

Resisting the Arabization of Islam in Indonesia

Monday, December 7, 2015

By Stanley A. Weiss

LONDON-It is a sign of the violent age we live in that there is a website in the United States devoted to updating daily deaths by gunfire. Last week, the Mass Shooting Tracker reported that in the first 334 days of this year, America had experienced 351 shootings in which four or more people were killed or injured -- an average of more than one a day. And yet, aside from wondering what it will take for America to end its insane addiction to guns, few of these tragedies have garnered as much attention in the South Asian nation of Indonesia than last week's horrific shooting in San Bernardino, California, where 14 were killed and 21 wounded at the hands of a young Muslim couple that were reportedly radicalized in Saudi Arabia.

For Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation - with more adherents of Islam than Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Jordan, Libya, Lebanon, and Palestine combined - the story of citizens returning home from the Middle East more extreme than when they left is an old one. But it is also a story generating fresh concern as a number of Indonesian Muslims are choosing to travel to Iraq and Syria to fight for the jihadists of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).

As in other countries witnessing a similar migration, the fear isn't what they will do when they get there - but rather, like the alleged shooters from California, what they might do when they get home. But the tolerant, secular, and democratic Indonesia is the nation best positioned today to challenge the clash within Islamic civilization, and there are lessons from how Indonesians are fighting this battle that we can all learn from today.

Some of those lessons go back nearly a century. For 600 years, since it first arrived in Indonesia with traders from India in the 13th Century, Islam grew quietly and locally across many of the islands that make up this archipelago nation. But trouble began in the late 1800s, when Jakarta's colonial Dutch overlords began building steam ships and investing in ports, enabling many Indonesian Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Mecca for the first time. By 1885, Indonesians quickly became the largest contingent of pilgrims from any nation to visit the holy place revered as the birthplace of the prophet Mohammad, where he first received instruction from God.

While at Mecca, the pilgrims were exposed for the

first time to the teachings of 18th Century Saudi cleric Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who advocated a medieval interpretation of Islam that promotes the subjugation of women and encourages the violent deaths of all "infidels" who believe differently by such barbaric practices as stoning and beheading.

Many of these travelers returned to Indonesia much less tolerant of the Hindu-infused brand of Islam practiced at home and horrified by local rituals and superstitions that had been layered on the practice of Islam over the centuries. Many sought to purify it, often violently, by advocating a turn to Wahhabism while calling for the state to adopt a strict form of Muslim, or Sharia, law.

By January, 1926 - 90 years ago next month - moderate Indonesian Muslims had had enough. They came together to found an organization, called Nahdlatul Ulama, which is known as NU and translates to "The Renaissance of Islamic Scholars." NU was dedicated to a more humane, more tolerant interpretation of Islam while calling out Wahhabism as a gross distortion of God's commands. For the next nine decades - as Indonesia eventually won its independence from the Dutch in the 40s, lived under military dictatorship starting in the 1960s, and started on the road to becoming the world's largest Muslim democracy in the 90s - NU waged a constant battle against fundamentalists.

For two of those decades, NU was led by Abdurrahman Wahid, fondly known as Gus Dur. Blind and irreverent, Gus Dur was the grandson of an NU founder and the son of a former NU leader. He and I became friends in the early 1990s, nearly a decade before he was elected President of Indonesia in the country's first presidential election after three decades of authoritarian rule.

"Too many Muslims willfully ignore the true teachings of Islam," he said to me many times before his death in 2010. "Right Islam" as he liked to call it, wasn't fanatical, but instead open and tolerant, recognizing that all religions in the modern world must exist alongside, and often within, secular society. "Democracy is not only not haram (forbidden) in Islam," he once wrote, "but is a compulsory element of Islam. Upholding democracy is one of the principals of Islam."

This very openness has made Indonesia a target in the age of al Qaeda and ISIS, both of which espouse a nihilistic version of Wahhabism. Over the past 15 years, a home-grown strain of al Qaeda, called Jema'ah Islamiyah, has brought Middle Eastern violence to Indonesia, often targeting western symbols. In 2000, bombings in 11 churches across Indonesia took 19 lives. In 2002, two explosions at a popular Balinese nightclub my wife and I often frequented, killing 202 people. In 2005, 20 more were killed in another bombing at a Bali resort. In 2003 and again in 2009, explosions at hotels in Jakarta took more lives.

In recent years, extremists have targeted symbols of the state itself, attacking Muslim police and military personnel. As the ISIS threat has grown in Syria and Iraq, NU -which is now the largest Muslim organization in the world, with 50 million members - has worked with local officials to combat what journalist Elizabeth Pisani has called the "Arabization of Islam in Indonesia." While government officials estimate that about 700 Indonesians have gone to fight for ISIS in the Middle East - including, in a few cases, entire families - widespread ISIS videos advocating violence haven't yet found a broad audience.

In fact, a recent global study by the Pew Foundation found that 79 percent of Indonesians condemn the actions of ISIS and only four percent support it - numbers much different than other Muslim majority nations like Pakistan, where just 28 percent of respondents voiced any disapproval of the Islamic State at all.

NU understands that opposition to radicalism needs to be constantly reinforced. Last week, just as their predecessors had done 90 years ago, the leadership of NU announced that it was time for the world to fight back against ISIS. It released a feature film that directly challenges the idea of ISIS, stressing that the Koran instructs true believers of Islam to love, not hate. Called the "Divine Grace of East Indies Islam," the film, as NU head Mustofa Bisri said last week, will counter "the spread of a shallow understanding of Islam" which "justify their harsh and often savage behavior by claiming to act in accord with God's commands" but which "are grievously mistaken."

For Indonesia, the lessons for fighting a false and barbaric form of Islam are simple.

First, it's not enough to speak out against radicals only when tragedies happen. As a well-known general says when prompted, "An insurgency can't be ended by eliminating the last supporter. It's not about killing them

all and using the military. You need a political solution and use smart power. You need to speak out against them every single day."

Second, cooperation counts. Indonesia's most effective counter-terrorism squad, known as Densus 88, was established by the Indonesian National Police, funded by the American government, trained by the Central Intelligence Agency, and coordinates constantly with the Australian Federal Police. In recent years, such coordination has stopped a 2012 plot to bomb the Indonesian parliament building and a planned 2013 attack on the embassy of Myanmar.

Third, lies need to be exposed publicly, and immediately. In a country where the majority lives in poverty and the economy is struggling, ISIS is promising to pay thousands of dollars each month. One motorcycle taxi driver made news recently when an ISIS representative told him he'd earn the equivalent of \$3,800 per month if he joined. It was countered with highly publicized stories from other Indonesians who returned early from Syria - because they were never paid the high wages they were promised.

As American officials struggle to understand what radicalized alleged San Bernardino shooters Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik in Saudi Arabia, Indonesia will continue to work every day to make clear, as a former U.S. Secretary of State once said, "if you want to know whether Islam, democracy, modernity, and women's rights can co-exist, go to Indonesia." Hillary Clinton was right when she spoke those words in 2009 - and with the NU's leadership, it will continue to be true for many decades to come.