

Nahdlatul Ulama and counter-terrorism: More than a proxy police force *

On November 18-19, the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCTC) held a conference in partnership with the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), to raise awareness of the United Nation's Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. That strategy seeks to expand the fight against terrorism to include Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and to recognize that the causes of terrorism are not simply militant ideologies. According to the UN General Assembly resolution 60/288, the causes of terrorism include poverty, human rights violations, political grievances, political marginalization, and other "conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism."

The conference was a refreshing change from eight years of hawkish counter-terrorism rhetoric. Even more refreshing was that the change came from the UN, an organization that was discredited in much of the Muslim world for its complicity in the US-led war in Iraq, particularly for Security Council Resolution 1441 which stated that Saddam Hussein's government would, "face serious consequences as a result of its continued violations of its obligations."

Yet despite the UN's effort to move beyond the "with us or against us" approach, surprisingly little attention was given to the implications of the CGCTC's partnership with NU. After all, NU is not a typical CSO: It is the largest Islamic organization in the world. It provides the backbone for Indonesia's culture of tolerance and its leaders are among the most influential in the Muslim world. In a recent list of the world's 500 most influential Muslims, seven come from NU backgrounds. ¹

Which raises the questions: What would an NU counter-terrorism policy look like? And, how would it differ from the UN's current policy? These are important questions for the UN as it tries to shape the next generation of counter-terrorism policies.

Removing the Roadblocks

The first step for crafting a new, NU-friendly counter-terrorism policy would be to remove the roadblocks to cooperation. The first roadblock is the perception among many Islamic organizations that efforts aimed at counter-terrorism are used as pretext for the persecution of Muslims around the globe including — but far beyond — American actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in Guantanamo Bay. There was a recent Jakarta screening of the film *Ten Conditions of Love* which tells of how the Chinese government used the shield of terrorism to isolate, imprison, and execute

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¹ The list includes chair of NU Dr KH Achmad Hasyim Muzadi, former NU chair Abdurahman Wahid, PBNU Secretary Prof Dr. H Nasaruddin Umar, Muslimat NU chair Siti Musdah Mulia, Muslimat NU board member Lily Zakiyah Munir, Fatayat NU chair Maria Ulfah Anshor, and Prof. Dr Tuti Alawiyah.

Uygher Muslims in Xingiang (also known as Eastern Turkmenistan). In Southeast Asia, one conference participant, Amina Rasul-Bernardo, made clear that in the Philippines, the central government has used the rhetoric of terrorism to oppress Mindanao Muslims, hundreds of whom remain imprisoned without trial. Vocal UN-led opposition to such distortions of the goals of the war on terror would go a long way towards removing Muslim organization's reluctance to sincerely work with the UN.

Trans-Local Networks and Solutions

As Rommel Banlaoi of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism made clear, the links between terrorist organizations within Southeast Asia have largely been broken due to police and military action. Yet productive ties between Muslim communities remain. Dr. Din Syamsuddin and Dr. Sudibyo Markus of Muhammadiyah have been active in negotiations between the Moro Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government. NU chair Hasyim Muzadi has proposed to the Thai government that there be more cooperation between Thai and Indonesian Muslims as a way of resolving tensions within Thailand. These 'trans-local' connections are an underutilized asset for combating violent groups across Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

After all, while contemporary politics operate on the basis of vertical ties between civil society, states, and international organizations, Islamic communities have long operated according to a different logic. Horizontal linkages based on trade and pilgrimage networks precede the modern nation-state and those linkages endure. Within Nusantara, the links between the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand and Muslim Indonesia could be harnessed using the Southeast Asia Forum for Islam and Democracy. Across the Indian Ocean, the sermons and scholarship of the Yemenese Sheikh al Habib Umar bin Hafiz continue to shape the beliefs of Indonesian Muslims, possibly even more than the state-sponsored rhetoric of the Indonesian Council of the Ulama (MUI, *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*). Including the voices and views of these global Muslim elites would bring powerful voices into the fight against terrorism.

Intra-Faith Dialogue

Inter-faith dialogue between Christians and Muslim is often seen as a substitute for military counter-terrorism policies. Yet given that inter-faith dialogue is based on the premise of resolving tension between different faiths, it is more of a complement than a substitute. More difficult, and arguably more important for reducing Islamic radicalism, is intra-faith dialogue. In Indonesia, that would mean bridging modernist, traditionalist, and Islamist divides. For fighting terrorism, an NU forum with Muhammadiyah, Islamic Defender's Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, and other groups, is arguably more important than entering into dialogue on related topics with Christian groups.

Such forums have a long history in Indonesia, from the Majelis Islamil Ala Indonesia (MIAI) of the 1930s, Masyumi in the 1950s, and MUI today. MUI's 2005 fatwa differentiating jihad from terrorism, and labelling terrorism *haram* (prohibited), was the result of Jusuf Kalla's efforts to bring Muslim leaders together in such a forum. While President Yudhoyono and Vice President Boediono lack the Islamic credentials to do the same, the chairs of NU and Muhammadiyah could take the lead. And they could so within the framework of an existing Islamic counter-terrorism strategy: the Organization of Islamic State's Convention on Combating International Terrorism shares a number of priorities with the 2006 UN strategy, most notably the emphasis on human rights (though it predates the UN by seven years). Overall, intra-faith dialogue should be better able to address the sources of political grievances than inter-faith dialogue.

Follow the Leaders

The most persuasive argument for following a NU counter-terrorism strategy was given the first day of the conference by Hasyim Muzadi: NU runs over 11,000 Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and none have been involved in terrorism. He could have gone even further; NU preachers have been undertaking religious outreach (*dakwah*) for decades with none promoting terrorism; NU members have been involved in businesses across the Muslim world without a single one financing terrorism; millions of NU members have made the pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, and not a single one has returned a suicide bomber.

In short, NU has been on the cutting edge of counter-terrorism since 1926. Alongside Muhammadiyah, they have been quietly improving their societies through education, *dakwah*, business networks, religious study and pilgrimage. So rather than looking to the UN for a strategy to the problem of terrorism, the UN might learn from NU and Muhammadiyah, who have time-tested structures in place to promote religious tolerance.