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Indonesian Islam: Neither White Knight nor Damsel in Distress

BY BENJAMIN NATHAN

In the fifteen years since 9/11, the attitude of the American media and foreign policy community towards Indonesian Islam has followed two parallel paths. The first is that Muslims in Indonesia have the potential to influence the thoughts and actions of Islamic extremists in the Middle East. The reasoning behind this viewpoint is easy to see: Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population, an overwhelming majority of whom reject acts of religious violence. American policymakers from both parties naturally see this state of affairs as a useful diplomatic tool for combating extremism in the Middle East. Former U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia Paul Wolfowitz echoed this theme in 2009, writing in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed entitled "Indonesia Is a Model Muslim Democracy" that "if [Indonesia] continues to make progress on religious tolerance, it can point the way for other majority Muslim countries." In November 2015, *The New York Times* described a recent anti-ISIS media campaign led by the Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as a "welcome antidote to jihadism" and as a solution to the problem that "Western leaders often lack credibility with those most susceptible to jihad's allure."

Benjamin Nathan, former researcher at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that "The same factors that limit the usefulness of Indonesian Islam as a counterweight to extremist groups in the Middle East apply with equal strength to attempts by extremist groups in the Middle East to make inroads in Indonesia."

The second path of American thinking about Indonesian Islam is that Islamic extremists in the Middle East have the potential to influence the thoughts and actions of Muslims in Indonesia. This is an idea of Indonesia as a teetering domino, a fortress of religious moderation under internal siege from a worldwide pox of Islamic fundamentalism. In this view, the fact that 90% of Indonesians are Muslims makes the country vulnerable to radicalization, moderate as Indonesia's mainstream form of Islam may be. In its 2016 budget, the State Department listed Indonesia as a "focus country" for its Antiterrorism Assistance and Countering Violent Extremism programs. The United States provides financial and technical support for Detachment 88, Indonesia's most prominent antiterror group, and also funds organizations deemed capable of "grass-roots counter-messaging" against extremism.

These twin perspectives assume the potential for widespread, persuasive communication between Indonesian Muslims and their coreligionists around the world. This assumption is largely off base. Chief among its flaws is that cultural and religious disparities between Indonesia and the Middle East, while impossible to measure precisely, are stark. Indonesians speak not Arabic but Malay, an Austronesian language whose resemblance to Arabic consists only of a scattershot of shared vocabulary. Indonesian Muslims generally make a point of distinguishing themselves from inhabitants of the Arab world. The Indonesian term *kearab-araban*, roughly equivalent to "over-Arabness," is not a term of respect.

Even if they could easily communicate with other Muslims around the world, Indonesians would have few opportunities to do so. Indonesians are simply not well-placed around the globe to influence the ideological tide of worldwide Islam. Indonesia's diaspora, aside from those who live in neighboring Malaysia, is small relative to population size. Of the Indonesians who travel to the Middle East, most are female domestic workers. The Saudi government caps the number of Indonesians allowed to attend the annual Hajj pilgrimage at 168,800 per year — just .08% of the country's Muslim population.

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And even if it were conceivable that Indonesian anti-extremist rhetoric could dissuade Muslims around the world from joining groups like ISIS and Boko Haram, it would still be misleading to claim that organized Islam in Indonesia is an outstanding example of peace and tolerance that transcends historically-bound political conditions. The *New York Times* article that called attention to Nahdlatul Ulama's anti-ISIS efforts made no mention of the fact that the group played a central role in the murder of hundreds of thousands of suspected communists from 1965 to 1966. Its popular reputation as a moderate organization that "stresses nonviolence, inclusiveness and acceptance of other religions" is the result of an astonishingly narrow focus on the present day.

The reason why Nahdlatul Ulama and similar organizations no longer coordinate mass violence is that their institutional legitimacy is now secure—they face no challenge to their influence that compares to the threat they once faced from organized communism. Their professed tolerance is a result of political stability, not a cause. The historical record on this point is clear: when immersed in the power struggle of the 1960s, NU proved just as susceptible to the temptations of political violence as the extremist groups its leaders denounce today. It is therefore hard to imagine how Indonesia's present-day brand of tolerance could take hold in such politically unstable regions as Syria and Nigeria.

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The same factors that limit the usefulness of Indonesian Islam as a counterweight to extremist groups in the Middle East apply with equal strength to attempts by extremist groups in the Middle East to make inroads in Indonesia. The wide political and cultural reach of groups like NU and Muhammadiyah have provided resistance against the ideological incursions of Salafi proselytizers and the recruitment efforts of the Islamic State. Even as mainstream Indonesian Islam grows more conservative in areas like LGBT rights and interreligious tolerance, its institutions constrain foreign radicalization.

ISIS, for its part, seems both unable and unwilling to carry out major terrorist attacks in Indonesia. In a January 2016 report for USAID, political scientist Greg Fealy estimated that only 250 to 300 Indonesian citizens—roughly one for every million—have traveled to join ISIS. Neighboring Australia's per capita rate is five times as high. While the attacks that killed four people in Jakarta on January 14th were widely interpreted as a sign that ISIS had expanded its focus to Indonesia, evidence suggests that central ISIS leadership in Iraq and Syria did not have a planning role. The attack was an amateurish and homegrown operation with no proven connection to ISIS beyond hazy funding links and an impossible-to-disprove link of 'inspiration."

Indonesia today faces issues that dwarf the threat of terrorism in their scope and significance, such as the economy and institutional political weaknesses. According to the Global Terrorism Index, Indonesia would not match Nigeria's 2014 casualty count from terrorism if an equivalent to January's Jakarta attack occurred five times a day for an entire year. The US foreign policy community should not let the strategic priority of preventing the spread of terrorism distort their view of Indonesia's own pressing needs. A strong Indonesia, after all, fits well within the policy interests of the United States. The world's fourth-most populous country is an important economic and strategic partner, not least because of China's increasing ambitions to establish its influence in Southeast Asia.

There is a risk, moreover, that funding local counterterrorism efforts will incur more than just an opportunity cost. The Indonesian military, sidelined since Suharto's downfall in 1998, views access to counterterrorism funding as a potential wedge for reestablishing its influence in national politics. A remilitarization of Indonesian society would surely damage the country's young democratic institutions. It could also thwart key American policy goals like the protection of religious freedom and human rights. The military has recently been involved in programs like *bela negara* ("defend the nation"), a training program for lay citizens that aims to target such social ills as latent communism and homosexuality. If American policymakers insist on enlisting Indonesia in the fight against terrorism, they must take care to avoid treatments that cause more harm than the targeted disease.

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