80% of the population here is made up of Muslims. Head teachers in Rufiji are Christians, all students are Muslims. What is eating Rufiji is the Christian system.

While Kibiti district would become the site of Tanzania’s most intense jihadist violence, the wider Salafist/reformist movement of Muslim activists would row back from mass mobilization around such issues in the coming years in the face of state actions.

A failure to disentangle international networks supporting Islamic reform and a politically active Muslim civil society from elements of those networks that supported violent extremism has meant that the effective marginalization of the latter within Tanzania has not been acknowledged. Relatedly, the importance of domestic political agendas has been marginalized in discourses surrounding violent extremism in Tanzania. An examination of patterns of violence, the political trajectory of Muslim individuals and organisations of influence, and the response of the state to Muslim activism allows for a shift in perspective and a clearer understanding of how states and community leaders have contributed to Tanzania’s resilience to violent extremism.
Patterns of Violence

The drama of the August 1998 attacks notwithstanding, the following decade was not marked by any significant acts of terrorism linked to Islamist extremism. The ACLED database for the years 1997 to 2012 records just one such instance, the August 1998 attack. From 2012 to 2017, ACLED records a significant spike in such incidents, with 32 reported. The author’s own records indicate 47 such incidents for the same period. The author’s database includes actions such as police raids on mosques, madrasas, and training camps where radicalization and paramilitary training were being undertaken; assassinations of local government officials and ruling party leaders by NSAGs; and robberies of banks, shops and mobile money agents. Most incidents have been minor, involving small groups of violent jihadists, rather than sustained campaigns by NSAGs.

The period 2012 to 2017 saw three distinct theaters of violence. These were focused on the coastal Tanga Region in the north and neighbouring Kilimanjaro and Morogoro Regions; Mwanza and other regions in the north-west bordering the Great Lakes; and Pwani and Mtwara Regions in the south. Since 2017, there has been a significant decrease in the number of incidents related to Islamist NSAGs with the one exception being in Mtwara Region adjacent to Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado.

In the period between 2012 and 2017, Tanga saw the greatest concentration of incidents, though there have only been two sustained encounters between security forces and armed groups in the region (in 2015 and 2016, respectively). In May 2015, seven soldiers of the TPDF were killed over several days in a sustained engagement with an armed group in the Amboni Caves complex near Tanga town. The following year, a three-day firefight occurred between an armed group and police in plains inland from the caves. Publicly, authorities described the caves complex as a hub for illegal migrants from the Horn of Africa making their way south. Later, and less publicly, authorities connected the base to gangs of “religious radicals” in other parts of Tanga Region. Beyond the Amboni Caves there is evidence of a number of smaller armed groups operating in Tanga Region in the years up to 2017, but none of these groups were involved in sustained actions against state targets. These groups do appear, however, to have been well embedded in the region, with established supply chains extending into Tanga town. These cells may have had deep roots in Tanga. In November 2013, a mosque in Tanga’s Kilindi District was raided by police, who uncovered
a significant cache of arms and an alleged children’s training camp. According to authorities, the mosque was connected to two settlements of “extremist Muslims” who had sought to live reclusively while rejecting state authority.30

Events in Tanga have been inextricably linked to the conflict in Somalia and neighboring Kenya. Tanga has primarily served as a site of recruitment into al-Shabaab or its Kenyan affiliates such as al-Hijra and Jaysh al-Ayman, which drew on a network of supporters of the Kenyan cleric Sheikh Aboud Rogo (who was assassinated in 2012, many suspect by Kenyan police).31 In 2012, the United Nations Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group alleged that al-Shabaab collaborated with the Ansaar Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC) in Tanga and a Zanzibar based criminal gang.32 Tanzania remains a significant source of recruits for al-Shabaab to this day, with some reports suggesting that they constitute the second largest cohort of foreign fighters after Kenya.33

In Mwanza in northwest Tanzania, a group of attackers that included at least one child killed three worshippers at a mosque in May 2016. The attackers came from a neighbouring mosque—perceived in the community as Salafist—that had been established after its founder failed to take control of another mosque in the area. The founder claimed to have received his religious education overseas but had no clear institutional affiliation or network. As recalled by areas residents, his teachings were divisive at an intimate household level. For example, he urged denial of rent to Muslim landlords and said that a Christian’s property can be taken freely.34

Another distinct phase of violent activity, centred in Pwani Region along Tanzania’s coast, exhibited a different set of connections. Unlike Tanga’s connections to Kenya and Somalia, the cells in Pwani were clearly networked most strongly into Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique and to DR Congo and Burundi via the Tanzanian border city of Kigoma. Between 2015 and 2017, over forty police officers, local officials, and local leaders of CCM were assassinated in Pwani, particularly in the districts of Kibiti, Mkuranga, and Rufiji. This took the form of intimate assassinations of individuals, often at their homes, and the killing of police on duty. Only once was a statement of purpose issued in the form of a leaflet left after an attack on a security checkpoint monitoring movement of forest produce in Kibiti District. The note stated that the imposition of levies on locally produced charcoal constitutes an oppression of local people.35 The group responsible never identified itself, but it was clearly associated with “unorthodox Islamic theological doctrines” also seen in Tanga and Mwanza.36

These dynamics in Pwani manifested in ways familiar to people in Mwanza and Cabo Delgado. Young clerics attempted to take over a mosque and were defeated.
as early as 2012. New mosques and religious schools were established, encouraging the rejection of secular education and of basic inter-generational social norms. These attitudes and practices were reflective of elements of Salafist political theology in Tanzania. The “flurry of crimes” that these elements committed was suppressed by a sustained security operation in 2017 in which hundreds were allegedly disappeared. Fugitive fighters made their way south to Mozambique to join the emerging insurgency in Cabo Delgado and northwest to join the Allied Democratic Forces or ADF (which later pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, joining the Cabo Delgado insurgents in forming the “Central Africa Province”) in eastern DR Congo. By October 2017, the insurgency in Mozambique had begun with an attack on Mocímboa da Praia town. The insurgency has been a persistent threat to Tanzania ever since given the involvement of Tanzanians and multiple armed incidents along the border. These incidents have mostly been low-level attacks with the exception of the October 14, 2021 attack on the small border town of Kitaya, which saw the town and a nearby detachment of the TPDF overwhelmed by a force of hundreds of fighters for one night.

In From the Cold: Examining the AMYC

ANSAAR MUSLIM YOUTH CENTER (AMYC), IDENTIFIED BY UN INVESTIGATORS IN 2012 as supporting al-Shabaab and originally known as Tanzanian Muslim Youth Union (known by its Kiswahili acronym UKIVITA), was established in the 1970s and has since been led by Sheikh Salim Barahiyan. At first glance, the Sheikh’s biography fits the template of the young Muslim benefiting from scholarships overseas and returning with a reformist religious agenda and rejection of state authority. There was some truth in this. In 2000 in Mwanza, Sheikh Barahiyan was reported to have called on Muslims to boycott presidential elections, claiming that elections would just underwrite a godless administration. He marginalised himself from many of his fellow Muslim activists pursuing more domestic agendas by accusing some of them of using the issue of the authorities’ storming of Dar es Salaam’s Mwembechai Mosque to get elected. Given Sheikh Barahiyan’s background, and given the support that AMYC received from charities based in Saudi Arabia, the U.K., and Kuwait, AMYC fit the template of foreign-funded fronts
that provide an environment for Islamist extremism to grow. This perception of AMYC has informed much mainstream analysis of extremism in East Africa. Yet the trajectory of two of the organisation’s key figures, Sheikh Barahiyan himself and Sheikh Kassim Mafuta, indicate that the political positions of these key figures have changed considerably over the years. In these two individuals’ trajectories we can see three interlinked processes. First, there was a reorientation of domestic and international civil society associated with Salafism from confrontation with the state towards settlement. Second, domestic Salafist groups focused more on social service provision, particularly education, than politics per se. AMYC now has over 20 schools offering the state curriculum. Finally, the state’s response to AMYC involved questionable security and judicial measures against Salafist clerics perceived as having an agenda sympathetic to Islamist NSAGs.

In July 2017, Sheikh Barahiyan spoke at a public rally organised by the Tanzania Islamic Foundation (TIF). Founded in the late 1990s, it is now one of the country’s most prominent independent Salafist organisations. TIF’s media outlets had been critical in popularizing the mfumo kristo narrative some years earlier. Sheikh Barahiyan’s speech was given in Muleba District, Kagera Region, in the north west of the country, close to routes that connect Cabo Delgado, Tanzania, and Eastern DR Congo. The public meeting drew Muslim leaders from Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and Kenya.

The theme of Sheikh Barahiyan’s talk was Ni Upi Usalafi wa Ukweli? (What is Real Salafism?). His hour-long address was given as a controversial, heavy-handed security operation was being undertaken to flush out the killers in Pwani Region and their supporters.

But Sheikh Barahiyan did not condemn the actions of the state. Rather, he addressed the issue with reference to religious texts. His concern was the presence of Muslim groups that declared takfir against fellow believers and challenge the state violently—and illegitimately:

We have been infiltrated by a group that identifies itself as Salafi, and declares that only its interpretation is valid... They go by different names [such as] Jamaat Takfiir, Jamaatul Jihaad, Salafiiyya Jihadiya. ... these groups have entered our country, and are dividing it. The country has lost its peace because of this group, fighting with the administration illegitimately.

Research conducted by the author in Tanga Region in 2017 revealed a litany of splinter groups from AMYC. Respondents noted more extreme offshoots emerg-
ing, often with strong cross-border links to Kenya. Such groups and individuals were effectively identified as “extremist.”

Also mentioned by the UN’s Somalia-Eritrea Monitoring Group in 2012 was Sheikh Kassim Mafuta, then of AMYC but who has since established his own institution, Markaz Pongwe, also based in Tanga. Sheikh Mafuta has a low public profile but remains influential along the coast, including in Cabo Delgado. If true that he was a recruiter for al-Shabaab in Tanga as alleged by the Monitoring Group, he has hidden it well. In a document dated 2006, he condemned a statement “put out by some of the khawariji youth led by an ignorant youth called Aboud Rogo” that accused Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, a noted quietist, of not being a genuine Salafi. Sheikh Mafuta is now a regular target of propaganda from violent jihadist groups online. In an undated video from Ashabul Kahfi Media, associated with the Islamic State’s “Central Africa Province” in DR Congo, Sheikh Mafuta is threatened with death along with the head of Bakwata. Markaz Pongwe maintains an active online presence, with channels on all major social media platforms. A series of recorded lectures distributed on Telegram in late 2020 saw him return to the “khawariji,” again refuting the teachings of Aboud Rogo (the late Kenyan cleric linked to al-Shabaab) regarding takfir and the killing of Muslims.

More mainstream conservative Muslim activists also mellowed after spending the years prior to 2012 focusing on mass organization against the state. Central to their analysis of Mfumo Kristo was that education systems, employment, and influence systematically disadvantaged Muslims and were rooted in Tanzania’s colonial past and sustained by post-colonial administrations. This narrative persists widely today. As one AMYC leader noted in 2017, “Muslims are behind in education, particularly in secular education. This stretches back to the time of the British. They only educated Christians….so Muslims are in difficulty.”

From the 1990s to the 2010s, these grievances consistently put such organizations in conflict with the state. Sometimes this led to violence, most notably the rioting in Dar es Salaam at the Mwembechai mosque in 1998. Street violence also flared in 2012 and 2013 in the capital in the context of a well-organized national campaign against the Mfumo Kristo. Central to this was a nationwide speaking tour by Sheikh Hassan Ilunga Kapungu and others, covered by media outlets such as the Tanzania Islamic Foundation’s Imaan FM and weekly newspaper, An Nuur. In 2011, his tour stopped at Ikwiriri in what is now Kibiti District, which was later to become infamous as the epicentre of the 2016-17 violence. He spoke of how Mfumo Kristo affected every office in the land from the State House to village offices. “The smell of Christianity” is in every government office, he told his...
primarily Muslim audience.\textsuperscript{54} He was aware of the prospect of violence and declared that progress towards a later mass rally in Dar es Salaam could only be stopped if lives were taken. The rally went ahead in October 2011 in Dar es Salaam’s Diamond Jubilee Hall, attracting thousands of attendees. This was followed the subsequent year with a campaign to have religious affiliation included in that year’s census (and a boycott of the census when that was rejected). Imaan FM was suspended for six months for encouraging such a boycott.\textsuperscript{55} While these rallies did not themselves devolve into violence, the tense atmosphere they created likely contributed to the street clashes Dar es Salaam experienced in 2011 and 2012.

Yet in subsequent years, the mainstream and public challenge to \textit{Mfumo Kristo} faded away. The rally in Dar es Salaam in October 2011 was the last of its kind. Just six years later, many of the same leaders who had challenged the state then were back in the same hall in a commercially sponsored event regarding spiritual values in Islam. Running every year since, the conference, called \textit{Misk ya Roho} (“fragrance of the soul”), is a professionally run event promoted by the Tanzania Islamic Foundation and sponsored by one of the ruling party’s most important funders. Politics are carefully avoided at these events. The Tanzania Islamic Foundation, meanwhile, has moved from diligently reporting on the arrests of Muslim leaders and broken government promises in 2015 to sinking wells in the president’s home district in 2019.\textsuperscript{56} Such a shift allows Muslim institutions to maintain access to overseas and domestic funding while compelling them to assert greater control over the local mosques and madrasas under their control. There has also been a return to the broader reformist agenda with a focus on education. AMYC now operates approximately 20 schools, while the Tanzania Islamic Foundation has a similarly ambitious education programme.

The State Response

IN JUNE 2017, PRIME MINISTER KASSIM MAJALIWA SPOKE AT LENGTH ABOUT THE killings in Pwani and ongoing security operations at the annual \textit{Baraza la Idd-el Fitr}, a gathering of Muslim leaders held annually to mark the Idd al-Fitr holiday. In speaking about the killings, Majaliwa referred to the armed group as “criminals,” denying them any political orientation or framework. But his remarks on a connection to religious education also demonstrated awareness of radicalization
processes. In his remarks, he called on his hosts, Bakwata, to identify who is teaching in religious schools and questioned how they are selected and if they have the right qualifications. He went on to ask if Bakwata was aware of the ideological position of the colleges training these teachers. By speaking at the Baraza la Idd, he recognized Bakwata’s critical role as Tanzania’s “official” Muslim representative body in addressing a key dynamic in the development of violent extremism in Tanzania and, by extension, the role of Muslim institutions more generally.

This statement, along with that of Sheikh Barahiyan the following month that challenged jihadist notions of takfīr, and the parallel security operations taking place at the time give some clue as to how such a notable shift occurred vis-à-vis state-civil society relations and how prominent religious leaders with sulphurous pasts could be brought into the country’s political settlement. The first, and obvious, strategy that the government employed was security-based. Security operations in Kibiti represented the most concerted effort, though not the first such operations. The incidents in Amboni Caves elicited similarly tough measures across Tanga Region between 2015 and 2017. Security forces have also been central to the Tanzanian response to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado. The heavy security presence on the border with Mozambique, described as a joint operation between the Tanzania Police Force and TPDF, is to be expected. This has been matched with clear public messaging from the police to local communities that are believed to be collaborating with the insurgency, messaging that has hardened as the conflict has developed. In 2018, police messaging was soft, with the offer of an amnesty if arms were handed in to the authorities and a call for those in Mtwara Region involved in “extremism” in Mozambique to turn themselves in. Two years later, in April 2020, the police were taking a tougher line. Inspector General of Police Simon Sirro is seen speaking on the street to gathered youths in a clip distributed that month that is reminiscent of the propaganda videos of the Cabo Delgado insurgents. Sirro says:

So, this news you hear from Mozambique, there are some going around misleading people saying ‘do you want and go and fight for...’, ah, I don’t want to mention it. Us Tanzanians we are accustomed to unity, so being misled into thinking you want some sort of state, states are chosen by voting, not waging war.

There was no offer of an amnesty this time. “Did you see what happened in Kibiti?” Sirro asks rhetorically in the video, referring to the security operations.

Of greater resonance in the Muslim community has been the continuing arrests
of Muslim activists and clerics since at least 2012 and their being charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 2002. The most high-profile of these arrests were those of the leaders of Zanzibar’s *Jumuiya ya Uamsho na Mihadhara ya Kiislam* (popularly known as Uamsho), who were initially detained in 2012. This cleric-led organization helped catalyze a movement seeking greater autonomy for Zanzibar. The leaders were arrested in 2012 and detained until charges were dropped in 2021. The state implicated Uamsho in certain acts of political violence in Zanzibar and beyond. A leaked document from 2014 from the Director of Public Prosecutions linked Uamsho with the upsurge in terrorism across Tanzania in 2013 and 2014. Hundreds of others have been arrested since then and most of them are still awaiting trial, according to Uamsho officials.62 Uamsho leaders have agreed to not engage in public activism, which, along with the lobbying of Muslim activists, likely contributed to the release of over 100 prisoners in February and March 2021 mainland Tanzania. 63

That the Tanzanian authorities ratcheted up security operations in response to increasing disturbances is easily understood. Less so is the shift of the country’s Muslim institutions and leaders towards a modus vivendi with the state. The process of coming in from the cold has taken place in a context of political outreach by Bakwata under the current Mufti; mixed political, administrative, and judicial measures undertaken by the state; and a recognition by religious leaders that Islamic sites were being used to radicalize youth and support terrorist networks.

Sheikh Abubakar Zubeir bin Ally Mbwana became the third leader of Bakwata in 2015, assuming the position of Mufti. One of his first priorities was improving relations between the country’s Muslim institutions through activating Article 103 of Bakwata’s constitution which allows for the establishment of a *Majlis Tansiq*, known as the Baraza la Mahusiano in Kiswahili or Coordination Council in English. The body’s exact membership and purpose is not made public, but members include the chairman of the Tanzania Islamic Foundation, Aref Nahdi, and Sheikh Mussa Kundecha, Amir of *Baraza Kuu la Taasisi na Jumuiya za Kiislamu*.64 (Tanzania Islamic Foundation provided an important media outlet for the 2011 and 2012 campaigns against *Mfumo Kristo*,65 while the Baraza Kuu was established in 1992 in opposition to Bakwata.)66

Against a background of increased jihadist violence, these institutions explicitly sought to marginalize violent jihadists while at the same time responding to the impact of security operations on their members. The former was seen clearly in Sheikh Barahiyan’s speech of 2017 noted above, but it was also explicitly stated back in 2015 in an *An Nuur* editorial which called for effective regulation of mosques and madrasas and their relevant curriculums. The editorial spoke of the
growth of extremist groups in Mwanza, Lindi, and Songea regions, drawing comparison with Nigeria’s Mohammed Mar’wa’s Yan Tatsine movement of the 1970s. It stated that “with strong authentically Muslim leadership, even if the likes of Abu Mar’wa emerge, they will be identified early, and steps taken.” Yet the same newspaper hasn’t shied away from addressing the issue of religious leaders detained on terrorism charges, and indeed it is the only media outlet to consistently cover the issue. That these institutions speak out against the state’s heavy-handedness against Muslims likely contributes to their legitimacy in the eyes of Muslim communities and, by extension, their ability to effectively discourage radical thinking.

The hard security approach has, for its part, likely contributed to more radical religious figures and institutions keeping extremist elements at arm’s length. This political positioning figuratively shrinks the space available for extremists. More tangibly, it restricts access to funds from religious charities and incentivizes Muslim institutions to control mosques and madrasas where radicalization, recruitment, and training can take place. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this could be seen in Ikwiriri town in Kibiti District prior to the surge in jihadist violence there in 2015-17. Early attempts by extremists to take over existing mosques were successfully resisted, denying the extremists physical space. The name of the mosque that the young radicals eventually established, Masjid Mabanzi, reflected their limited access to funds as Mabanzi refers to residual, cast off timber.

Administrative measures have also played a role in restricting the spaces where armed groups have been known to organize. These measures, in place for at least five years, include mandatory registration of visiting clerics and those engaged in tabligh (a form of missionary activity wherein Muslim men strengthen other Muslims in their faith) with local Bakwata officials. In border regions such as Tanga, as well as in Zanzibar, tabligh had been identified as a significant vector of extremism, facilitating radicalization and recruitment. Practitioners of tabligh in Tanzania come from across the country and East Africa region, as well as from Asia, particularly Pakistan. These measures to regulate tabligh are generally perceived as successful.
A Way Forward

IF THE DOMESTIC TERROR THREAT HAS BEEN CONTAINED OVER THE YEARS, IT HAS also changed considerably. The strength of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado has prompted intervention by regional powers, including Tanzania. This has necessitated considerably greater international engagement by Tanzania. Meanwhile, the increase in online pro-Islamic State propaganda materials aimed at East African audiences has heightened the risk of individuals becoming radicalized and active with minimal need for supportive networks.

Prior to the conflict in Cabo Delgado, Tanzania had limited its counter-terrorism engagement to working through regional structures while limiting engagement with bilateral donors. This is in contrast to neighbours such as Kenya and Uganda which have received significant Western assistance and taken on roles in the “war on terror” enthusiastically.

Tanzania has been confident in its ability to deal with domestic threats through a combination of coercion and its broad-church politics while reluctant to open its security sector to significant levels of cooperation. This was most acute under President John Pombe Magufuli (2015–2021). The multilateral response to the insurgency in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado province that has taken shape over the past year reflects a change in that position under Magufuli’s successor, Samia Suluhu Hassan.

Tanzania has deployed troops both along its border as well as in Cabo Delgado as part of SAMIM. At the start of the mission in August 2021, Tanzania had contributed the largest deployment of forces (277 out of 738 personnel) to SAMIM. It also has the second largest representation within SAMIM’s coordination mechanism with three of 19 places—one more than all countries except Mozambique itself. SAMIM operates parallel to the military intervention of Rwanda in Cabo Delgado. In this respect, Tanzania has had to engage proactively with Rwanda on counterterror efforts across the region, while acting on intelligence provided by SAMIM and Rwandan units in Cabo Delgado.

An emergent threat that the region will have to deal with is the impact of the apparent increase in online propaganda targeting East Africa, particularly since 2019. Tanzania may already be feeling this impact. On August 25, 2021, Hamza Mohammed killed four people, three of them police, in Dar es Salaam in a shootout that ended with police killing him outside the French embassy (just a few metres from the site of the U.S. embassy that had been bombed in 1998). He seemed
to be acting alone, armed with just his own pistol. Police later announced that while he was in touch with people overseas, he had radicalized alone, and online, by viewing materials associated with both the Islamic State and al-Shabaab. Reports that Hamza, whose family had roots in Somalia, had travelled to Somalia and had al-Shabaab connections were never confirmed.

Jihadist propaganda in Kiswahili is disseminated openly on social media platforms, particularly Facebook. Much of it is produced by Islamic State sympathizers and builds on mainstream and Islamic media reports of incidents. Of greater concern are steps by the Islamic State itself to target East Africa with versions of radio shows from al-Bayan, the Islamic State’s audio channel, which are currently disseminated across closed and open platforms.

Hamza’s funeral four days after the August 2021 shooting was attended by one of Bakwata’s most senior officials. The chairperson of the body’s executive committee spoke to mourners of how death is God’s will. A representative from Baraza Kuu la Taasisi na Jumuiya za Kiislamu (originally set up in opposition to Bakwata in 1992) also spoke. He questioned why Hamza needed to be killed and suggested that we will now never know what drove him. The first act of violent extremism in Tanzania’s capital since August 2017 being undertaken by a lone individual illustrates how freedom to operate has been denied to armed groups. The two aforementioned figures speaking together at his funeral embodies the political progress that has been made in marginalizing extremism in Tanzania. Whether such progress can be sustained with Tanzanian troops involved in a potentially protracted conflict in Mozambique, alongside the active targeting of East Africa by the Islamic State, remains to be seen.

NOTES

2. A series of significant attacks took place in October 2020, notably the October 15 massed attack on the small border town of Kitaya. ACLED, Cabo Ligado Cabo Ligado Weekly: October 12–18, 2020; Cabo Ligado Weekly: October 19–25, 2020; Cabo Ligado Weekly: October 26–November 1, 2020. Since then, there have been a small number of reported incidents in Tanzania, mostly low-level raids on villages for provisions.


8. The words are those of Tanzania’s Vice President at the time, Abeid Karume, later President of Zanzibar, quoted in Abdin Noor Chande, *Islam, Islamic Leadership and Community Development in Tanga, Tanzania* (Montreal: McGill University, 1991), 176.


14. At the time, the author was leading a team conducting a week-long training of community leaders in a nearby neighbourhood that included representatives of Christian Churches, CCM, an opposition party, and one of the Mwembechai mosque leaders who was arrested in the trouble. Youth rioting in response to police actions targeted almost exclusively vehicles and offices of the government and CCM.


16. Al-Haramain Foundation (Tanzania) was sanctioned by the United Nations in 2004 for, amongst other things, involvement in the bombing of the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings.
Al-Haramain Foundation (Tanzania) is not the same as the “Al Haramain Muslim Centre” established by Abas Mustafa Maqbul.


20. An Nuur is currently published online and sometimes in hard copy. Back issues to 1998 are available at www.islamtanzania.org. Imaan FM still broadcasts across Tanzania on FM and is also available online.


23. A database of incidents associated with Jihadist NSAGs was compiled by the author in 2017 using open-source materials. The granularity of key informant interviews allowed acts of seeming criminality to be associated with Jihadist NSAGs, accounting for the higher number.


27. Team interviews led by author, Tanga, October 2017.

28. “An Overview of Violent Extremism in Tanzania Mainland & Tanga” (Nairobi: Wasafiri Consulting, 2018). At least three gangs were active in mountainous areas of Tanga Region in the years prior to 2017. Though almost exclusively involved in criminality, residents reported them all as being led by individuals described as “Ansaar.”


33. Matt Bryden, The Decline and Fall of Al Shabaab? Think Again (Nairobi: Sahan, 2015). Bryden estimates that Tanzanians were the second largest group of foreign fighters in Al Shabaab at the time. A series of recruitment videos released by the group in December 2021 and January 2022 have specifically targeted Tanzanians, as well as other East Africans.


45. Kabendera, “Where Are the Missing 380 People?”
48. Author communication, Cabo Delgado cleric.
49. Khawariji is used to refer derogatorily to Islamists who employ political violence. Those who use it are in turn referred to as wanafiq, or hypocrites, by extremists.
50. The text, “Makhawariji wa Zama Hizi” is dated December 24, 2006 and can be found online as part 11 of a series, “Hii ni Daawa Yetu,” or “This is our Daawa,” published under the mark of Markaz Pongwe, Sheikh Mafuta’s centre in Tanga.
51. Six “seminars” were released on a Telegram channel associated with Sheikh Kassim Mafuta over December 2020 and January 2021. They highlighted issues such as khawariji’s lack of understanding of fiqh, or Islamic justice, the khawariji’s justification in taking Muslim lives, and their declaring kufr, or a state of disbelief, on other Muslims.
53. Interview, Tanga, October 2017.
55. Ng’atigwa, The Media in Society.
60. Tanzania Police Force (@tanpol), Twitter post, April 9, 2020, https://twitter.com/tanpol/status/1248155950206328832. This clip was also broadcast on TV news that night and subsequently made the rounds on social media.
61. Ibid.
64. Membership is not publicized, though a photograph entitled ٷ٤٨٩٢٠٣١٣١٣٤, or Coordination Council, showing portraits of council members was shared on Facebook in 2019:https://www.facebook.com/SheikhIbrahimGhulaam/posts/2518790181485978.
66. Saalfeld, Before and Beyond Al-Shabaab.
68. An example is the ongoing coverage of the detention of Ahmad Kidege, first arrested in September 2019 in Tanga. Kidege had been a teacher and prominent activist in Tanga town and now faces terrorism charges. An Nuur took the unprecedented step of publishing an interview with him during his detention. During the interview, Kidege alleged that he had been tortured and explained how he had been named by a former student who was arrested at a border crossing. He also denounced violent jihad. Bakari Mwakangwale, “Ustadh Kidege aunguruma gerezani,” An Nuur, March 13-19, 2020.
70. Interviews, Tanga region, September and October 2020.
The Rise of “Woke” Islamism in the West

By Lorenzo Vidino

Islamism in the West has an almost 70-year history, dating back to when the first members of the Muslim Brotherhood, either students pursuing graduate studies in Western universities or senior leaders fleeing persecution in their home countries, arrived in North America and Europe in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Since then, activists linked to various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world and other movements from the Indian sub-continent (Jemaat-e-Islami) and Turkey (Millî Görüş) that belong to the broad family of political Islam have established a stable presence in the West. These movements have since evolved ideologically and organizationally, and, despite their still relatively small size, have become disproportionately influential forces in the West’s heterogeneous Muslim communities.

Some aspects of this presence have not changed substantially over time. For example, the inner workings of many Western Islamist networks, such as the scrupulous selection process, the internal secrecy and the hierarchical structure, are virtually identical to those of the early days, in substance replicating those of the mother structures in Muslim-majority societies. Yet, over the years, Western-based members of the characteristically flexible and pragmatic Islamist movement came to understand that several aspects of their political matrix had to be adapted.

Firstly, they understood that the goals the movement harbored for Muslim majority societies—Islamization of the entire society and installation of an Islamic government ruling based on sharia—could not realistically be achieved in the
West, where Muslims constitute just a small minority. Western Islamists went on to see disseminating their politico-religious worldview inside Western Muslim communities and influencing Western policies and debates on pertinent issues as two more suitable goals.

Moreover, with time, Western Islamists understood that not only their goals but also their tactics needed to be adapted. Some of the narratives, frames and language that constitute the traditional repertoire of Islamism have remained un-mutated. This has been particularly true among the tightly knit older members of the movement, and as the movement has sought to engage with the wider but still relatively small audience of conservative sympathizers in Western Muslim communities. But, at the same time, Western Islamists have substantially altered how they present themselves to two of its core audiences: Western Muslim communities (the majority of which have little knowledge about or interest in Islamism) and Western establishments (broadly intended to include governmental actors, media, and civil society).

Making traction with these two constituencies has been crucially important to Western Islamists since they realized, by the early 1980s, that their presence in the West was not temporary and that they could use it not just as a refuge from Middle Eastern regimes but to achieve a new and broad set of goals. The recently established and fast-growing Muslim communities of the West came to be seen as an ideally receptive audience for the Islamists’ religious and socio-political worldview, and Yussuf al-Qaradawi, the putative spiritual leader of the global Islamist movement, posited “the duty of the Islamic Movement [is] not to leave these [Western] expatriates to be swept by the whirlpool of the materialistic trend that prevails in the West.” As for influencing Western establishments, over the last thirty years Islamists have consistently sought to present themselves as legitimate representatives of local Muslim communities, reliable and moderate interlocutors for governments, media and society at large.

In order to win over these constituencies, Western Islamists soon understood the need to tailor their messaging and frames. This process of language adaptation started decades ago but has deepened and accelerated over the last 10–15 years, as a new generation of young activists has come to the fore. Unlike the first generation of Islamists who arrived from the Middle East, this new cadre is more attuned to Western cultural sensitivities by virtue of being born in the West and having mostly been educated in social sciences, humanities and communications (while the educational background of most activists of the first generation heavily tended to be in disciplines such as engineering and medicine).

Many from this new generation of Islamist activists retain only tenuous formal
links to established Islamist structures. They might have grown up with Islamist influences—in some cases literally, as some of them are the children of Islamist pioneers in the West—such as being active in Islamist youth groups or giving frequent lectures at mosques and events linked to the network. But they have often created their own ways of amplifying their voices, from establishing new organizations and a multi-platform online presence. Their degrees of connectivity with traditional Islamist organizations varies but is at times quite limited, at least formally.

Moreover, most of these young Islamist actors rarely use Islamist references and if they do so, it tends to be done in somewhat veiled terms. Instead, they speak the language of discrimination, anti-racism, internalized oppression, intersectionality and post-colonial theory. Several of the causes they embrace, such as the environment or lowering university fees, have nothing to do with Islamism. Others can be seen as overlapping with Islamism’s traditional grievances but are framed in typically progressive terms and with no apparent Islamist undertone. For example, Western Islamists’ recent adherence to calls to “de-colonize” school curricula fit the ideology’s inherent anti-colonial nature but are formulated adopting the phrasing commonly used in progressive circles.

These approaches have allowed the new generation of Western Islamists to make inroads in political, media and civil society circles in ways their predecessors could only hope. By largely shedding Islamist tropes and adopting progressive frames and causes, young Western Islamists have forged strong alliances in mainstream society and have come to be widely accepted in Western establishment circles. Many of them have therefore come to run as candidates in political parties, pen op-eds for and appear in debates on mainstream media; forge alliances with a broad array of progressive organizations and thought leaders; receive grants from respected foundations and governmental agencies.

In substance, long gone are the days in which Western Islamists publicly burned books, as during the Rushdie Affair in 1988. Many of today’s Islamists use frames, embrace causes and make alliances that puzzle not only long-time observers of the movement but also the first generation of pioneers. Some, particularly in Europe, have begun to refer to this trend as “woke Islamism.” The term is contested and can be seen as somewhat disparaging. But it has become relatively common among both observers and old-timers of the Islamist scene in the West, aptly describing a trend that has substantially accelerated over the last couple of years.

This article seeks to analyze some of the key dynamics behind woke Islamism in the West, from its origins to its many manifestations. Doing so is a complex endeavor, as the trend changes from country to country and is relatively new, making its developments and implications impossible to fully assess. Despite these
challenges, the article aims to shed some light on a phenomenon that is substantially changing the face of Islamism in the West and that should therefore be understood by academics and policymakers alike.

Islamism and Ultra-Progressive Politics

The relationship between the Left and Islamism—both terms, to be sure, that include an incredibly diverse array of political views and currents—is a complex one. Even by limiting our analysis to the West, it is impossible to even remotely capture its many facets, a task that is anyway beyond the scope of this essay. Yet it is fair to say that one of the most prominent trends that have characterized the relationship between at least some of the most progressive and at times radical elements of the Left and Islamism is that of sympathy and desire to cooperate.

Many voices on the Left, including in its more progressive quarters, take a markedly different approach, highlighting the many issues on which the two movements sharply differ and arguing against any favorable view of Islamism. But a fascination with Islamism has gripped substantial parts of the Western Left since the 1950s. Islamism’s strong anti-colonial views, rejection of what it perceives as Western-imposed social and economic constructs, anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism, and its ability to mobilize masses have garnered admiration in broad sections of the Western Left.

This sympathy and perceived commonality of enemies have led many to postulate an alliance with Islamists. The view has been held, whether openly or not, by many in the Western Left, from mainstream voices to, at times, fringe, violent leftist groups. Many of these theorizations have found little to no concretization. But, over the last twenty years, several operationalizations of the potential alliance (at times dubbed as red-green) have happened in more mainstream quarters of the Left in various Western countries. Many see a quintessential example of this dynamic in the alliance that emerged in the UK in the early 2000s around the Stop the War Coalition (STWC). Originally a partnership of various organizations led by the Socialist Workers Party and the Communist Party of Britain, in the run up to the 2003 Iraq war STWC reached out to the Muslim Association of
Britain, an organization founded and headed by prominent UK-based Muslim Brotherhood activists such as Kamal Helbawy, Azzam Tamimi and Anas al-Tikriti. Impressed by the turnout an anti-Israel protest MAB had organized in central London in April 2002, STWC leaders asked MAB to join the coalition. It should be noted that MAB’s anti-Israel protest had received widespread criticism for the presence of emblems of Hamas and Hezbollah and the burning of Israeli and American flags.8

The offer generated intense internal debate, as MAB leaders weighed the benefits of extending their message on a much larger level and the potential costs that an alliance with Marxists, atheists and homosexuals could have caused them, particularly among the most conservative segments of the Muslim community.9 In the end, MAB accepted to enter in a form of a partnership on an equal basis, cooperating closely but remaining an autonomous bloc with its own agenda. It also imposed as necessary conditions for its participation the presence of halal food, faith-sensitive accommodations and gender-segregated meetings and demonstrations.10 STWC leaders, despite the protests of some of their members, reportedly agreed to all the conditions.11

The cooperation between MAB and STWC was quite successful, as hundreds of thousands of demonstrators participated to their events. It also led to the formation of a political party, RESPECT/The Unity Coalition, which achieved minor successes at the polls. Its candidates included far Left leaders like “Old Labour” MP George Galloway and Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party leader Lindsey German, MAB members like Anas al Tikriti, and other Muslim activists like Salma Yaqoob and Yvonne Ridley, the British journalist who had converted to Islam after being held in captivity by the Taliban.

Somewhat similar forms of cooperation have taken place in other Western countries over the last twenty years. But over the last decade some of the more progressive quarters of the West’s Left have adopted issues, frames and a language that are significantly different from those it traditionally used. Identity politics, intersectionality, concerns over systemic injustices and prejudices have become the predominant issues among leftist activists, particularly of the younger generation. The term “woke,” despite being contested by some for having become somewhat derogatory of the trend, is frequently used to describe this approach to political activism.

Wokeism, in its various manifestations, arguably constitutes a perfect political vessel for Islamists. The tendency to blame “whiteness” and the white man’s allegedly domineering tendency for most of the world’s woes is, for example, a perfect fit for an ideology like Islamism that was born in the first half of the 20th
century in opposition to colonialism and that has since blamed a large part of the Muslim world’s problems on the West. By the same token, strong forms of identity politics perfectly match with the long-standing claim of Western Islamists that Western Muslim communities should be allowed to have their own separate social, educational and legal structures. If in his writings in the 1990s Yussuf al-Qaradawi urged Western Islamists “have your small society within the larger society, try to have your own ‘Muslim ghetto,” today’s confrontational identity politics offer Islamists arguments to make the case that Muslims need “safe spaces” to be shielded from “structural racism” and preserve their identity.12

Moreover, wokeism provides Western Islamists with a strong, multipurpose rhetorical weapon: Islamophobia. To be sure, anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination are, sadly, fairly widespread problematics, manifesting themselves throughout the West both in subtle ways and, occasionally, dramatically violent actions. But Islamists have a tendency to exaggerate and instrumentalize the issue to serve their own various, overlapping purposes.

With Muslim communities, Western Islamists seek to use the Islamophobia card to foster a strong Islamic identity and carve out a position of leadership for themselves. Western Islamists have long understood that no other factor has a greater impact on the formation of a collective identity than the existence or the perception of an outside force threatening the community. They have also shown an unparalleled cunningness in becoming the main advocates of causes that outraged the majority of Muslims, even those who did not share Islamist leanings. From the Rushdie Affair to the Danish cartoons, from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to controversies over the veil in various European countries, Western Islamists have utilized their superior resources and mobilization skills to lead protests against events that they portrayed as part of a pattern of Western aggression against Muslims and Islam.

Fostering the idea that Muslims are under siege, discriminated and victimized, Western Islamists have portrayed themselves as the only voices willing and capable to stand up for the community. By framing them to suit their needs, they have exploited global political crises, undeniable forms of discrimination that have affected Western Muslims, and cultural tensions that have routinely appeared in most Western countries over the last twenty years. A “community under siege,” to use an expression often employed in Brotherhood circles after 9/11, tends to close ranks, reinforce its communal identity, and rely on aggressive and capable leaders who can defend it.13 Having nurtured this culture of victimhood, Western Islamists, as consummated identity entrepreneurs, have been consistent in tapping into the grievances of Western Muslims and presenting themselves as the
only force able to “act as the first line of defence for Islam and Muslims all over the world.”¹⁴

Externally, Islamophobia serves two main purposes. The first is to create a broad range of alliances with other communities that face discriminations and organizations that fight it. Western Islamists have increasingly framed Islamophobia as part of the structural injustices that, according to them, plague Western societies and, on that basis, have formed alliances with the most disparate organizations fighting discrimination. This includes entities from groups towards which the Islamist movement has historically shown animosity, such as Jewish or LBGQT organizations. These alliances allow Islamists to gain greater access to mainstream society and counter the accusations of intolerance to which they have themselves been historically subjected.

Finally, Western Islamists utilize Islamophobia as a label for any criticism not just of Islam and Muslims but also of themselves. Any scrutiny of Islamist ideology and actors can be easily labelled as racist, an attempt by people with privilege to silence marginalized voices of color. This charge is made also against critics of Islamism with a Muslim background, as they too are not rarely accused of being Islamophobes.

**Islamist Networks Go Woke**

As Wokeism has become gradually mainstream in Western societies over the last decade, Western Islamists have also increasingly embraced it. They have increasingly framed several of their “historical” issues, such as Palestine or anti-Muslim discrimination, through progressive frames that at times accompany but, in most cases, replace, at least externally, Islamist ones. And they also adopted new issues, such as the anti-capitalist agenda to tackle climate change or even gender equality, which have traditionally been alien, if not contrary to, Islamist discourse.

This new approach begs the question over its sincerity. A more skeptical observer could argue that it is purely façade, that Islamists use the language of the progressive Left simply to be seen as moderate, shed the bad image that tarnishes the Islamist milieus they come from, and be accepted in mainstream circles. But, fear the critics, Islamists have not abandoned their views and have just cleverly adopted wokeism as a political tool to better advance their goals, which in reality have little to do with progressive causes.
A different viewpoint is that the new cadres of activists that got their start in Western Islamist milieus are Western-born, have studied at Western universities (and, unlike the pioneers of the movement, not in technical faculties but mostly in humanities), and have frequently participated in the activities of non-Islamist entities. This, taken together, means young Islamists have been deeply exposed to wokeism and may have genuinely embraced at least some elements of its worldview and framing. In substance, it is not unreasonable that young Western Islamists generally embrace various aspects of wokeism, often juxtaposing and reconciling it with various elements of the Islamist worldview they also absorbed during their activism career.

It is impossible to assess which of the two opposing positions is correct, and obviously each case is different and should be looked at individually. In several instances a middle position, one that considers that Western Islamists are simultaneously embracing progressive causes and frames out of genuine conviction and more cynically adopting them to advance their cause without fully believing in them, is likely to be the most appropriate.

What seems clear though in this relatively new and fast-developing trend is the fact that, while individual activists might embrace wokeism independently, organizations and networks with clear and long-standing Islamist connections have been playing an important role in furthering this process. In substance, in what appears a fairly concerted effort, established Islamist groups or structures have been connecting, platforming and financially supporting activists with or without an Islamist background that adopt positions steeped in wokeism which advance the Islamist movement’s goals. In substance, while the adoption of wokeism might be spontaneous, there is ample evidence that Islamist structures seek to support it.

Examples of this dynamic abound. Among the most telling is that of Al Jazeera+ (better known as AJ+), which tellingly describes itself as “a unique, global digital news and storytelling brand dedicated to human rights and equality, holding power to account, and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities seeking to make their stories seen and heard” and “a social justice lens on a world struggling for change.”\(^{15}\) Launched in 2014, AJ+ is “the trailblazing brainchild of the young and restless creative minds of Al Jazeera’s Incubation and Innovation Unit, who earlier than most saw the emerging opportunity to reach a millennial audience with a video news product delivered via social media platforms.” As its own website openly states AJ+ “is part of the Al Jazeera Media Network, an editorially independent entity funded by the government of Qatar as an investment in promoting “the public good”—in the way that the British taxpayer funds the BBC.”

Al Jazeera Arabic, the mother entity of the group, is well known for being heav-
ily staffed with members and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood and for regularly broadcasting Islamist viewpoints, a fact that has led the channel to be banned in several Arab countries and suffer severe criticism in the West. AJ+, which has a large social media presence in four languages (English, Spanish, Arabic and French), targets a very different audience from the mother channel and adopts a radically different approach. AJ+, in fact, regularly features stories that focus on issues central to the progressive movement and framed in quintessentially woke fashion.

Most of AJ+’s stories have little or nothing to do with Islamist-related issues, but consistently accuse Western societies of a ubiquitous pattern of injustice and discrimination against a variety of victim groups, from ethnic and religious minorities to the LBGTQ community. Supplementing these stories, which constitute the backbone of AJ+’s editorial line, are stories that do cover topics closer to the traditional interests of Islamists, such as various Middle Eastern conflicts or anti-Muslim sentiments in the West. The insertion of the latter topics in the broader narrative and the use of similar language to discuss all of them clearly aim at making Islamist points of view acceptable to the AJ+’s audience, a large portion of which is composed of millennials and younger individuals without a Muslim background.

As an example, AJ+ English regularly demonizes the U.S. government for a variety of past and current sins with stories such as *The Government Plot To Erase Native Languages*; *The Real Story of the Alamo: forget what you learned in school*; *Capitalism is a disease*; and *Raoul Peck’s Journey Into The Heart of Whiteness*. These stories are accompanied by others such as *Fleeing to the Heart of the Empire*, which compares the experiences of Vietnamese and Afghan refugees to America (“the heart of the empire”). “Once again,” reads the article, “those subject to America’s imperialist adventures are banging on the door, seeking to escape the conflagration as troops pull out. And once again, they are met with widespread indifference.” Other stories include *Resistance and the “War On Terror” in East Africa*; *Palestinians Are Striking to Fight Apartheid*; or *On COVID, India and privilege*.

A similar dynamic is visible for the French language version of AJ+. French AJ+ has launched or actively promoted a series of campaigns to denounce various incidents, many of them steeped in pop culture close to millennials and their juniors, it considered racist with quintessentially woke frames. They include promoting the hashtag #BlackHogwarts to point out that people of color are severely underrepresented in the Harry Potter series; denouncing both Miley Cyrus’ twerk and Kylie Jenner’s hairstyle as cultural appropriation; and criticizing the...
French football federation for featuring a white player, Antoine Griezmann, as its main testimonial of its anti-racism campaign.

Accompanying these messages, which serve no Islamist goal if not that of painting Western countries as irremediably racist and potentially weakening young people’s belief in them, French AJ+ puts out messages that are more in line with traditional Islamist viewpoints. The channel, for example, has actively championed the campaign to support Tariq Ramadan after the Brotherhood-linked scholar was accused by French authorities of sexual violence against various women.27 And over the last couple of years, once the government of Emmanuel Macron began adopting increasingly confrontational positions towards Islamism, French AJ+ stepped up its anti-France rhetoric. An article, for example, compares France to Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, arguing that the European country’s anti-hijab laws are identical to those of countries that dictate what women should wear.

If AJ+ is a glossy, multimedia platform targeting the TikTok generation with short, simple but professionally produced messages, other entities with a clear Islamist background seek to disseminate a more academic version of Islamist wokeism. A perfect example of this dynamic is the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA), an “independent, nonprofit, research and public policy institution based in Istanbul, Turkey, and affiliated with Istanbul Zaim University.”28 Initially a small entity established in 2010, Zaim University has been closely affiliated with Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). It has received substantial government funding and therefore experienced remarkable growth, reaching 10,000 students in just a few years.29

CIGA was established at Zaim by prominent Palestinian scholar-cum-activist Sami al-Arian.30 Al-Arian is a very well-known name in Islamist circles and was famously the subject of a high-profile terrorism case in the US.31 He was arrested in February 2003 in Florida on a 17-count indictment. He eventually plead guilty to one charge, being sentenced to 57 months in prison for conspiring to violate a federal law that prohibits making or receiving contributions of funds, goods or services to, or for the benefit of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a Specially Designated Terrorist. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, “in his guilty plea, al-Arian admitted that, during the period of the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s, he and several of his co-conspirators were associated with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. He further admitted that he performed various services for the PIJ in 1995 and thereafter, knowing that the PIJ had been designated as a Specially Designated Terrorist and that the PIJ engaged in horrific and deadly acts of violence.”32
Upon release, al-Arian received political asylum in Turkey, where he opened CIGA. Under al-Arian’s leadership, CIGA has established itself as a major hub of Islamophobia studies. Since 2018, CIGA holds a large annual conference on Islamophobia, which brings together dozens among the most prominent academics and activists engaged in researching and challenging Islamophobia. An analysis of invitees, sponsors and topics of CIGA’s conferences clearly show a mix between traditional Islamism and ultra-progressivism, the perfect Islamist wokeism combination.

CIGA’s 2021 conference, which due to the COVID-19 pandemic was held online, clearly showcased these features. The event was co-sponsored, among others, by Qatar’s Ahmed bin Khalifa University and by Cage, a highly controversial UK-based organization created in the early 2000s to advocate for the release of Guantanamo Bay detainees that has since embraced various Islamist causes. Speakers included individuals with clear Islamist connections such as Yasin Aktai, chief adviser for the president of Turkey’s AK Party; Chafika Attalai, a leading member of Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF), an organization dissolved by the French government in the wake of the assassination of French school teacher Samuel Paty; and Cage’s Moazzam Begg, himself a former Guantanamo detainee. At the same time, many of the other speakers did not have any Islamist background, but were mostly Western-based academics, activists, defense lawyers in terrorism cases, and in general individuals in various capacities engaged in issues CIGA considered Islamophobia-related.

Somewhat embodying CIGA’s transnational academic Islamist wokeism is a young scholar from Austria, Farid Hafez. Hafez is a fellow at CIGA and was present at all three editions of CIGA’s Islamophobia conference. He is also a fellow at Bridge Initiative, “a multi-year research project on Islamophobia housed within” Georgetown University’s Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACM CU). According to Georgetown’s website, the ACMCU “was established in 1993 with the mission of building stronger bridges of cooperation between Muslims and Christians, and enhancing the West’s understanding of the Islamic world. In December 2005, Georgetown received a $20 million dollar gift from His Royal Highness Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal of Saudi Arabia to support and expand the center.”

The center is run by two prominent Islamic studies scholars with well-known Islamist sympathies, John Esposito and Jonathan C. Brown. Tellingly, both scholars have close ties to Sami al-Arian, CIGA’s founder. Esposito publicly described al-Arian as “a good friend” and submitted a letter to the judge of his U.S. terrorism trial praising him as “an extraordinarily bright, articulate scholar and
intellectual-activist, a man of conscience with a strong commitment to peace and social justice.” Brown is married to Leila al-Arian, Sami al-Arian’s daughter and, incidentally, a producer for Al-Jazeera. Hafez’s position at both centers is therefore unsurprising.

Hafez is a rising star of Islamophobia studies, giving talks at institutions on both sides of the Atlantic and cooperating with many other scholars of the circle. His approach to the subject very much adopts progressive frames to discuss the issue of Islamophobia. His latest book, for example, is revealingly titled The “Other” Austria: Life in Austria beyond white male heteronormative German Catholic dominance.

But Hafez is also a very controversial figure with Islamist connections. In November 2020, for instance, Hafez was detained as part of Operation Luxor, the largest counterterrorism operation ever conducted in Austria. According to Austrian authorities, the individuals investigated were part of a Muslim Brotherhood/Hamas support network in the Central European country. Hafez has been vocal in proclaiming his innocence and arguing that the case is baseless and politically motivated. Some of his defenses caused controversy, like when his article Xinjiang and Kristallnacht in Austria: Freedom of Religion under Threat compared the actions of the Austrian government in Operation Luxor to the Nazi regime’s persecution of Jews and the Chinese government’s brutal treatment of the Uighurs. The article drew severe criticism from Jewish organizations in both Austria and the United States. He has nonetheless become a cause célèbre in Islamist and progressive circles, with petitions and online fundraising efforts created to support him.

Academically, Hafez has gained international attention for his role as co-editor of the annual European Islamophobia Report (EIR). Launched in 2015, the EIR is an edited volume in which contributors outline alleged incidents and trends of anti-Muslim discrimination in various European countries. Tellingly, the front cover of EIR’s latest edition (2021), a more than 900-page book analyzing 31 countries, features French President Emmanuel Macron on the cover, a clear indication that EIR’s targets are not just those individuals and actors that engage in clear-cut anti-Muslim hatred but also mainstream personalities that challenge Islamism.

EIR has some strong links to Turkey, a country whose AKP regime in recent years has consistently accused Europe of pervasive Islamophobia. The report’s co-editor is Enes Bayrakli, who has served as SETA’s director of European studies and Brussels office coordinator. Formally independent, SETA is virtually unanimously seen as a propaganda arm of the AKP. The founder of SETA is
Ibrahim Kalin, President Erdogan’s spokesperson, and recently the co-author of a book with Georgetown University’s Bridge Initiative director John Esposito. Kalin is also a fellow at Georgetown’s ACMCU, Bridge’s parent institution.

For several years EIR was published by SETA and funded by the European Union as part of the EU-Turkey Civil Society Dialogue. This created controversies and various European governments and European MPs publicly stated their views opposing the idea of European public funds paying for an Islamophobia report published by an AKP-linked think tank. EIR’s 2020 edition was no longer published by SETA but by the Vienna-based Leopold Weiss Institute. The institute has no website and is not known to organize any activity, but a search of Austrian databases shows that its director is Farid Hafez.

Turkey’s role in previous editions of EIR was evident, and it is particularly interesting to note how high-ranking Turkish politicians attended and keynoted EIR launch events. EIR’s findings were also often used by Turkish politicians to support their political positions. For example, at the launch of the 2018 edition of the EIR, Faruk Kaymakci, Turkey’s deputy foreign minister and director for EU affairs, stated that the rise of far right movements and growing Islamophobia were the main challenges to the European Union and argued that Turkey joining the EU could be the “antidote” to these issues. “With Turkey’s membership, the EU can change its image,” he stated, “EU institutions can reach the Muslim world; otherwise the EU will be seen as an imperialist Christian club.”

Reactions and Possible Developments

As said, irrespective of whether the adoption of woke issues and frames on the part of Western Islamists is genuine or tactical, it has allowed many of its activists to be accepted in ultra-progressive milieus in ways pioneers of the movement in the West could not. From anti-racism structures to mainstream media, from governmental agencies funding anti-discrimination and diversity work to progressive intellectual circles and churches, woke Islamists have made valuable alliances which grant them greater visibility and access. Moreover, their very proximity to these environments partially shields them from the critics’ accusations of being Islamists.
At the same time, over the last few years the phenomenon of woke Islamism has received increased scrutiny and criticism. This is particularly true in France and, more broadly, the French-speaking world, where concerns over Islamism and its impact on society have arguably been more heightened than in any other part of the West. Moreover, in France concerns over the spread of wokeism in general, which is largely seen as a divisive American cultural import, have been widespread and President Macron has openly declared he is “against woke culture.”

In this environment it is not surprising that discussions over the contested term *Islamo-gauchisme* (Islamo-Leftism) take place at the highest levels of French government and culture, with France’s higher education minister Frédérique Vidal stating that “Islamo-gauchism is eating away at our society as a whole.” Or that *Le Figaro*, one of France’s newspaper of records, would publish an article about the “holy alliance between wokeism and Islamism.” *Le Figaro*’s piece described how FEMYSO, a Brussels-based student and youth organization founded by top leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West and historically run by scions of prominent Brotherhood leaders and heads of Brotherhood-linked student groups throughout Europe, received large funding from the European Union to conduct anti-Islamophobia and pro-hijab campaigns. FEMYSO framed many of its slogans in typical woke Islamist fashion. For example, it described one its projects, MEET, as an “EU-funded comprehensive programme aimed at tackling gendered Islamophobia,” which it described as the “intersectional discrimination that Muslim women and girls suffer based mainly on grounds of ethnicity, religion and gender.”

But sharp criticism of woke Islamism has come also from non-governmental voices, many of them of Muslim background. Naëm Bestandji, a French-Tunisian author, has argued that Islamism is a quintessentially far-right ideology but that the movement has understood that working with the progressive Left is its most promising tactic and that “infiltrating anti-racist circles is therefore essential.” “For that,” he argues, “you have to transform a religion into a ‘race.’ Any criticism of their ideology, presented as just Islam, would therefore be an attack on individuals. It is the creation of a blasphemy specific to Islam by the diversion of the fight against racism. This is the art of the term ‘Islamophobia.’ The religious fight and the fight against racism are then intertwined. The second serves as a pretext for the advance of the first. It’s a masterstroke.”

An alternative way of looking at this is to interpret it not as a calculated ploy but as a genuine phenomenon that can be described as the Westernization of Islamism. It can be argued that we are witnessing a generational process that leads new, Western-based Islamist actors to shed some aspects of traditional Islamism and honestly embrace aspects of other ideologies. That could potentially further
lead to a dilution and an atomization of Islamism, as various activists could embrace different ideological strands and embark on different pathways.

Of course, these are purely hypothetical theories and scenarios which are difficult to prove and they assume the trend will continue and that it will be adopted by the mainstream of Islamist movements in the West. But irrespective of whether it is tactically or genuinely embraced, Islamist wokeism has become a concern for many. Apprehension about the implication of the dynamic have been well framed by Belgium-based activist Dyab Abou Jahjah. Abou Jahjah has a background that makes his views particularly interesting. Born in Lebanon in 1971, he fought with Shia militias before moving to Belgium in 1991. There, he founded the Arab European League, an activist group that became particularly controversial in the years immediately following the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, as Abou Jahjah expressed veiled support for the attack and other anti-Western views, earning him the nickname of Belgium’s “public enemy number 1.” He has since left activism and works as a teacher, but he has remained a keen observer of Belgium’s Islamist and Muslim scenes.

“This new woke Islamism,” writes Abou Jahjah on his blog, “along with the rest of the extreme progressive movement (often called ‘woke’), dreams of an archipelago of ‘Safe spaces’ that interact in justice and equity. It is in this colorful and beautiful utopian painting of society that the toxic nature of European Islamism resides today. Along with the other woke trends, the woke neo-Islamists deconstruct ‘universalism’ in favor of the ‘intersectionality’ of exceptions. Thus, one day, all exceptions may eventually become the rule.”

“The fact that a large proportion of Islamists now embrace ultra-progressive politics is better than that they embrace jihadist fascism,” he adds. “Nevertheless, the attack on modernity and most of its values, including secularism, is carried out in a more refined and efficient manner and within a broad alliance with serious potential to mobilize. This strategy is not aimed at creating an Islamic state, but it can lead to a fragmentation of society along identity lines so that everyone can ‘be themselves’.” “When exceptionalism,” he concludes, “not universalism, becomes the cornerstone of citizenship, who will then dare to challenge calls for separate tribunals and even separate laws?”

It is difficult to say whether Abou Jahjah’s prediction of the evolution of woke Islamism is correct. What is clear, as this article has aimed to summarily describe, is that there is a growing trend within Western Islamist circles to adopt ultra-progressive/woke issues and language and to forge alliances with entities in that milieu. The questions over this relatively new development are plentiful, from whether it is authentic or tactical; whether it could determine splits within Islamist
ranks, as some of the most conservative cross-sections might be uncomfortable with embracing various ultra-progressive causes; and whether some progressive circles will not embrace woke Islamists. These dynamics might play out in different ways in different circumstances and different countries. But it is clear that the trend of woke Islamism is one that deserves being followed.

NOTES

1. For more on this, see the interviews with a dozen former members of the Muslim Brotherhood in various Western countries in Lorenzo Vidino, *The Closed Circle: Joining and Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2020).


3. For example, Karen Taylor, the head of Brussels-based ENAR (an organization, to be noted, with extensive connections with various Islamist-leaning entities and headed for years by Michael Privot, a self-admitted member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Belgium) stated: “as the voice of the anti-racist movement in Europe, ENAR stands against any narrative describing some civil society organisations and activists as invisible ‘Islamists’ willing to use a ‘woke’ agenda to implement their ‘hidden’ and intolerant political objectives. These prejudices intentionally create fear and division within Europe to exclude part of the society. It is our mission to challenge myths and counter stereotypes on Muslim communities until we reach racial equity. It is our priority to ensure that such narratives do not contribute to the racialisation and criminalisation of any minority group and do not restrict fundamental rights.” See “European Day Against Islamophobia 2021: ENAR condemns ‘Woke Islamism’ theory as a political weapon to further legitimise the demonisation of Muslims and those perceived as Muslims in Europe,” Press Release, European Network Against Racism (ENAR), October 1, 2021, https://bit.ly/3LQKpOq (accessed March 1, 2022).


6. Tellingly, for example, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, remnants of the Italian Red Brigades argued for cooperation with groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda and the Taliban (incidentally displaying very little understanding of the


9. Ibid.


12. al Qaradawi, *Priorities*.

13. The term has been used, for example, as the title of a 2004 book describing the U.S. Muslim community by Ahmed Yousef. Yousef, who served for years as director of the Fairfax, VA-based think tank United Association for Studies and Research (UASR), later became chief political adviser to Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh. See Ahmed Yousef, *American Muslims: A Community under Siege* (Springfield, VA: UASR Publishing Group, 2004).

14. These are the words used by the Muslim Association of Britain to define its aims. See MAB’s website: https://bit.ly/36V12tT (accessed February 8, 2017).


25. Ibid.
27. AJplus français, Twitter post, February 20, 2018, 12:00 p.m., https://bit.ly/3NYiMF.
32. Ibid.
The Civilizational Origins of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama and its Humanitarian Islam Movement

By K. H. Yahya Cholil Staquf and C. Holland Taylor

ON THANKSGIVING DAY, 2015, THE NEW YORK TIMES PUBLISHED A LEAD STORY TITLED, “From Indonesia, a Muslim Challenge to the Ideology of the Islamic State,” by veteran correspondent Joe Cochrane. Appearing shortly after a series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris that claimed the lives of 130 people, the article opened with the words:

JAKARTA, Indonesia—The scene is horrifyingly familiar. Islamic State soldiers march a line of prisoners to a riverbank, shoot them one by one and dump their bodies over a blood-soaked dock into the water.

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

That powerful scene is one of many in a 90-minute film that amounts to a relentless, religious repudiation of the Islamic State and the opening salvo in a global campaign by the world’s largest Muslim group to challenge its ideology head-on.

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

Responding to the threat posed by ISIS and Islamist extremism in general, spiritual leaders of Indonesia’s 90-million-member Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) developed—and began to operationalize—a global strategy to reconcile Islamic teachings with the reality of the modern world, whose context and conditions differ significantly from those in which classical Islamic law emerged.

Integral to this strategy has been the creation and adoption of a series of historic declarations by Nahdlatul Ulama and its dynamic 5-million-member young adults movement, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor. These declarations—promulgated at major international events hosted by Nahdlatul Ulama and Ansor—are among the most visible manifestations of a long-term, systematic and institutional effort to recontextualize (i.e., reform) obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that lend themselves to religious hatred, supremacy and violence.

These declarations include the 2016 International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration; the 2016 First Global Unity Forum Declaration; the 2017 Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam; and the 2018 Nusantara Statement and Nusantara Manifesto. In February of 2019, a little more than three years after Joe Cochrane’s article appeared in The New York Times, Nahdlatul Ulama built upon these declarations by issuing an unprecedented ruling explicitly designed to “Transform the Prevailing ‘Muslim Mindset,’ for the Sake of World Peace and to Achieve a Harmonious Communal Life for All Mankind.”

In a major break with Islamic conservatism, this ruling abolished the legal category of *kafir* (“infidel,” i.e., those who do not adhere to Islam), which has long cast a shadow over the faith’s relationships with other religions. The ruling was adopt-
ed at the 2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars (“2019 Munas”), a gathering of some 20,000 NU-affiliated theologians. Held in Banjar, West Java, the 2019 Munas also endorsed the concept of a nation state rather than caliphate and affirmed that all citizens, irrespective of their religious beliefs, have equal rights and obligations.

In September of that year, the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board published a book titled Findings of the 2019 National Conference of Nahdlatul Ulama Religious Scholars. This 316-page volume included a formal decree issued by the Bahtsul Masa’il ad-Diniyyah Maudluiyyah Commission. Bahtsul Masa’il is a division of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council. Its members are prominent religious scholars whose knowledge and mastery of fiqh (Islamic law) qualifies them to issue authoritative rulings on matters related to Islamic jurisprudence.

According to the Bahtsul Masa’il ad-Diniyyah Maudluiyyah Commission’s formal decree, the modern nation state is theologically legitimate; there is no legal category of infidel (kafr) within a modern nation state, only “fellow citizens”; Muslims must obey the laws of any modern nation state in which they dwell; and Muslims have a religious obligation to foster peace rather than automatically wage war on behalf of their co-religionists, whenever conflict erupts between Muslim and non-Muslim populations anywhere in the world.

Virtually the entire senior leadership of the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council and its Executive Board attended the Bahtsul Masa’il ad-Diniyyah Maudluiyyah Commission, whose resolutions and findings were approved with unanimous consent by the Commission itself, and at a subsequent plenary session of the 2019 Munas, which was attended by thousands of NU religious scholars from throughout Indonesia.

At the 2019 Munas, ulama (religious scholars) and their disciples witnessed or directly participated in the creation of new fiqh (Islamic legal rulings) adopted through a process of collective ijtihad, the use of independent reasoning to formulate Islamic law. Known as al-istinbath al-jama’iy, this process was authorized by the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board and its National Congress during the 15-year tenure of former NU Chairman H. E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, from 1984–1999.

The religious, socio-cultural and geopolitical implications of these rulings may be glimpsed from the fact that—absent the category of infidel—there is no theological basis for Muslims to foster enmity or perpetrate acts of violence (e.g., jihadi terrorism) against those perceived to be non-Muslim.

As could be expected, these pioneering decrees elicited a negative response from Muslim extremists, who falsely accused Nahdlatul Ulama of seeking to
“delete” certain passages of the Qur’an. In reality, NU theologians are moving to recontextualize (i.e., reform) obsolete tenets of Islamic orthodoxy, and bring Islamic teachings into alignment with the modern world of democracy and human rights, by using the very same principles of usul al-fiqh employed to create Islamic law during the Middle Ages.

With Indonesia being the world’s largest Muslim nation and Nahdlatul Ulama wielding significant influence within the government of President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”), the recontextualization of Islamic teachings has begun to reverberate throughout the Muslim world.

In his opening address to the 2019 Munas, which was attended by President Jokowi, Kyai Haji Said Aqil Siradj, who at the time served as Chairman of the NU Central Board, said:

In the final portion of my speech, Mr. President, I need to emphasize that Nahdlatul Ulama supports the commitment made by the Vatican and al-Azhar University, as expressed in the Document on Human Fraternity signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayyeb, in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on February 4th.

Why does the NU support this document? Our support is based on the concept of fraternity long articulated and embraced by the NU—i.e., the fraternity of Muslims (rukhuwwah islamiyyah); the fraternity of those who dwell within a single nation (rukhuwwah wataniyyah); and the fraternity of all human beings (rukhuwwah insaniyyah, or rukhuwwah basyariyyah)—as formally declared by Nahdlatul Ulama at the NU Congress held in 1984, at which Gus Dur (KH. Abdurrahman Wahid) was elected Chairman of the NU for the first time.

In the view of Nahdlatul Ulama, the Document on Human Fraternity is consistent with, and articulates, key elements of the concept of fraternity that Nahdlatul Ulama has embraced and consistently endeavored to implement for over 35 years. Our concept of universal fraternity inspires NU efforts to: 1) end the state of enmity that has historically existed between Muslims and non-Muslims; 2) accept the existence of the nation state as theologically legitimate and reject [all efforts to establish] a caliphate; 3) theologically accept the existence of a nation’s constitution and acknowledge
that this does not conflict with Islamic shari’ah; and 4) resolve conflicts [between Muslims and non-Muslims] and establish a state of world peace.

These fundamental elements of the Nahdlatul Ulama world view are compatible with the Document signed by Pope Francis and the Shaykh of al-Azhar. Whether they have emulated our example—and borrowed from our thoughts—I can’t say. I only know that we were first [in articulating these ideas and have consistently done so] for over 35 years, since the Nahdlatul Ulama Congress held in Situbondo [East Java] in 1984.

How did all this come about? Why has Indonesia emerged as a global leader, prepared to address some of the most challenging and difficult issues of our time? To answer these questions, we must take a journey back through history.

**Islam Nusantara (East Indies Islam)**

_Hymn for Protection in the Dark of Night_  
by Sunan Kalijogo (circa 15th/16th century)

> There is a sacred hymn  
> whose divine vibrations shield us in the dark of night  
> (so that we may be) invincible—  
> enveloped by beauty, harmony and well-being—  
> and preserved from all affliction  
> far from every horrifying threat and disaster.  
> Evil spirits and Satan instinctively recoil  
> (from these sacred vibrations).  
> Sorcerers fear to hurl their black magic (against us)  
> for this sacred hymn disrupts and diverts every evil plan and maneuver  
> causing witchcraft to fail and rebound upon its sender.

Thus begins the documentary film, *The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara: Inspiration from the Festival of East Indies Saints.* In his 2015 _New York Times_ article, Joe
Cochrane described this film as “the opening salvo in a global campaign by the world’s largest Muslim group to challenge [Islamic State] ideology head-on.”

*Hymn for Protection in the Dark of Night* was composed by Sunan Kalijogo, one of the *Wali Songo*, or Nine Saints, who are credited with propagating Islam on the island of Java during the 15th and 16th centuries. To this day, Sunan Kalijogo remains the most influential and beloved of the *Wali Songo* within Nahdlatul Ulama and Javanese society at large.

The NU logo, designed by K. H. Ridwan Abdullah in 1927, prominently displays nine stars and a rope with 99 segments encircling the globe. The image of the earth represents Nahdlatul Ulama’s civilizational mission, and religious mandate, to “consolidate the universe” by manifesting love and compassion for all sentient beings and every aspect of creation (*rahmatan li al-‘alamin*, Qur’an 21:107).

The rope symbolizes the 99 Beautiful Names of God (*al-asma ul-husna*) and the overriding imperative to ensure the welfare of humanity by maintaining a vertical tie with God and the horizontal tie of fraternity with one’s fellow human beings. The nine stars symbolize the *Wali Songo*, whose teachings inspired the founding of Nahdlatul Ulama and serve as a direct chain of transmission to the Prophet Muhammad (saw.) himself. Simultaneously, the nine stars also represent the Prophet and his four rightly guided successors (situated above the globe) and the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence (below the globe).

As a traditional *ahlus-sunnah wal-jamaah* (Sunni Muslim) organization, Nahdlatul Ulama follows Ashar’i and Maturidi theology; recognizes the four Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence; and embraces *tasawwuf*, or Islamic mysticism. While NU’s foundational documents explicitly acknowledge the teachings of
Junayd al-Bagdadi (830–910), Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111) and Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (1078–1166), its followers often study a wide range of Sufi masters—including Ibn ‘Ata Allah al-Iskandari (1259–1310), Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240) and Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273)—whose teachings are deeply influential within the organization. As The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara declares in its opening credits:

It is impossible to count the myriad paths to God,
for they are as numerous as the souls that inhabit His creatures.
—Shaykh Najm ud-Din Kubra, 1145–1221

This view, expressed by a renowned mystic and saint from Khwarezm, in Central Asia, who founded the Kubrawiyah Sufi Brotherhood, lies at the heart of Islam Nusantara, or “East Indies Islam,” and its ancient civilizational world view. As the prominent historian and Islamic scholar Kyai Haji Agus Sanyoto explains in the film The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara:

From the time of Shaykh Maulana Malik Ibrahim, [one of the Wali Songo who] came to Java before Sunan Ampel, the saints recognized a central fact of Indonesian society: namely, that the number of people who practiced Hinduism and Buddhism was relatively small, and consisted mainly of those living in palace environs. As a general rule, people who had little or nothing to do with the royal courts continued to practice the original, ancient religion of the East Indies Archipelago, Kapitayan.

The Dutch mistakenly called this ancient belief system “animism-dynamism.” The Wali Songo understood Kapitayan and developed a system of proselytism based on its structure and format. Why? Because Kapitayan had much in common with Islam, and was regarded as the most ancient Oneness (tauhid) religion present in the East Indies. And why did the Wali Songo think that? Because Kapitayan worshipped the highest God, whom they called Sang Hyang Taya: The Great Void, or Absolute.

Taya means Emptiness, suwung. Yet although the word literally means, “That Which is Not,” it does not imply non-existence. True, ‘That’ does not exist on a physical plane; yet ‘That’ does exist.
'That’ is empty, yet full. This cannot be explained in purely rational terms, which is why Sang Hyang Taya came to be described with the phrase, Tankeno kinoyo ngopo: That to which nothing can be done.” The mind cannot grasp ‘That,’ which lies beyond human concepts. Nor can ‘That’ be approached using any of the five senses.

That is why the ancients used the term “suwung” or “awang-uwung”: ‘That’ is... yet is not. ‘That’ is not... yet is.

Those familiar with mysticism, which the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines as “the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience,” will immediately recognize in Agus Sanyoto’s narrative a description of the Divine essence reminiscent of that expressed by mystics from all the world’s major religious traditions. When Hinduism and Buddhism arrived during the early centuries of the Common Era, many inhabitants of the East Indies readily embraced these new religions, which they regarded as different paths leading individuals to the direct experience or “consciousness” of a single Transcendent Reality, or Truth, which was already long familiar to them.

The 14th-century Javanese court poet Mpu Tantular—a nephew of King Raja Sanagara of the syncretic Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit Empire—gave voice to this unitary vision in his epic poem Sutasoma, from which Indonesia’s national motto, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, “Oneness Amid Diversity,” is derived. This ancient Javanese kakawin (book of poetry) promotes mutual understanding and tolerance between Buddhists and Hindu followers of Shiva. The phrase Bhinneka Tunggal Ika appears in chapter 139, verse 5:

Rwâneka dhâtu winuwus Buddha Wiswa,
Bhinnêki rakwa ring apan kena parwanosen,
Mangka ng Jinatwa kalawan Śiwatatwa tunggal,
Bhinnêka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangrwa.

It is said that Buddha and Shiva are two distinct substances (or entities).

They are indeed different, yet it is impossible to regard them as fundamentally different [when one apprehends the underlying Unity of existence].
The arrival of Islam did not provoke resistance among the inhabitants of the East Indies Archipelago, because Nusantara civilization was already long accustomed to foreign cultures and religions. When something new arrived from afar, people would study it—adopting what they liked and ignoring the rest. That was the customary way of life in the East Indies.

Given this way of life, Muslim proselytizers could relax and engage in dialogue with the reality of Nusantara society and its unique history. Ultimately, this produced various expressions of Islam that more accurately reflect the actual substance, and essence, of Islam itself, as expressed in both the Qur’an and the Sunnah (i.e., the teachings, deeds, and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), for example:

“And We sent you [Muhammad] for no purpose other than to be a blessing for all creation.” —Qur’an, 21:107

“I have been sent only to perfect the moral framework [of humanity].” —Hadith, Sahih Muslim

These circumstances help to explain certain differences between Islam Nusantara and the Islamic civilization that emerged in the Arab Middle East and its various offspring, such as Persia, India, Central Asia, and northern Africa, all the way to Morocco and Spain. When Islam first developed in the Hijaz and then spread to nearby areas, military conquest invariably preceded the introduction of Islam itself.

Thus, the Islamization of Middle East civilization and its surrounding regions occurred in the wake of military conquest. As a result, there was a political dimension that greatly influenced the formation of Islamic civilization. For Islam burst forth as a military and political overlord, and it was precisely in the name of Islam that Arab tribes justified their rule. In other words, the seizure of military and political power occurred in the name of Islam.

Actually, from a very early date—i.e., the second generation of Islam in the Middle East—criticism emerged regarding this reality, through the development of what we now know as Sufism. Sufism represents a coherent set of teachings that
invite people to grasp the essence of Islam, the essence of religion, and not simply adhere to its outer expressions, including its formal, institutional aspects.

In the East Indies, Islam did not face the enormous political and military challenges that existed in the Middle East. As a result, those who proselytized Islam in the Malay Archipelago could immediately address the very nature and essence of religion itself: that is, spirituality...the immense richness of the inner life...the life of the soul. As it so happened, this was perfectly compatible with the pre-existing *Nusantara* civilization, which viewed religion as a means to develop human potential in its entirety, not merely in a physical or material sense, but rather, and above all, our spiritual potential.

When Islam arrived it was welcomed by this open-minded view of religion: that it may assume any number of outer forms of expression, but what is vital is how we grasp the essence of religion, and comprehend its fundamental message.

That is why the teachings of the *Wali Songo* are not concerned merely with Islamic law, and in fact, have very little to do with such legal formalities. What is most conspicuous about the teachings we have inherited from our tradition of East Indies saints is precisely their great wisdom regarding “the development of the soul.”

---

**A Response to the Dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate**

**THE RELIGIOUS AND CIVILIZATIONAL LEGACY OF THESE SAINTS INSPIRED THE BIRTH of Nahdlatul Ulama, which means “The Awakening of Islamic Scholars.” In January of 1926, genealogical and spiritual heirs of the *Wali Songo* established NU in response to the confluence of two world-historic events.**

The first was the conquest of the most holy cities in Islam—Mecca and Medina—by Abdulaziz ibn Saud and his Wahhabi army, whose ideology resembled that of ISIS and al-Qaeda.

The second event was the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate, by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in 1924. For nearly 600 years, the Ottoman Empire—an Islamic caliphate—had politically dominated much of the Islamic world and shaped its understanding of Islamic orthodoxy. Seemingly overnight, this unifying force vanished, leaving a political, theological and civilizational vacuum in its wake.
Nahdlatul Ulama’s founders recognized that this seismic event heralded a profound change within the international order, which would affect the lives of Muslims worldwide.

Prior to World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate, the world was largely dominated by empires, kingdoms and tribal confederations. Unlike the Republic of Indonesia (est. 1945) and the United States of America, these empires and kingdoms generally had official state religions. The full enjoyment of legal privileges by their subjects was usually predicated upon their adopting the state’s religious identity. For example, the Ottoman Empire—and other Islamic caliphates before it—systematically discriminated against non-Muslims by enforcing a wide range of orthodox Islamic tenets that govern the treatment of conquered infidels, or “dhimmi.”

Like Christianity—whose institutionalized teachings and practices have varied widely over the course of its 2,000-year history—Islam is a diverse and complex religion. One element thereof is classical Islamic law, or fiqh, which addresses how a Muslim state should be governed and conduct international affairs. This classical Islamic jurisprudence evolved gradually over the course of centuries, within the context of a bygone “age of empires,” which witnessed over 1,200 years of violent conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, including many jihads and crusades.

In the post-World War II era of nation states, equal citizenship, human rights and religious freedom, some tenets of classical Islamic orthodoxy are no longer relevant to Muslims’ daily lives. Such tenets include norms that encourage enmity towards non-Muslims; require the establishment of a universal Islamic state, or caliphate; and reject laws derived from modern political processes.

For over 1,200 years prior to the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate, the majority of the world’s Muslims lived under political systems that sought to embody the orthodox ideal of a unified Muslim community, led by a pious Muslim ruler who adhered to the basic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy and led his community in a state of permanent warfare with neighboring non-Muslims. These tenets of classical Islamic jurisprudence are still taught by most orthodox Sunni and Shi’ite institutions as authoritative and correct, and thus continue to shape what may be described as the “prevailing Muslim mindset” worldwide.

One of the few regions of the Muslim world where these orthodox legal teachings were not historically dominant is the Indo-Malayan Archipelago, the territory of modern-day Indonesia, which we call Nusantara.

Prior to the invention of nuclear weapons and the advent of modern technology, which enabled the attacks of 9/11, the United States enjoyed a remarkably high
degree of security, protected by the vast expanses of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Similarly, the diverse cultures and civilization of the East Indies long flourished in relative security. Although the Indo-Malayan Archipelago has, for thousands of years, been a major crossroads of international trade, it generally enjoyed the luxury of embracing the best elements, and benignly neglecting the worst, of foreign cultures and civilizations.

That is no longer possible today.

Our relative isolation ended with the onset of the industrial age in the 19th century. Greatly improved transportation and communication in the form of steam-ships and other innovations cut journey times between the East Indies and the Middle East. For the first time, large numbers of Nusantara Muslims began visiting the holy cities of Mecca and Medina for pilgrimage—many staying for years before returning home with a much more detailed understanding of Islamic orthodoxy, including classical Islamic law.

The return of these pilgrims and legal scholars to the East Indies led to the emergence of a new kind of Islamic scholarship, closer in form and substance to that prevailing within the Ottoman Caliphate.

Previously, from the 15th to the 19th century, the distance between Nusantara and the traditional centers of Islamic learning in the Middle East meant that local Muslim leaders had to find creative, contextually appropriate responses to the actual needs and problems of their followers, with very little reference to classical Islamic law.

In effect, this meant that Nusantara religious scholars—called kyais—were engaged in a process of ijtihad—that is, creating new religious rulings and norms, long after this process had formally ended in the Middle East. For example, Sunan Kalijogo introduced the use of local cultural expressions such as shadow puppet theater, accompanied by an orchestra playing brass gongs, to teach the essential spiritual message of Islam, even though a fundamentalist understanding of Islamic orthodoxy would prohibit such practices.

This tradition of de facto ijtihad made Islam Nusantara more responsive to the changing needs of contemporary reality, and much better prepared to deal with the civilizational shockwaves generated by the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate and the transformation of global order from one of empires to one whose fundamental building block is the modern nation state.

The Muslim scholars who founded Nahdlatul Ulama were fully aware of this changing reality. For example, Kyai Zubair Dahlan constantly emphasized to his son—Kyai Maimun Zubair, one of NU’s most respected classical scholars, who was born in 1928 and passed away in 2019—how world civilization was changing.
Like Kyai Zubair Dahlan, the founding generation of Nahdlatul Ulama scholars deliberately prepared their disciples— that is, subsequent generations of NU scholars—to face the challenges posed by the remarkable changes that followed in the wake of World War I and World War II.

It quickly becomes obvious to anyone who examines the critical decisions made by Nahdlatul Ulama’s leadership over the past century, that these NU leaders made their decisions in light of the demands posed by contemporary reality, in order to promote the welfare of all Indonesians. For example, NU did not demand the establishment of Indonesia as an Islamic state. Rather, our leaders chose to found Indonesia as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state, imbued with respect for the nation’s enormous cultural, religious and ethnic diversity.

This momentous decision had no precedent in Islamic orthodoxy. It was the result of *ijtihad* and a profoundly difficult negotiation between Islamic orthodoxy and the emergence of a new world. NU kyais supported the founding of the Republic of Indonesia as a pluralistic nation state after an extensive dialogue with secular scholars, as they grew up together and engaged in nationalist, anti-colonial activism.

Pancasila, the “Five Principles” that lie at the heart of Indonesia’s state ideology, reflect not only the values of Nusantara civilization but also the essence of Islamic *shari’ah*¹³: belief in the Divinity Who is the Great “One”; a just and civilized humanity; the unity of Indonesia; society led by the wisdom that arises from deliberations among and between the people’s representatives; and the realization of social justice for all the people of Indonesia. In this, it is reminiscent of the Medina Charter, which formed the basis of a multi-religious state during the early years of Islam on the Arab Peninsula.

The sudden dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate and emergence of a new international order triggered profound anxiety, confusion and chaos throughout the Islamic world. Many Muslims joined Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami; many, in the Middle East, embraced Pan-Arabism; while others turned to Communism. Even in Indonesia there was profound opposition to the establishment of a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state. From 1949 to 1962, the Government of Indonesia, backed by Nahdlatul Ulama, waged a bitter struggle to defeat an armed insurrection called the Darul Islam, or Islamic State, movement. During the 1950s and 60s, the third largest Communist Party in the world was that of Indonesia. Following a Communist coup attempt in 1965, Nahdlatul Ulama joined Roman Catholics, Protestants and other Indonesian nationalists to defeat those who wanted the Republic of Indonesia to become part of the Communist Bloc.
Unlike many across the Muslim world, NU leaders did not insist upon a return to the obsolete construct of an Islamic caliphate. Instead, they chose to establish Indonesia as a nation state, which they acknowledged as the fundamental building block of a new, rules-based international order that promised to foster harmonious relations between different civilizations and to avoid the great religious conflicts of the past.

Unfortunately, many Muslims—especially in the Middle East—have come to view the nation state as a colonial imposition. Muslim extremists dream of re-establishing a global caliphate. The devastating events of 9/11, the Bali bombings of 2002 and the constant drumbeat of attacks perpetrated by Islamist terrorists worldwide for the past two decades have convinced many Nahdlatul Ulama leaders that Indonesia’s traditionally pluralistic and tolerant understanding and practice of Islam cannot survive if we fail to address obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that lend themselves to religious hatred, supremacy and violence.

Indonesia’s first democratically elected president and former NU Chairman Abdurrahman Wahid foresaw this challenge. President Wahid played a leading role in overthrowing the Suharto regime in 1998 and transforming Indonesia into the world’s 3rd largest democracy. During President Wahid’s brief term in office, he established press freedom, extended civil and political liberties to Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese population and other minorities, and restored civilian control of the military. Despite serious challenges posed by Islamist extremists and their opportunistic political allies, President Wahid succeeded in stabilizing Indonesia’s young democracy and preserving the Republic of Indonesia as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state.

Poised for Global Expansion

This brief history explains why Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama has both the capacity and motivation to launch a systematic recontextualization of Islamic teachings. In May of 2016, Nahdlatul Ulama hosted Islamic scholars from 33 countries and adopted the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration, which states:

15. The Nahdlatul Ulama calls upon people of good will of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus not to
16. The Nahdlatul Ulama will strive to consolidate the global ahlusunnah wal jamaah (Sunni Muslim) community, in order to bring about a world in which Islam, and Muslims, are truly beneficent and contribute to the well-being of all humanity.

The past decade has witnessed a profound revival of Nahdlatul Ulama and its dedication to the spiritual values and civilizational mission that inspired its founding in 1926. This may be seen not only from the ISOMIL and subsequent declarations, but also from the systematic implementation of a concrete strategy to propagate what NU describes as “Humanitarian Islam.” Humanitarian Islam is a global movement that seeks to restore rahmah (universal love and compassion) to its rightful place as the primary message of Islam, by addressing obsolete and problematic elements within Islamic orthodoxy that lend themselves to tyranny, while positioning these efforts within a much broader initiative to reject any and all forms of tyranny, and foster the emergence of a global civilization endowed with noble character.

As Mohammed Abu el-Fadl—deputy editor of Egypt’s most widely circulated daily newspaper, al-Ahram—wrote after visiting Indonesia in 2015: “Nahdlatul Ulama has consistently nurtured the values of Islam Nusantara for nearly a century, and is now poised to export its collective wisdom and experience throughout the world, for the benefit of humanity.”

In a separate article titled “Political Horizons for Indonesian Islam,” Abu el-Fadl observed that “the profoundly spiritual and tolerant worldview embodied in the term Islam Nusantara has begun to expand beyond its local framework to a global environment. Many lines of communication have been initiated between Nahdlatul Ulama and various Western governments. [Spiritual leaders within] Nahdlatul Ulama have begun to establish working relationships and operational nodes in many countries, operating under the organizational name, ‘Home of Divine Grace (Bayt ar-Rahmah).’ Each operational node propagates the model of tolerance embraced by Nahdlatul Ulama—such as peaceful coexistence with others and respect for individuals’ right to privacy, including freedom of thought and conscience—and seeks to accomplish this by leveraging the profound humane and spiritual values that underlie and animate all religions.”

At its 34th Congress held in Lampung, Sumatra in December of 2021, Nahdlatul Ulama embraced this global agenda, as encapsulated in the phrase
“Mengayomi Jagad Membangun Peradaban” (“Nourishing All of Creation and Building a Shared Civilization”). In a speech delivered in Lampung upon his election as Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board, one of the authors of this essay outlined two primary agendas he will pursue as Chairman of the 90-million-member organization: “The first is to develop self-sufficiency and autonomy for all Indonesian citizens, and the second is to heighten Nahdlatul Ulama’s role in the struggle to foster world peace.”

Regarding efforts to promote world peace, Nahdlatul Ulama has already proven successful in conducting a number of initiatives that are increasingly acknowledged, and valued, by key elements of the global community.

What needs to be done now is to accelerate our international engagement and develop synergy with initiatives conducted by the Indonesian government. For if we examine the international landscape and current geopolitical dynamics, it is clear that no single nation is better positioned to contribute to world peace than the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.17

The film, The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara, which documents Nahdlatul Ulama’s spiritual revival, concludes with the final stanzas of Sunan Kalijogo’s Hymn for Protection in the Darkness of Night. In a segment that directly challenges Islamic State ideology, the hymn’s Javanese lyrics are sung against a backdrop of ISIS destroying the shrine of Shaykh Ahmad ar-Rifa’i, founder of the Rifa’iyah Sufi brotherhood, in Tal Afar, Iraq, in 2014:

> May this fire be extinguished by a cool stream of water
> May brigands and rapists not come our way
> All evil shall vanish through the power of these divine vibrations
> May every dire threat immediately rebound upon its sender
> All illness and disease exorcised by the power of this sacred hymn.18

The final segment of the film is titled “The exalted values of East Indies civilization became the firm and upright foundation of the Indonesian nation state.” It features the Governor of Central Java, Ganjar Pranowo, addressing the 2014 Festival of Nusantara Saints:
It’s uncomfortable for us, as Muslims, when we’re accused of being violent. [Fanatical] bomb experts. We, personally, are incapable of such behavior. That’s why I have such high hopes for the vision and movement launched today in Demak, with this event held from early morning till late at night. I hope that the Festival of Nusantara Saints will inspire us to adopt a new approach capable of resolving these problems, and that in the field of international diplomacy we may offer the world [a new kind of Islam]. What kind of Islam? Well, like what you see here in Indonesia.

The Divine Grace of Islam Nusantara concludes with hundreds of senior NU leaders gathered in prayer in an open-air wooden pavilion in Demak, as the final verses of the Hymn are heard on the soundtrack:

Within the Perfect Man, every element of the body and soul functions in complete harmony
orbitied by dancing celestial nymphs
guarded by angels and all of God’s Messengers
My light is the Prophet Muhammad
My vision, the Messengers of God
Safeguarded by Adam’s shari’ah
[our innate human ability to know and serve God]
Spiritually perfected, all prophets and saints have become One within myself.¹⁹

NOTES

3. The complete text of these declarations may be found on the website of Bayt ar-Rahmah li ad-Da’wa al-Islamiyah Rahmatan li al-‘Alamin, a North Carolina-based 501(c)(3)
organization that helps coordinate the expansion of Nahdlatul Ulama operations worldwide. See: https://baytarrahmah.org/key-texts/.


12. This opening scene and the film’s trailer may be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLEi5ED_Xw.

13. See Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, ed., The Illusion of an Islamic State (Ilusi Negara Islam), Jakarta, Indonesia: LibForAll Foundation, Wahid Institute and Maarif Institute, 2009/2011, p. 35: “The primary reason we must oppose hardline movements is to restore honor and respect to Islam, which the extremists have desecrated, while at the same time preserving Pancasila and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Victory in the struggle against extremists will restore the majesty of Islamic teachings as rahmatan lil-âlamîn—a blessing for all creation—and this represents a vital key to building a peaceful world.

“We have conducted and published this study in order to raise awareness among all
components of Indonesian society, particularly the elite and mass media, concerning the dangers of extremist ideology and doctrine with which Middle Eastern transnational movements are flooding our nation, and which have sprouted like mushrooms in the rainy season over the past decade, during our democratic era. This work is also intended as a call to defend and preserve Pancasila, which reflects the essence of shari’a and transforms Islam into a true blessing for all creation.”


18. This segment of the film may be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB-02QWzXgk.

19. The authors wish to express their appreciation to Dr. Timothy Samuel Shah, Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Center for Shared Civilizational Values, for his valuable advice and assistance in the drafting of this essay.
It is not uncommon for people to refer to Indonesia as the largest, most tolerant, and most moderate Muslim country in the world. Indonesian officials and diplomats often use such expressions in their speeches. However, what is the origin of this tolerance and moderation, and how have they been retained all these decades? Clearly, their continuing presence has involved a complex social-historical struggle.

At a time when many Muslim countries globally have been involved in political conflicts, civil wars, and other strife, Indonesia remains an oasis of pluralism, a model Muslim country. The Indonesian version of democracy not only disproves the myth that Islam and democracy are incompatible, but also demonstrates how Islam can be managed and maintained within a modern nation state. Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country, with 230 million Muslims comprising 87.2 percent of the total population. Yet Islam is not the national religion. In fact, there is no official religion mentioned in the Indonesian Constitution.

Most works studying the Muslim world are Middle East-centric and tend to view Islam in South and Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, as peripheral Islam. This view is common not only among academics, but also among policymakers. Southeast Asia is not viewed as truly representing Islam. Some even call Islam in
this region “syncretic Islam,” a term with a negative connotation: Islam that is mixed up with local traditions is considered not pure or even “pseudo-Islam.” Consequently, the dynamics of Islam in Southeast Asia are considered less significant than those of the broader, Middle Eastern Muslim world.

The Middle East—the lens through which the Muslim world has conventionally been viewed—is currently in a bad state, both politically and economically. The Arab Spring of 2010 has not resulted in the hoped-for progress in democracy and human rights. Some parts of the Middle East have witnessed turmoil and fighting, with most of the violence perpetrated by Muslims against fellow Muslims. The emergence of the Islamic State in Syria has caused further troubles for the region. Thus, Islam and the turmoil of the Middle East are often conflated.

This Middle East-centric view of Islam leads some to believe that Islam is a threat to the values of modernity. This view considers the Muslim world as an outlier in the changing global attitudes toward ideas of progress, including democracy, human rights, gender justice, and minority rights. But given that the Muslim world plays an important role in determining the direction of global change, talking about global justice without including the Muslim world is a mistake. Now may be the time to shift from the perspective that sees Islam through an exclusively Middle Eastern prism and to understand the significance of Southeast Asian Islam.

The world religion study released by the Pew Research Center in April 2015 explains why it might be impossible to ignore the Muslim world when examining global change.1 Entitled “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections 2010–2050,” the study presents data on age, birth and death rates, migration, and conversion for eight major religions. The largest religious groups by percentage of global population as of 2010 are Christianity (31.4 percent), Islam (23.2 percent or 1.6 billion adherents), Hinduism (15 percent), Buddhism (7.1 percent), folk religion (5.9 percent), Judaism (0.2 percent), unaffiliated (atheism and agnosticism; 16.4 percent), and other religions (0.8 percent).

According to the Pew Center’s projection, by 2050 the global Muslim population will reach 29.7 percent (2.76 billion adherents) and Christianity will be stable at 31.4 percent. The percentage of Muslims and Christians is estimated to be around the same in 2070, at 32.3 percent. By 2100, the percentage of Muslims and Christians will reach 34.9 percent and 33.8 percent respectively. This research also shows that the numbers of atheists, agnostics, and people without religion will likely increase in several countries, including the U.S. and France, but globally their number will decrease, from 16.4 percent (in 2010) to 13.2 percent (in 2050). Meanwhile, other religions—including Hinduism, Buddhism, and
Judaism—will not experience much change in the proportion of their followers in the global population over the next four decades. An unanswered question concerns the kind of Islam that will be preeminent in 2050.

In addition to these ongoing demographic changes, a “decentering” of Islam’s development has also occurred. The Middle East is no longer seen by the vast majority of Muslims to represent Islam—certainly not politically, and increasingly not religiously. Islam in other world regions has developed its own characteristics. Put another way, no region can be fully considered as the sole representative of Islam; this has been true since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. With the nation state and nationalism entering the Muslim world, Muslim regions across the globe have their specific identities, even if their various identities have a common religious thread that brings them together. These identities and characteristics are shaped by a unique dynamic of Islamization. Indonesia, as one of the most important countries in Southeast Asia, was built under a unique Islamization process that has created a distinctive Islam.

Some recent academic works have sought to justify excluding Southeast Asia in any discussion of the Muslim world. For instance, Ahmet T. Kuru’s noted 2019 book, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, attempts to answer why the “Muslim world” is experiencing authoritarianism and underdevelopment, but it deliberately ignores the Southeast Asian region, especially Indonesia, as one of its units of analysis. Kuru offers two explanations for this. First, Islam in Indonesia had existed side by side with and mixed with indigenous traditions until the 16th century. (According to Antony Reid, very few sources can be found in Southeast Asia before 1590 AD.) Second, Kuru argues that in the 19th and 20th centuries, Islam in the Southeast Asian region was mostly influenced by Middle Eastern interpretations, not the other way around. For these reasons, Kuru says Islam in Indonesia is not comparable to Islam in the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa, and the Indian subcontinent.

Indonesian Islam has taken a different historical path from Islam in other regions. In the introduction to the Indonesian edition of his book, Kuru acknowledges that Indonesia is an exception to his big thesis. Indeed, he has since argued Islam in Indonesia should be considered on its own terms, and that its successes and reputation for moderation have not been sufficiently recognized around the world. In addition to the absence of the ulema-state alliance and oil rents, Indonesia has better democratic and economic development indicators than other majority-Muslim countries, although it is still considered a “flawed democracy” rather than a “full democracy” (see below).

The Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2020 Democracy Index shows that demo-
racy in Indonesia is fairly stable. In 2020, Indonesian democracy did face some setbacks, but this was a global phenomenon connected to the global health crisis, not unique to or limited to Indonesia. According to the report, out of 167 countries, Indonesia ranks 64th globally and 11th in the Asia-Australia region. The Indonesian Democracy Index score is 6.48, and the country is classified under the “flawed democracies” category. On a 0–10 scale, Indonesia scores 7.92 for its electoral process and pluralism, 7.14 for government functions, 6.11 for political participation, 5.63 for democratic political culture, and 5.59 for civil liberties. The report also indicates that the development of democracy and the economy in Indonesia is far more advanced than in other Muslim countries in the Middle East and Africa.

The capacity of Islam to build a distinctive Islamic character in Indonesia should not be taken for granted; this character was not inevitable but rather formed through a long process. It was influenced by the Islamization process that occurred in the country over time, the struggle over national politics, and the existence of a broad base of Islamic community organizations that do not depend upon power politics. This historical experience created social capital and a certain characteristic Islam that is called “Nusantara Islam” by the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia with a membership of approximately 60 million.

Nusantara Islam: Response and Manifesto

The word “NUSANTARA” is generally used as a designation or name for the entire territory of the Indonesian archipelago. It is a designation of locus (place), not an attribute. As such, Nusantara Islam is Islam that grows, develops, and lives in the archipelago as a result of the dialectical process between the Islamic texts (the Qur’an and hadith) and the local reality and culture. This dialectic eventually forms a sect, identity, value, and culture, along with all of their inherent features. The distinctive features of Nusantara Islam were born from the living traditions and the dynamic struggles of the Indonesian people over a long historical span. By adhering to the fundamental sources of Islam, the Qur’an and the hadith, the Islamization process has allowed 87.2 percent of the Indonesian population to embrace Islam without war or major bloodshed.
In the history of Islamic intellectualism in Indonesia, the term Nusantara Islam has deep roots. In 2007, the Ministry of Religious Affairs published a book entitled *Nalar Islam Nusantara*, which contains research on the diversity of Islamic movements by several prominent Indonesian Islamic organizations, including NU, Muhammadiyah, PERSIS (Persatuan Islam), and al-Irsyad. In the same year, the scholar Nor Huda published an article entitled “Islam Nusantara: Sejarah Sosial Intelektual Islam di Indonesia” (“Nusantara Islam: The Social History of Islamic Intellectuals in Indonesia”). In 2008, the Wahid Foundation published *Ragam Eskpresi Islam Nusantara/Various Expressions of Nusantara Islam*, a book that grew out of an opinion column published in two influential Indonesian magazines (*Gatra* and *Tempo*) on the diversity of Islam in Indonesia. Also in 2008, several articles on the characteristics of Islam in Indonesia were published by *Taswirul Afkar*, a journal of the Institute for Human Resources Study and Development at Nahdlatul Ulama; these included a cover feature on Nusantara Islam. Notwithstanding these publications, however, adequate discussion about the term has yet to take place.

The first public discussion of the term Nusantara Islam in Indonesia finally occurred when it was used as the theme of the 33rd NU Congress in Jombang, East Java, in early 2015. Criticism of Nusantara Islam as the theme of the NU Congress emerged soon after.

One criticism came from groups such as Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defender Front) and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, which view Islam and nationalism as being contradictory and seek to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state. They also justify violence in the name of spreading Islam and reject all kinds of local cultures as contradicting what they deem to be Islamic values. They faulted Nusantara Islam for seeing no contradiction between Islam and national identity or between Islam and local traditions; for carrying out the Islamization process peacefully, without involving and justifying violence as a way of spreading Islam; and for reinforcing tolerance and anti-radicalism.

These critiques are inseparable from Indonesia’s national politics. Most of the groups that have criticized Nusantara Islam as an ideal and a reality are, in fact, political opponents of President Joko Widodo; their opposition has increased since the president’s opening speech at the NU’s Alim Ulama National Conference at Istiqlal Mosque (on June 14, 2015). In that speech, he praised Nusantara Islam and even said, “Our Islam is Nusantara Islam.” The government and NU have been very close since then, as both seek to stop the spread of radical Islamist groups.

In an effort to disseminate the ideas of Nusantara Islam, NU held an International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) on May 9–11, 2016. The
summit, called “Nusantara Islam as Inspiration for World Peace,” was attended by around 400 participants from Sudan, Libya, Algeria, India, Russia, Morocco, Thailand, England, Senegal, Lithuania, Spain, Greece, South Korea, Pakistan, Jordan, Malaysia, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and other countries; it resulted in the Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration. The declaration, which has become known as the “Manifesto of Nusantara Islam,” offered Nusantara Islam to the world as an Islamic paradigm worthy of emulation. It argued that Islam contributes to universal civilization by respecting and appreciating the existing cultures and promoting harmony and peace. It also invited Muslim communities around the world “to recall the beauty and dynamism that emerged from the historic encounter of the spirit and teachings of Islam with the reality of local cultures …, which have given birth to numerous great civilizations,” including in the archipelago.

The declaration offers the perspective of Nusantara Islam, which does not see any contradiction between religion and nationality. The perspective is expressed in its memorable adage hubbul watan minal iman, meaning “love for the motherland is part of faith.” Whoever does not have a nationality will not have a homeland. Whoever does not have a homeland will not have a history. In Nusantara Islam’s perspective, Islam does not mobilize its adherents to conquer the world, but encourages them to continually strive to become ahlaqul karimah (noble characters). This way, Islam can truly manifest itself as a blessing or a mercy to all creation (rahmatan lil ‘alamin). Nusantara Islam strictly follows and lives up to the teachings and values of fundamental Islam, including tawassuth (the middle way, the moderate path), tawaazun (balance, harmony), tasaamuh (gentleness and compassion, not violence and coercion), and i’tidaal (justice).

Further, the declaration highlights the factors behind rampant religious extremism, terrorism, and conflicts in the Middle East and the tidal wave of Islamophobia in the West. This extremism is the fallout from a misinterpretation of Islam. For decades, many governments in the Middle East have exploited the religious differences—and the history of hostility—between existing schools of Islam, without considering the consequences for humanity at large. By promoting sectarian differences or discrimination, these countries pursue soft power (influence over opinion) and hard power (political, economic, and military influence) and spread their conflicts to the world. Such sectarian propaganda deliberately fosters religious extremism and encourages the spread of terrorism throughout the world. This directly contributes to creating the tidal wave of Islamophobia among non-Muslims. The threat of religious extremism and terrorism can be overcome only if these governments are willing to open up and construct alternative sources of political legitimacy.
Moreover, economic and political injustice as well as mass poverty in many Muslim countries also plays a significant role in the growth of religious extremism and terrorism. The persistence of injustice is constantly used as propaganda by extremist and terrorist groups to justify their existence and utopian claims that they, and they alone, will build a better future. Therefore, the issues of injustice and poverty are inseparable from extremism and terrorism.10

The NU Declaration is said to be a manifesto for realizing Nusantara Islam based on historical experience. This manifesto is highly relevant to ongoing global challenges, especially religious-political conflicts in various parts of the Muslim world and the growing radicalism that presents a threat to world security. Although Indonesia is affected by the problems and challenges of the larger Muslim world and cannot be considered separate from it, it has so far been able to face various challenges with its own social capital.

**Nusantara Islam:**
Social Capital and Characteristics

**NUSANTARA ISLAM IS NOT, AS SOME CRITICS CHARGE, A THEOLOGICAL SYNCRETISM** that incorporates various beliefs. It is instead Islam that is aware of itself, where it stands, and its place in history. The awareness of this historical reality means that Nusantara Islam recognizes the basic plurality of human civilizations; it opposes cultural imperialism and does not wish to impose one society’s culture on another different society. Islam is basically inseparable from Arab culture, but Arab culture is not always synonymous with Islam. This historical understanding allows Muslims in the archipelago to distinguish Islam as a series of teachings from elements of Arab culture.

Nusantara Islam’s awareness of itself is inseparable from the Islamization process that historically shaped the Islam of the archipelago. Compared to the Islamization process in some other regions of the world, the process in Indonesia and Southeast Asia is relatively new; according to studies by historians, the Islamization process in Indonesia occurred just as Islam in the Middle East suffered from decline.

Historians of Islam present several informed theories—and occasionally a lot of speculation—about the early history of Islam in Indonesia, how it entered the
archipelago, and how the subsequent Islamization process unfolded there. Some argue that Islam was introduced in the archipelago in the century after Hijra (an event of the seventh century), when Arab traders arrived in Banda Aceh. This theory claims that the Islam that came to Indonesia was the most authentic Islam since the early days of Islam’s development in Arabia. This “Arab theory” is acknowledged by earlier writers such as John Crawfurd, who maintained that the interaction between Indonesians and Muslims from the east coast of India played an important role in the spread of Islam in the archipelago. Similarly, Jansje Keijzer held that Nusantara Islam came from Egypt because of its similarities with the Shafi’i school of thought, while G. K. Niemann and J. J. De Holander held that Islam in the archipelago did not originate from Egypt but from Hadramaut in Yemen.11

In contrast, many writers explicitly argue that Islam came to Indonesia right from Arabia (not India) in the seventh century (not the 12th or 13th century) through Arab traders who traveled to the ports of the archipelago. Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah, for example, mentions a camphor business contract between the Indonesians and Arab traders in the seventh century.12 This theory is shared by many Islamic historians who are willing to say that Islam in the archipelago is genuine and authentic Islam coming directly from its original center and clearly not a peripheral and syncretic Islam. However, this Arab theory is unable to explain how the religious conversion took place and how the Islamization process was involved in it. This difficulty is understandable, however, if we bear in mind that the Arab traders did not solely aim to spread Islam.

A second theory has been proposed by Dutch scholars, including Pijnappel and G. W. J. Drewes,13 who claimed the origin of Islam in the archipelago was from the Indian subcontinent, specifically the Gujarat and Malabar regions, and not Persia or Arabia. According to them, the Arabs who were subject to the Shafi’i school of thought immigrated and settled in India and then brought Islam to the archipelago. This theory was later developed by Snouck Hurgronje, an Indonesianist from the Netherlands, who argued that once Islam was firmly established in several port cities of the Indian subcontinent, Indian or Deccan Muslims came to Malay Indonesia as the early propagators of Islam. Only then did the Arabs claiming the titles of Sayyid and Syarif and descent from Prophet Muhammad accomplish their mission in spreading Islam in the archipelago by becoming priests or sultans. This process occurred in the 12th century—the most likely period for the beginning of Islam in its true sense in the archipelago.14

A third theory, developed by S.Q. Fatimi15 and based on the fact that most prominent people or their descendants in Pasai were Bengalis, states that Islam came...
from Bengal (Bangladesh): Islam first arrived in the Malay Peninsula from the east coast, not from the west (Malacca), and traveled through Canton, Phanrang (Vietnam), Leran, and Trengganu. He argues that the doctrine of Islam in the peninsula resembles the one in Phanrang, and finds the inscription elements in Trengganu similar to the ones in Leran. Drewes, a historian of Indonesia, criticizes this theory, particularly the claim about the inscriptions, which he considered was not well-substantiated. In addition, the dominant school of thought in Bengal is the Hanafi school, not the Shafi'i school as in Indonesia.16

Regarding the question of who spread Islam in the archipelago, most Western scholars argue that the first propagator of Islam was a Muslim trader who began trading in the area and married a local woman. This is in contrast to the opinion of A. H. Johns, who in an article entitled “Sufism as a Category in Indonesian Literature and History” questions this view.17 Johns finds it difficult to believe that Muslim traders were propagators of Islam. If they were actively involved in spreading Islam, why did Islam not spread before the 12th century, given that it had been present in the archipelago since the seventh century? In other words, despite the fact that the natives had met and interacted with Muslims since the seventh century, there is no evidence showing large numbers of local people converting to Islam or substantial Islamization taking place in the archipelago before the 12th century.

A. H. Johns proposes a theory that the wandering Sufis, with their charismatic authority and spiritual power, spread Islam in the archipelago and finally succeeded in Islamizing a large population beginning in the 13th century. Their success was due to their ability to present Islam in a moderate manner, especially in emphasizing the compatibility between Islam and local culture.18 As a result of this approach, Islam in the region—especially on the island of Java Island—is called syncretic Islam by Western researchers,19 including Harry J. Benda,20 Clifford Geertz,21 W. F. Wertheim,22 Robert Jay,23 Howard M. Fiderspiel,24 and others. The word “syncretic” tends to be used pejoratively, to argue that Indonesian Islam is somehow not “authentic” and is mixed up with outside elements. However, this assumption (or accusation) is not entirely true, as the basic aspects of constructing Islam in Indonesia are no different from those operating in other parts of the world. The only distinction is the way of expressing Islam; local traditions are opposed and wiped out in other places, but Islam in Indonesia actually embraces them. This is the reason why more than 200 million Indonesians profess Islam. The phase when wandering Sufis were actively involved, which began in the 13th century, is inseparable from the development of Islam. The Sufi order became a dominant force in the development of the Muslim world, right after the fall of
Baghdad in 1258 (corresponding to 656 AH). The Sufi order gradually became a stable and disciplined institution, and developed an affiliation with the trade and handicraft groups that had helped shape urban society. The dominant role played by the Sufis in spreading Islam in the archipelago has shaped the characteristics of Indonesian Islam.

The Islamization process in Indonesia formed the characteristics of Nusantara Islam in six main ways:

1. Promoting dialogue and the way of peace. Dialogue and the way of peace are characteristics originating from the Sufis’ teachings and Islamization processes in the archipelago. The Sufis put forth an example of how to preach and spread Islam into the heart of the society, and in doing so produced a much stronger Islam than one spread by violence and intimidation. Acceptance is a choice—not compelled—based on the principles of Islamic teachings.

2. Adapting to local traditions. The presence of Islam in the archipelago does not involve opposition to or destruction of local traditions or their physical and nonphysical symbols. This adaptive attitude is in line with the characteristics of dialogue and the way of peace. Here, adaptation is not syncretism, but the ability to incorporate Islamic teachings within social customs to create a harmonious relationship between Islam and the traditions and customs of the society. The traditions and customs of the people are kept and maintained, but the worldview is replaced with the Islam-based worldview. This adaptive approach leads Islam in the archipelago to avoid coercion and become part of the belief and culture of the people themselves.

3. Relying on the power of civil society. Nusantara Islam is not an Islam that depends on political power. If it did, then the collapse of political power would mean that it, too, collapsed. Even though Nusantara Islam needs to engage in and support political life, political power is not the main foundation of its social power and influence. The true power of Islam is the cultural power that exists in society under the guidance of religious scholars, the ulema. Here, the power of Islam in civil society means that Muslim scholars, especially under religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, play a significant role in protecting society on the one hand and guarding the integrity of the Republic of Indonesia on the other. The ulema do not live in ivory towers. They live within society to fully understand people and their activities, and so become their spokesmen and the anchor of their lives. They play a role in handling any political or social chaos and disturbances due to change. This is why,
no matter how big the social and political changes are, they do not cause extra-
ordinary shocks that threaten the life of society, nation, and state. This situation
in turn ensures economic, social, and cultural independence, that is, sovereignty
and freedom from foreign control and malign influence.
does not see any contradiction between Islam and nationalism. The integrity
of the nation is understood in Nusantara Islam as a collective and individual
responsibility. The love for the homeland is an awareness of the importance of
securing a foothold. There is a memorable adage in Indonesia, “\textit{hubbul wathan
minal iman}”—“love for the motherland is part of faith”—that suggests Nusan-
tara Islam’s religious-creative approach to encouraging Muslims to love their
homeland. This is what inspired the Muslims in Surabaya, East Java, and its
surroundings to promote the “Resolution of Jihad” and defend Indonesian
independence in 1945. Muslim scholars in Indonesia loved and defended the
country; to preserve its integrity, they were unwilling to make Indonesia an
Islamic state. The Jakarta Charter agreed by Indonesia’s founding fathers on
June 22, 1945 stated that there was an obligation to carry out Islamic law for
its adherents, but this was removed from the Constitution at the beginning of the
formation of the Indonesian state. However, this did not lessen their love for
Indonesia in the slightest. The love for the nation and the state did not dimin-
ish their love for Islam. In fact, the love for Islam and effort to build a civilization
would not be possible in a country that could not be managed independently.
Hence for Nusantara Islam and NU, nationalism is an important prerequisite
to building an Islamic civilization.
5. Believing in citizen equality. Nusantara Islam recognizes the equality of all
Indonesian citizens; no citizen is privileged over another. Each and every one
of them is treated equally without discrimination regardless of their religion,
ethnicity, and race. Their equality is a result and continuation of the nation-state
ideology, which views ties to the state as a social contract that includes the
state’s duty to protect all its citizens. The state’s protection of its citizens with-
out discrimination is a form of loyalty to the basic principles of Islam, as human
beings are God’s most noble creatures. The state offers its protection to citizens
solely as human beings who are willing to become citizens, not for anything else.
In the National Alim Ulama Conference in 2019, Nahdlatul Ulama emphatically
rejected the idea that non-Muslims should be called \textit{kafir}. Instead, they are
citizens. This approach embodies the principle of equality for all citizens.
6. Rejecting extremism and radicalism. In its long history, Nusantara Islam has
always rejected religious extremism. Extremism is a way of thinking and acting
that contradicts the Islamic principles of tawasuth (moderation) and tasamuh (tolerance). Extreme thinking can lead someone to become radical by justifying violence as a way to realize what is considered an ideal. Wherever extremism takes root, it will always bring chaos and disharmony. Nusantara Islam opposes extremism and aims to create the balance that can lead to a harmonious life. In contrast, religious extremism can lead to acts of intolerance and even terrorism, and may justify violence and war to fight for its belief. But instead of defending religion, this approach will only destroy religion.

Given all these characteristics, Nusantara Islam is not allergic to modern ideas and is actually a critical partner for ideas such as democracy and human rights, which are facing challenges globally. Democracy and human rights certainly entail new values that may be in tension with Islam. But under Nusantara Islam, there is dialogue and give and take in cases where Islamic teachings are considered contrary to modern ideas. Such a willingness to make concessions allows a balanced world order and the establishment of a civilization that respects the nature and dignity of humanity.

The experiences of Muslims in Indonesia, where Pancasila offers a set of national principles to protect all kinds of beliefs, play a very important role in the growth of Islamic civilization in the country. Although Indonesia is not a country where Islam is the national religion, it does not ignore the importance of religious values in politics or state management. For this reason, NU as the main pillar of Nusantara Islam has always shown its love for the country, considering it as the house of Islam (darul Islam)—the place where Muslims are given the facilities and freedom to practice their religion and belief.

Conclusion

WITH ITS UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE, NUSANTARA Islam offers an alternative understanding of the development and future of Islam. Indeed, understanding the development of the Muslim world is not possible without including Nusantara Islam. The world needs to understand this fact, rather than accept a monolithic understanding of Islam. Nusantara Islam is clearly not peripheral Islam, and to say so presupposes the existence of central Islam. Essentially and practically, it is Islam itself. It reminds the world that there are always
different ways of expressing Islam, and that it is necessary to contextualize Islamic teachings.

Nusantara Islam is not, as critics charge, a deviation from a single normative “authentic” Islam. Rather, it embodies what has become the norm in the Indonesian archipelago through hundreds of years of Islamic history. It is a cosmopolitan Islam that respects diversity and is open to new ideas without fearing loss of its authenticity—that is, its commitment to the basic principles of the Islamic faith. The real-world experience of Nusantara Islam in maintaining the character of peaceful Islam that is compatible with democracy can be a reference for other nations in the Muslim World as they confront various problems. In short, Nusantara Islam is not a type of Islam trapped under majoritarianism, but the one kind that gives a sense of security and protection to minority groups.

NOTES

   The Democracy Index Report has been published since 2006. It assesses countries based on four categories—full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes. Indonesia has always been listed as a flawed democracy. This means it has managed to prevent itself from becoming a hybrid or authoritarian regime.
5. No exact data show the number of NU members. According to a survey conducted by the Alvara Research Center in 2016, 50.3 percent of Indonesia’s Muslim population, or about 79.04 million people, claimed to be affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama. See Hasanuddin Ali, “Menakar Jumlah Jamaah NU dan Muhammadiyah,” January 19, 2017, https://hasanuddinali.com/2017/01/19/menakar-jumlah-jamaah-nu-dan-muhammadiah/.
6. By contrast, the Islamization process in other regions usually involved conquest and war.


9. Ibid.

10. Adopted from the 16 points of the Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration. NUOnline.com, “Inilah Naskah Lengkap Deklarasi Nahdlatul Ulama kepada Dunia,” May 10, 2016, https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/68092/inilah-naskah-lengkap-deklarasi-nahdlatul-ulama-kepada-dunia. This manifesto was reinforced in an ulema meeting held by the Ansor Youth Movement, the youth organization of Nahdlatul Ulama, on May 21–22, 2017, in Jombang, East Java; this resulted in the Ansor Youth Movement’s Declaration on Humanitarian Islam. On October 25, 2018, the Ansor Youth Movement issued the Nusantara Manifesto, which invites people of goodwill of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus to prevent the political weaponization of Islam, whether by Muslims or non-Muslims, and to curtail the spread of communal hatred by fostering the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being. See Rüdiger Lohlker, “Fiqh Reconsidered: Indigenization and Universalization of Islamic Law in Indonesia,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 7 (2021): 188–208.


19. “Syncretic” refers first to the integration of Islamic teachings with the local values held
by the community since before the arrival of Islam, and second to the integration of Islamic teachings with values and traditions of the Indian and Persian merchant communities who spread Islam.


25. Pancasila—the “five principles” that underpin modern Indonesia’s political order—including the belief in one supreme God; humanitarianism; nationalism; democracy; and social justice.
Contributors

RUMADI AHMAD is Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Sharia and Law, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta; Chairman of the Institute for Human Resources Study and Development, National Board of Nahdlatul Ulama.

MUSTAFA AKYOL is Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute, focusing on Islam, modernity and public policy.

PETER BOFIN is a research consultant based in Ireland and East Africa.

ABDUL SAYED is an independent researcher on jihadism and the politics and security of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

K. H.YAHYA CHOLIL STAQUF is Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board and co-founder of the Humanitarian Islam movement.

C. HOLLAND TAYLOR serves as Emissary to the UN, Americas and Europe for Gerakan Pemuda Ansor and is a co-founder of the Humanitarian Islam movement.

PIETER VAN OSTAEYEN is an historian and Arabist and a doctoral candidate in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Leuven.

LORENZO VIDINO is the Director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University.

CHARLIE WINTER is the Director of Research at Extrac.