The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy and World Affairs

STRATEGIC REVIEW

SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC POLICY INDONESIA

The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy and World Affairs

JANUARY-MARCH 2018/VOLUME 8/NUMBER 1
www.sr-indonesia.com

Maneuvering within Islam's narrative space

BRIAN L STEED AND C HOLLAND TAYLOR

'Living less dangerously'

PETER VERHEZEN, IAN O WILLIAMSON AND NATALIA SOEBAGJO

Indonesian child brides

SEPTIANI TEBERLINA RUMAPEA

Australia's 'Russia' problem

RORY MEDCALF

ISSN 2477-1813

Rp125.000

Cover Story

Maneuvering within Islam's narrative space

Brian L Steed

Life is lived in the narrative space. What we hear, read or see is sorted and evaluated based on our narrative space terrain. Influence comes easiest through understanding this terrain.

Maneuver in the narrative space: Lessons from Islam Nusantara

C Holland Taylor

There has been a centuries-long struggle between competing forces, maneuvering in both the physical and narrative space, producing Indonesia's uniquely pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual brand of Islam. It should be celebrated.

AFP PHOTO/GIUSEPPE CACACE

Maneuvering within Islam's narrative space

Brian L Steed
is an assistant professor of military history at the United States Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. This essay reflects his own thoughts and is not representative of the US Army or US government.

War is a contest for influence. This contest occurs in narrative space that contains terrain and has morphology. Organizations, nonstate actors and states operate throughout the narrative space to influence partners and opponents to accomplish their interests. The following material defines the terms associated with maneuver in the narrative space – maneuver, narrative and narrative space – and then explains the processes associated with the construction and transformation of narrative space. The primary example of this maneuver is the Islamic State, or ISIS.

Influence is combat power, or the power to achieve victory, in 21st-century conflict. This may be influence needed to convince an opponent that they are defeated, or it may be the influence essential to convincing a partner to pursue an action that is not perceived to be immediately beneficial to the actor. This also may be the influence to dissuade a

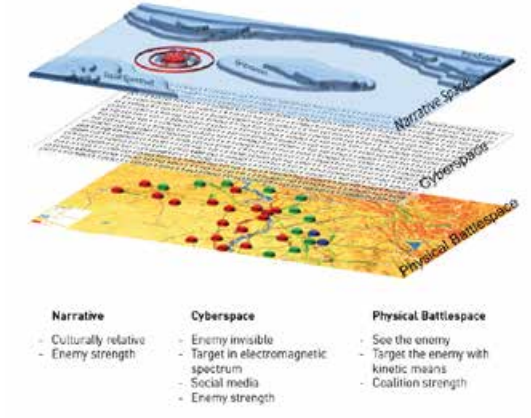
potential adversary from moving toward violence. Influence comes through a variety of sources and means. In some cases, particularly when focused on the opponent, influence can come from the barrel of a gun. Influence, both with opponents and partners, can also come through relationships. In this case, the best kind of influence is that which lasts absent the influencer. The objective of competition, conflict or war is to influence the competitor, opponent or adversary to do that which is desired. The desire may be for the enemy to accept defeat, to modify behavior or to accept a subordinate market or global position. For the sake of clarity, this work uses "conflict" more than "war" because of the philosophical narrowing associated with the word "war." Wars are often construed to imply conflict only between states or recognized political entities. Conflict is a competition of influence.

Influence occurs in narrative space

An example comes from the game of pool. This is a game played on a smooth and flat surface. A player does not intend to hit the cue ball into a pocket. The intent is to hit another ball into a pocket by using the cue ball, influencing one ball through the action and interaction with another ball. If the player wants to sink the eight ball, then the player must influence the eight ball through the cue ball – that is conflict with the opponent. Conflict that is by, with and through a partner, such as NATO forces working by, with and through local rebel forces in Libya in 2011 or the United States-led coalition working by, with and through Iraqi security forces and Kurdish Peshmerga in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria from 2014 to the present, is a combination shot. In this case, the pool player influences the eight ball into the pocket by using the cue ball to, in turn, influence the four ball to then influence the eight ball. Such a combination shot is difficult on a standard pool table with a smooth, flat surface.

Narrative space is a philosophical conceptualization of the perception environment in which conflict exists. For this discussion, the conflict environment is divided into the physical battle space, cyberspace and narrative space (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1.
Narrative Space Has Terrain



This construct is created to assist those who plan and execute policy to visualize obstacles and opportunities in the pursuit of that policy. By understanding the narrative space morphology, it is possible to develop greater influence with respect to opponents and partners. The development and delivery

of influence is done within the narrative space which contains, like the physical battle space, key and decisive terrain that was and is shaped by identity, liminal narratives and transient narratives (see Figure 1.3 later in this essay). These narratives can be detracted or amplified by the "words-deeds-images" of any of the parties involved in the conflict. Maneuver in the narrative space is facilitated by the depth of appreciation of the narrative space terrain. Unlike the physical battle space, narrative space terrain can be readily altered by conflict participants to greater benefit or detriment.

Success in 21st-century conflict requires positive maneuver in the narrative space that includes the braided interaction of "words-deeds-images." The emphasis is on establishing a narrative that drives the actions of all participants throughout all levels of interaction and operations – from the soldier on the ground to diplomatic personnel to national policy makers.

ISIS currently maneuvers in the narrative space through the use of ideology, supported with a strategic approach that includes engagement to develop resources and a focus on exhaustion of the opponent and, finally, violence. They base their actions and existence off statements and beliefs that, by their interpretation, represent the true performance of a global faith: they are the army of righteousness supporting a state led by the legitimate successor (or caliph) of the Prophet of God. Their actions are necessary and sanctioned by the caliph, regardless of how heinous they appear to outsiders. This narrative was not constructed overnight. It was built over years, generations and centuries.

Maneuver

Maneuver is gaining a position of advantage. In considering maneuver, one is then forced to consider the definitions of position and advantage. Position connotes location and is often associated with physical space and specific geography: crossroad, hilltop, river crossing, etc. This may be true. A position of advantage could also be a website or IP address; a political or religious title or authority; connection to historic or mythic people, places or events; or ideological beliefs. Advantage is relative. It is a position that gives greater opportunity or power to the actor with respect to the opponent in the conflict, counterpart in the competition or partner.

As this is relational, it is critical that the actor understand values placed on the various locations, whether they be fixed and physical or conceptual, by the various participants. For example, one hilltop may have value for the placement of artillery to threaten a specific village, but it may have no advantage whatsoever in terms of shaping the thoughts and behaviors of the villagers. Whereas a simple shrine may have tremendous value to the community, but have no technical or tactical military, diplomatic or political value. Another example of relative power comes from words themselves. The vocabulary in any human interaction can be used to place a person or people in a position of advantage or disadvantage. This is true of simple vocabulary, but it becomes even more powerfully relevant when the vocabulary fits within deep-flowing narratives.

Center of gravity

According to contemporary US military thought and doctrine, there is one aspect toward which maneuver should be directed, and that is the center of gravity. This is explained first and best by the 19th-century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, as he describes it as "the hub of all power" and "the point at which all our energies should be directed." Clausewitz further explains that in an ideal world, a single center of gravity can be comprehended if one fully understands both self and the opponent. Elsewhere, Clausewitz will state and imply that there may be more than one center of gravity. He typically states the army as a center of gravity, but he also includes cities and infrastructure as possible options.

A center of gravity is that thing which, if threatened, will cause a change in the behavior of the opponent. It is the thing which the opponent cannot dare risk and will cause adjustments in the opponent's behavior to protect. In contemporary conflict, it is questionable that such a thing exists. Despite this uncertainty, the term is regularly used in the planning and execution of conflict actions. Center of gravity most succinctly captures the ideal of maneuver – a position so vital as to lead to an overthrow of the opponent. Truly a position of advantage.

For center of gravity to be influential in maneuver a series of assumptions must be played out in full. First, we must assume (as we have) that center of gravity does in fact exist. Second, that the actor can identify the center of gravity. It isn't enough that it exists, but the actor must also understand it well enough to know the right way to then attack or undermine it. Third, the center of gravity must be able to be targeted. In the case of a physical center of gravity, this means that the actor is able to deliver some weapon against the target. Fourth, resources targeting the center of gravity can reach the target. In World War II, this was particularly dangerous as numerous bombers were destroyed on the way to targets and the targets were often not engaged as a result. Fifth, the resources, once at the target area, can accurately engage the target. Sixth, the center of gravity can be targeted enough times to achieve the desired effect. Rarely does one blow achieve results. For this to work, sufficient blows must be delivered. Finally, the opponent cannot develop effective countermeasures.

ISIS provides an excellent example for this discussion of center of gravity. If ISIS has a center of gravity – and this is open for debate – then this center of gravity does not exist in the physical space; rather it exists in the narrative space. Thinking of it this way, what can ISIS not afford to risk or to lose? Salvation. ISIS has declared a caliphate and that caliphate must control some terrain to have validity, but in today's world it is possible to imagine virtual terrain or small areas of a remote island in some distant archipelago. It isn't necessarily linked to cities or deserts or mountains in Iraq or Syria. Taking away terrain may not overthrow ISIS. What happens to ISIS if one takes away their definition of salvation? If no one believes the ISIS salvation narrative, will anyone flock to their banner or conduct attacks around the globe in their name? The answer

is no. Therefore, this must be their center of gravity.

For the purpose of this argument, the actor is the US government. The seven assumptions are addressed in brief. This is a linked series. If any one of the series fails, then the likelihood of achieving the success promised by Clausewitz is minimal. First, there is a center of gravity and it is the ISIS-defined notion of salvation. Second, can the US government understand this center of gravity? The answer here is problematic as few people have the training to grasp the Koranic and hadithic exegesis necessary to fully understand the argument. Third, can the US government target salvation? How could it? This isn't something to be delivered by a bomber or a tank. Additionally, the US government is probably not deemed credible in the religious debate as it is typically seen in the Middle East, specifically, and among Muslims, in general, as either a Christian or secular nation. Fourth, assuming that the United States can target the center of gravity through messaging, how can those messages reach the target audience – those fighters who believe in the salvation message or those potential fighters inclined to believe? Will they believe the message delivered? Fifth, will the message be accurate enough to actually achieve target effects – in this case, fighters leaving the ISIS army or potential recruits who instead remain home and peaceful. The final two assumptions are linked in that it is questionable that no countermeasures will be developed to prevent the message from having effect before it can happen often enough.

This example is crucial to understanding maneuver in the narrative space. The linked series of assumptions explain the problems with understanding both the position and the relative advantage gained by holding that position. This also provides the relationship of maneuver with respect to a specific enemy. It is unlikely that Al Qaeda, for example, has the exact same center of gravity as does ISIS, and therefore it is nearly as unlikely that the position of advantage – the objective of the maneuver – is the same. Just as for each enemy on each different terrain on battlefields around the world, there is no one predesignated position of advantage. Each battlefield and opponent must be understood independent of previous battlefields and opponents.

Narrative

Narrative is the sum total of how people interpret their environment. Narrative space is what shapes thoughts and actions, and it includes physical space and cyberspace within this conceptualization. It is also the means by which people make sense of their world – especially when their world creates cognitive dissonance. The terrain associated with narrative is a combination of the identity, the liminal narrative and the transient narrative. These terms are explained below.

Narrative, in general, is the processing mechanism by which people understand the world in which they live. It includes, as does the terrain, identity. It also includes culture and history. Narrative is "[t]he stories we tell, the identity we form, the way we understand events in our lives (the way we give them meaning) and our future actions,"

according to philosopher Ajit K Maan. In this description, narrative is more than story, which is a necessary part of narrative. It is more than messages and talking points delivered by politicians, government officials and military professionals. It is not simply social media in all its forms. These platforms are important and maybe even essential to communicate the messages and stories that make up the narrative, but they are not synonymous with narrative. Social media is a tool or a medium for delivery of narrative and not the narrative itself. Narrative is not memes. Like social media, memes are critical to convey narrative, but they are not the narrative. They are also a tool or mechanism. Some have advocated for a form of memetic warfare to combat offensive or opposing narrative. That would be analogous to proposing a single weapon system warfare – tank warfare or submarine warfare or bomber warfare – to defeat the opponent. Some, notably early air power theorists, have done so in the past. Those people were wrong, just as are those who overemphasize memetic warfare miss the mark today. Physical warfare is best conducted as combined arms that utilize ground maneuver forces in concert with supporting fires and mobility and countermobility efforts. The same method of thinking is relevant to maneuver in the narrative space. It also requires a combination of "words-deeds-images" delivered through various sources and methods. In this vein, memetic warfare and social media applications are useful and may even be significant to maneuver in the narrative space, but no one method will be sufficiently decisive on its own.

Narrative is a combination of language, religion, culture, history, education and traditions that provides context to the stories created by society to assist individuals in understanding what they experience. A simple American narrative might be: America is a land of opportunity where an average person can make of themselves whatever they want through hard work and great ideas. This is a narrative that has been created over generations with numerous stories and experiences as support. It is promulgated with millions of tweets and posts of hard-working women and men who achieved more than their parents through dedicated commitment. Every weekend, millions of people watch sports events where stories are shared of disadvantaged youth with bad family situations who became elite stars with large salaries and lucrative product endorsements. This simple example provides some shape to the definition of the term "narrative" as well as leading in to the discussion on the construction of this narrative space.

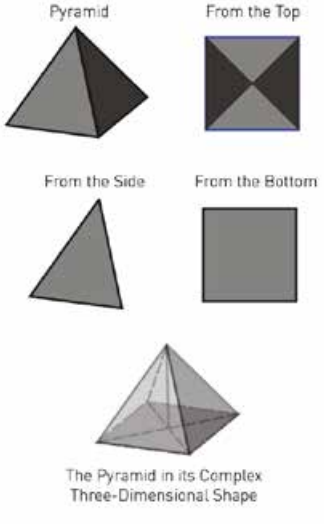
The pyramid

Perspective is crucial to this discussion and not all people(s) share the same perspective. The following metaphor explains the differences in perspectives and how that applies to this discussion (see Figure 1.2). "A visual analogy of this comes through a reference to the geometric pyramid shape. Think of it in three dimensions as the accompanying illustrations try to convey. This is a shape that can be perceived from many different angles and some of the angles present radically different ways to describe or define

the shape. If one looks at a pyramid precisely from the top then one will see a square with bisecting diagonals. If one looks at the pyramid from the exact opposite direction then one will see only a square. If one sees the pyramid from the side it is possible to see only a triangle. If one looks at the pyramid from another angle then it is possible to see the pyramid in its complex three-dimensional shape.

"Introspection is understanding the angle from which you are observing the pyramid. What do I see? Why does it look this way to me? These are fundamental questions for moving forward. Empathetic appreciation is recognizing the angle from which your counterpart/opponent is observing the pyramid. What does he/she see? Why does it look that way to him/her? Once these two conceptual understandings exist then, and I would argue only then, can one effectively begin to anticipate how one's counterpart/opponent will respond to the events surrounding both of the participants in the negotiation, conflict or engagement" ("Bees and Spiders," Steed, 2014).

Figure 1.2.
The Pyramid and Perspective



This metaphor is used to convey that although people from one culture see squares (conceptually speaking), their counterparts from other cultures see triangles. The square is no more accurate a way to envision the pyramid than is the triangle, and the triangle is no less accurate a way to describe the pyramid than is the square. Neither perspective captures the entirety of the shape and both have their accuracies and inaccuracies built into their perspective. Thus, one cannot assume that equal information conveys equal understanding, acceptance or advocacy. This is especially crucial when dealing with maneuver in the narrative space.

A different, though related metaphor is trying to catch a fish using one's hands while standing in a body of water. When one looks down into the water and sees the fish, it is understood that the fish is not actually where it is observed. Water refracts light rays on a different angle than does air. This specific refraction angle offsets the fish. To catch the fish, one must adjust the placement of hands appropriately.

The pyramid metaphor also speaks to this refraction angle in perception and communication. As discussed in the following section, as information reaches the liminal narrative it is filtered according to acceptability. The determination of acceptance or rejection is influenced by the refraction angle. The shape of narrative space terrain

differs with general and specific audiences, as there are a variety of refraction angles. Obviously, leaders and policy makers cannot account for each individual refraction angle; however, the large, societal-based refraction

AFP PHOTO/CHRISTOPHE ARCHAMBAULT

angles must be considered to adequately understand the terrain and its relationship to the actor's interactions with the opponent, counterpart or partner.

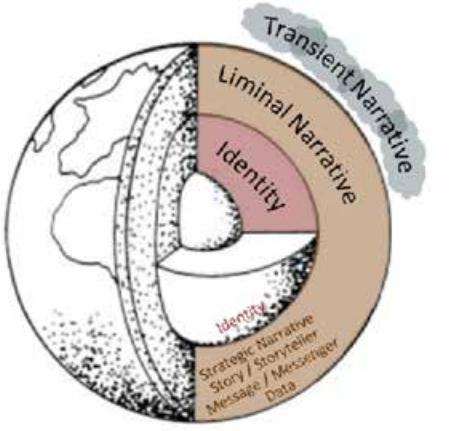
Narrative is not solely a cognitive domain, which is why it is described as more than story. It is the environment, the experience and the associated cognition.

Narrative space

Narrative space has terrain, just as does physical space. Narrative space terrain is made up of ideas, concepts, humiliations, grievances, history, culture, language, religion, etc. that have different values in terms of shaping the thoughts and associated actions of people who reside in that narrative space. Narrative, for the purposes of this theory, includes social identity, liminal narrative and transient narrative. Figure 1.3 captures the imagery of this concept in that social identity forms the core of how

the society or culture sees itself and the most deeply rooted narrative structures. It is the bedrock of the later described narrative space.

Figure 1.3.
Components of Narrative



Liminal narrative is the crust that sits in between the core and the atmosphere of the transient narrative. It is so named as it is in the transition area between the daily narrative immersion and the core identity. Liminal narrative begins with the first instruction provided to a child. It includes customs, religion, culture, biases, mythology, prejudices, accepted truths and other formative-shaping means of filtering ideas and perceiving information. The transient narrative includes news, rumor, information, entertainment, conspiracy theories and other time-sensitive means of information or data flow. The transient and the liminal narrative have inverse hierarchies of components. For the transient narrative, the highest is the strategic narrative and then the story, the message and data or memes. The liminal narrative filters this hierarchy and reverses the order such that the first sorted are the data and memes and then the message, the story and finally the strategic narrative. The liminal narrative further filters messengers and storytellers for acceptability.

When a person receives new information that has a potential impact on the narrative, that information is then filtered through the liminal narrative. Does it challenge or confirm the narrative? Based on the answer, and based on the individual's experience and the flexibility or permeability of the liminal narrative filter, the transient narrative information will either be accepted or rejected. If accepted, it may slightly adjust the narrative, and if rejected, it maintains the existing narrative's permanence – as described later, these are personal examples of depositional or erosional events. Transient narratives are accepted when they reinforce liminal narratives or identity. They are rejected when transient information challenges the liminal narratives or identity and are then seen as subversive. This leads to the information being discarded; sometimes as impure or sinful. This is not simply an issue of truth or fiction, but more importantly about concordant or discordant transient narratives.

An example of the interplay between transient and liminal narrative is evidenced in the fight against ISIS in Iraq. The most popular narrative in Iraq in early 2015, and continuing to 2016, was that the United States (and Israel) created and is (are) supporting ISIS in combat operations. For the average American, this is ludicrous. The American identity and liminal narrative includes

concepts of freedom, justice, human rights, civil liberties, separation of church and state, and humanitarian behavior. What ISIS stands for, as popularly communicated in the US media, runs counter to this American liminal narrative; thus this transient narrative is discarded because the filter does not let it through. Because the transient narrative was rejected, there was no early counter from the US government in Iraq or beyond. It was simply deemed too ludicrous to comment on. In Iraq, however, the narrative grew. Some say that the narrative started with the Iranians or other Shiite militia groups. Regardless of where it started, by January 2015 everyone was saying it or thinking it – Arabs, Persians, Kurds, Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, Yazidis. It didn't matter who – they all were thinking it was true. Why?

A way to look at the Iraqi liminal narrative may go as follows: the United States hates Iraq. The average Iraqi in 1990 believed they were the pinnacle of Middle East might and civilization, and because of this Israel and the United States wanted to weaken and humiliate the great ancient power. Starting in 1990, US forces began to harm their economy through sanctions. In 1991, the US-led military coalition destroyed much of their infrastructure and security forces through Operation Desert Storm. From 1991 to 2003, the United States and its coalition allies imposed one of the harshest sanctions regimes ever leveled against a country, dramatically harming not just the economy but all of Iraqi society. In 2003, President George W Bush continued what his father George HW Bush began by invading the country and destroying the government, throwing the country into chaos. Then after eight years of occupation, instability and mayhem, and just as things appeared to be stabilizing, the United States withdrew, creating another round of confusion and turmoil. Just as the prime minister was getting his hands on the problems, which a Sunni would say were the necks of the Sunnis, in comes ISIS to create more catastrophe.

Americans may say this doesn't make sense because we are providing support for the Iraqi government. Why would the United States support both? The Iraqi liminal narrative about America includes US Congressional testimony in 1987 where it was revealed that the American government sold arms and equipment to both Iraq and Iran at the same time during the Iran-Iraq War as part of the Iran-Contra affair. Therefore, the United States has a history of double-dealing when it comes to Iraq. When one sees images of ISIS fighters, they are typically wearing American-made gear and driving US-made vehicles. The United States must be equipping them. This is photographic evidence of support to ISIS. American officials say that ISIS got this equipment when they captured it from Iraqi security forces. There are videos showing Iraqi soldiers or militia members holding up American meals-ready-to-eat, or MREs, that they say they found in ISIS positions. This will be excused by saying the MREs may have come from airdropped pallets blown off course and intended for the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar or Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq. When Tikrit was retaken in May 2015, *The New York Times* interviewed a Shiite militia fighter who said he saw the United States support ISIS fighters

during the battle with his own eyes.

Iraqis glean further support for their narrative from political speeches such as those made during the 2016 US presidential primary and general election campaigns. Democratic candidates said that the Islamic State was created through the actions of George W Bush and the invasion and occupation of Iraq (2003-11). In contrast, Republican candidates and pundits on the right blamed the creation of the Islamic State on the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2011 by President Barack Obama. In either case, all sides of the American political spectrum feed into the narrative that the United States, one way or the other, created ISIS.

In sum, the liminal Iraqi narrative is that the United States and its coalition allies have a singular purpose of making the people of Iraq suffer. Additionally, the United States wants to protect Israel, and keeping Iraq weak and divided by Shiite and Sunni killing each other serves that purpose. The Iraqi people have seen what the United States does when it is serious about a problem: it deploys tens of thousands of forces and mountains of gear and material. That is not what the United States did in the fight against ISIS. The United States, through its technology, can control all of its actions and sees and knows what is happening throughout Iraq – or so the narrative goes – and thus nothing happens by accident. Therefore, if bad things happen, the United States knows it and can do something about it, if so desired. Because ISIS continued to exist for years after Obama called for its destruction, then the United States must not want to defeat them as it claimed.

In summing up this discussion on the construct of narrative, this is about the way humans process information and make decisions. The stories are the real world and they matter. The structure and organization of stories is based off the narrative morphology. It gives shape to the stories and purpose and direction to the characters in those stories.

Dead space

Where one stands determines what one sees. The location of an observer is further impeded by the morphology of the surrounding terrain. If one is at the bottom of a valley then it is clear that visibility will be more limited than if one stood high on a hilltop. The area that one cannot see or that a weapon system cannot engage from a given position is called dead space, as it affords opportunities for opponents to move unobserved and/or unengaged.

The shape of the physical landscape creates dead space. In cyberspace, there is an entire portion of the web referred to as the "dark web." This includes domains that are discreet and not included on web browsers and which one must know the specific address to access. There are also applications that only allow entry to those with invitations from existing members and include highly secure forms of communication. Both of these types of sites create dead space for governments and security professionals. The nature of Bitcoin as a currency that is only available through online commerce also presents an effective dead space currency – a means to conduct business transactions that are both unobservable and

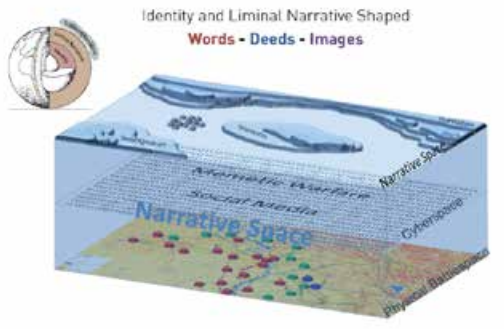
untraceable.

Narrative space also includes dead space. Some of this is determined by decisions of the observer, just as is true for the physical space. Where one stands determines the observable world. In discussions of narrative, there tends to be a lot of emphasis on social media. This may be, in part, because there are existing tools that can track and map social networks, thereby making it easier to understand the terrain. The problem with this emphasis is that so focusing creates tremendous dead space for those groups or organizations that do not rely on social media to promote or promulgate their narrative. ISIS uses Twitter, YouTube posts and numerous other online media to promote their narrative and to develop narrative space terrain. Al Qaeda and their affiliates do not rely as much on these same tools. There are online publications from Al Qaeda, but most of their engagement is focused in region rather than extraregional. That means that discussions in mosques, actions in villages and conspiracy theories on the street are more important to Al Qaeda. Current tools do not capture this, as it requires people present in the environment to understand what is happening – hence dead space.

Construct

The narrative space has terrain including key and decisive terrain – "words, images, ideas" – that have greater value than others. Narrative space is not truly a separate space despite the depiction in Figure 1.1. Rather, it includes cyberspace and physical space, as they are all interrelated (see Figure 1.4). The figures show narrative space separate to communicate that it is a domain that requires a different way of thinking. Narrative space terrain pre-exists maneuver by any party in the conflict and denotes the inherent value within the community in which the competitors seek to attain a position of advantage.

Figure 1.4.
Narrative Space-Holistic Representation



Terrain, in the narrative space, is dynamic and may be altered by the "words-deeds-images" of any of the conflict participants. In general, the terrain is primarily formed by the construct of societal identity and the liminal narrative. Identity-related terrain is the least likely to change, as this is created over generations and sometimes centuries of beliefs and common references and values. Liminal narrative and the terrain derived therefrom have a greater potential to change. Those conducting maneuver in the narrative space often seek to use the existing key and decisive terrain to their advantage and may also seek to adjust that terrain through the transient

narrative data/memes, messages, stories and the linked "words-deeds-images" associated with their maneuver.

Narrative space terrain is constructed in much the same way as is physical terrain through basic processes of deposition, erosion and tectonic forces (see Figure 1.5), which creates a narrative landscape or narrative morphology. These processes, as with their physical counterparts, happen over long periods of time or can happen in violent episodic events. The primary shapers of this space are events, ideas (people-thinkers) and actions (people-doers).

Deposition is reinforcement of the pre-existing narrative structure. This is an additive process that is building, sometimes for generations, the landscape. Every time a parent tells a child a story or points to a specific event with the same conceptual moral note that proves the story true is a depositional event. Each subsequent event or story deposits a new layer of narrative sediment upon the pre-existing landscape, reinforcing the morphology.

Erosion is changing the pre-existing narrative structure. As with deposition, this can occur over a long time, although this tends to be more episodic than does deposition. The comparison of deposition and erosion does not necessarily mean that deposition is good and erosion is bad. One is reinforcing and the other is changing. For example, when a child arrives at school for the first time, they may be challenged with new ideas, new social norms and different information than what they learned at home. All of this is erosional, as it reshapes interpretations of the world. This is a natural part of growth and development.

Figure 1.5.
Narrative Space Terrain Construct

Erosional

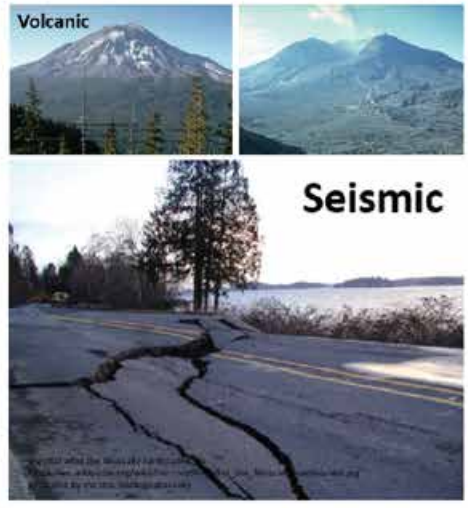
- Events
- Actions (Doers)
- Ideas (Thinkers)

- Redefinition of identity
- Challenge to identity

Depositional:

- Events
- Actions (Doers)
- Ideas (Thinkers)

- Reinforcing of identity
- Informal instruction
  Societal Reinforcement
  Humiliation, grievance, etc.



Tectonic (Seismic and Volcanic)

- Events
- Actions (Doers)
- Ideas (Thinkers)

- Connected identity
- Rapid transformation through traumatic events:
  - War —invasion, occupation
  - Atrocity
  - Economic collapse
  - Natural disaster

However, depending on the nature of the erosional event, this can also be traumatic. Violent crime challenges personal safety. Religious missionaries can change definitions of salvation. Invasion, whether physical or cultural, can reshape values and aesthetics.

The final process is tectonic in that, like physical tectonic forces, it can be abrupt and significantly transformative in a single event. Also, like the physical counterpart, narrative tectonic events tend to work off generations of pre-existing stress that can be released in a single event. The single events are not transformative in and of themselves, but they are transformative, and sometimes radically so, because of the pre-existing conditions inclining the landscape toward change.

In each category, there are examples of people who are thinkers or doers who provide depositional, erosional or tectonic effects. There are also events, some natural and many man-made, that can provide the same variety of effects. The difference is in the speed of the effect. Depositional is the slowest and most consistent. Erosional can be either slow or fast, though it tends toward an opposingly similar consistent approach, as does depositional. The speed and drama of change comes from the tectonic people and events.

Iraq

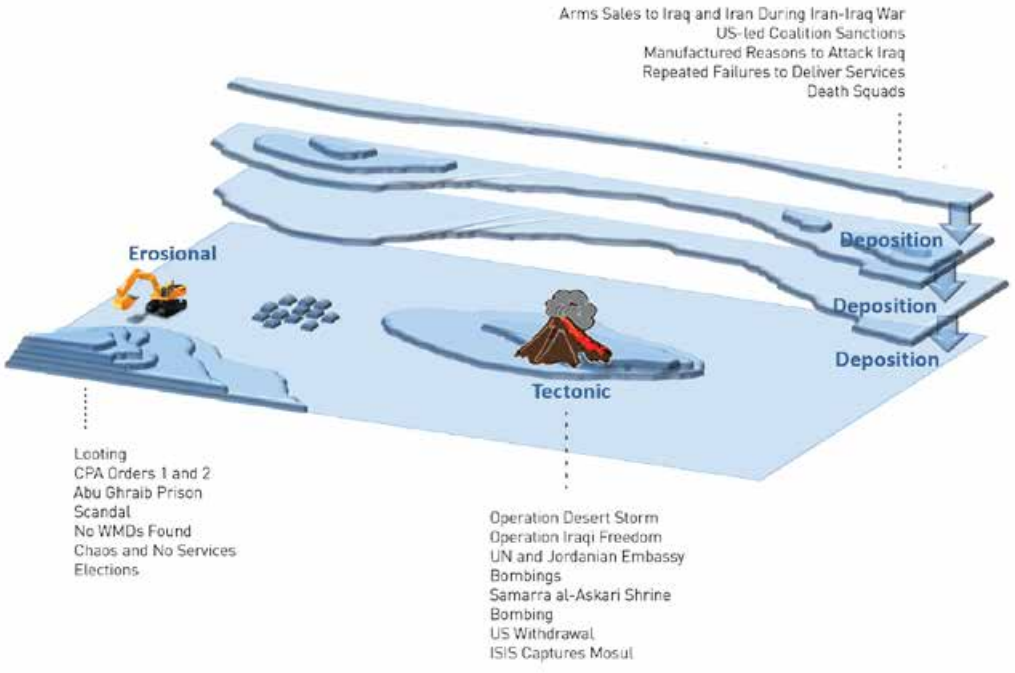
Iraq, during the US-led invasion known as Operation Iraqi Freedom, serves as an example of this construction of narrative space. Iraq is used here because earlier the basic narrative for Iraq was laid out with respect to why Iraqis believe that the United States created and operationally supported ISIS. As previously noted, the primary narrative with which American forces dealt in Iraq was negative. Even though the invading force removed an unpopular leader, Saddam Hussein, it was still an invading force and the very act of invasion was depositional as it demonstrated US desire to weaken Iraq.

A brief history of Operation Iraqi Freedom is that the US government, along with other coalition partners, invaded Iraq in 2003, overthrew the government of Hussein and created the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), with the intent of granting sovereignty to an amenable Iraqi government as soon as possible. The CPA issued two orders in quick succession that removed all Ba'ath Party members from current and future government service and disbanded the Iraqi military. The US military, instead of handing things off in less than a year, remained in Iraq for more than eight and a half years, only leaving at the end of 2011.

Depositional actions included the following issues. Removing the Iraqi security forces and denying them and all Ba'athists access to government pensions created both an unemployed and disgruntled force, expressing both a lack of concern for the stability and security of Iraq, as well as disrespect to hundreds of thousands of families placed in serious financial hardship. No active weapons of mass destruction program was found. As this became clearer for Iraqis, the pretense for the American invasion seemed to be solely a power grab to weaken Iraq or seize its oil. The ever-increasing violence in Iraq, with death squads roaming neighborhoods at night, further

Figure 1.6.

Narrative Space Terrain Construct Example: Iraq



communicated a willingness on the part of the occupying power for Iraq to be in chaos or an inability to control the environment. Finally, the most powerful and successful nation on earth could not meet the basic needs of the Iraqi people, such as electricity.

Erosional events include the following issues. (Note: Not all erosional events are negative.) American forces did move to have open elections. This was a first in Iraqi history. The events of the 2007 "surge" of American troops demonstrated both commitment and competence at a time when both of those components were challenged. America's presumed dominance was challenged by the ongoing insurgency and inability to provide basic security.

Tectonic events associated with Iraq tend toward violence. The toppling of Saddam Hussein was tectonic in that it created a new landscape on which all other events transpired. The bombing of the United Nations headquarters and Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad in 2003 drove off the international community and institutions and left the United States as the primary guarantor of Iraqi liberties. The 2006 bombing of the Al Askari Shrine in Samarra started a sectarian civil war

within Baghdad, if not the entire country. Each of these events shook the world of Iraq's population and significantly reformed the narrative landscape.

The interaction between these forces, events, thinkers and doers shape the world each and every day, and create a dynamic and constantly reforming narrative space. Understanding narrative space terrain means understanding not just its current morphology, but also the history of that morphology. How recent are the features present? What are the fault lines and the stresses currently existing in the terrain?

Change (evolution)

The bombing of the Al Askari Shrine initiated a bloody civil war between Sunni and Shiite throughout Iraq, but primarily in Baghdad. Prior to the US invasion and the insurgency that rose in opposition to it, Iraq was relatively nonsectarian and certainly did not include the torture and slaughter of members of other sects by private citizens – torture was reserved for Saddam's regime. Many Iraqis were married across sectarian lines and most Iraqi tribes included families from both Sunni and Shiite sects. The transformation of this stable environment to one of bloody sectarian violence took only a matter of months. Comments by Iraqis in 2016 that they could not trust members of other sects as ISIS governed large portions of the country were relatively new and unique in Iraqi history. Iraqis had not been killing each other for hundreds or thousands of years. This sectarian murder started in 2003 and grew rapidly over time due to "words-deeds-images" in the narrative space that both erupted and shook the existing societal norms, eroded old nonsectarian attitudes and then deposited notions of fear and loathing, sowing distrust between the communities. This all happened within months and years. Narrative space terrain can change and evolve rapidly. Iraq provides a sad example of such transformation.

From 2006 to 2011, the US government, through investment of personnel, equipment and money, also changed the Iraqi security forces and the trust with the populace for the better. The events and attitudes associated with the "surge" is an example of positive change through hard work to first erode the negative narrative landscape and then deposit along favorable lines for the United States, coalition forces and Iraqi security forces. Although there are critics of this example, it is difficult to argue that violence was not reduced and trust not increased between the Iraqi people and their security forces. Narrative terrain can be shaped and changed by both indigenous and foreign thinkers, doers and events. And it doesn't always take decades.

Maneuver in the narrative space

Narrative morphology assists an actor to understand not just the nature of the influence environment, but also the inclination of individuals within the environment to receive the "words-deeds-images" delivered. Maneuver in the narrative space is about weaving together a coherently consistent message of "words-deeds-images" sufficient to influence opponents and partners toward the desired

end. The maneuver in the narrative space theory advocates for a deeper understanding of the narrative space to more effectively engage and influence both opponents and partners. The better one understands narrative space, in both its construct and historicity, then the more effectively one can function within it, use it or shape it.

"words-deeds-images" support their position as the caliphate and as the army of the righteous in this great battle of the ages. They support this ideological main effort with what is termed a strategic approach. This combines a broad-based engagement effort that includes a spectrum of personal interaction, recruitment and seduction all the way to broadcast images

AFP PHOTO/KHALED DESOUKI

ISIS serves as the exemplar actor for demonstrating what is meant by maneuver in the narrative space. There is not space here to explain their conduct in detail, so what follows is a brief summary. ISIS conducts their maneuver in the narrative space by placing the greatest emphasis on ideology. All of their

and videos and online magazines targeting specific cultures and communities. This is wrapped in an opponent-oriented strategy of exhaustion. ISIS does not seek military victory. Instead, it seeks societal and economic exhaustion: to make the enemy invest so many resources into security as to induce economic

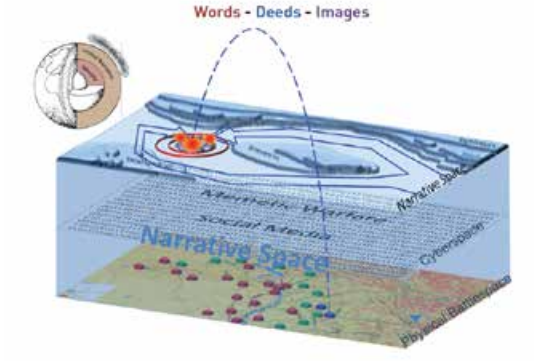
collapse. Finally, there is the supporting effort of violence. The graphic violence garners media attention, providing resources to the engagement effort, and it also serves to communicate the narrative of an inexhaustible (remaining and expanding) foe that will do whatever is necessary to win. What is necessary is always supportive of the ideology.

Conflict is a competition for influence, and that influence is achieved through a variety of tools. Strategic narrative is a tool that explains the overarching purpose of operations in "words-deeds-images." Strategic narrative provides guidance with parameters for communicating stories through various means. These stories both express intent and weaken cognitive dissonance. Successful narrative requires full comprehension of the narrative space landscape and empowers the use of all capabilities.

Maneuver in the narrative space is the execution of the strategic narrative through the braided cord of "words-deeds-images." This occurs most effectively when the narrative space is fully understood from the perspective of the opponent or counterpart. In the case of Iraq, the United States could only conduct effective maneuver in the narrative space if American leaders understood the Iraqi narrative space terrain morphology in terms of basic shape, as well as the key and decisive terrain. Then it is possible to construct an interwoven or braided cord of "words-deeds-images" that support the strategic narrative and enable the actor to gain a position of advantage or strike at the center of gravity. Maneuver happens through a combined campaign that includes effective use of memes and data, along with messages, stories, imagery and actions or deeds. The deeds are critical in that people will tend to evaluate actions as more important than words. Most critical is that to effectively transform the narrative morphology, one must maintain a tight braid of "words-deeds-images" such that the intended audience cannot see a disparity between what is said, what is done and what is shown.

Actions in the physical space have influence and impact on the narrative space terrain (see Figure 1.7). These actions can be violent or nonviolent. The plan associated with such maneuver needs to recognize the intent of the "words-deeds-images" such that one knows whether they are depositional, erosional or tectonic. The specific challenge with tectonic events is that it is hard to predict the resulting narrative terrain morphology following a tectonic episode.

Figure 1.7.
Maneuver in the Narrative Space



Additionally, it requires that one have a

deeper understanding of the narrative space terrain in terms of historicity, such that the tensions and stress are comprehended. Carl von Clausewitz wrote about grammar in the communication of warfare. Warfare is a tool of communication that includes violence as a subcomponent of narrative. Often, following specific military strikes, one can hear reporters and experts use the phrase "send a message" when explaining the purpose for a strike. Historian Wayne Lee wrote that war "is violence perpetrated by humans with the intent to communicate with other humans. ... [R]arely has that message been merely 'die.' As an act of communication, it has its own structures, patterns and internally consistent logic, a 'grammar,' in which violent acts carry meaning and convey intention."

Understanding the grammar of conflict means understanding not simply the narrative space morphology, but also the historicity of that morphology. It is recognizing how that morphology changes the perception of "words-deeds-images" said, done and broadcast.

The phrase "words-deeds-images" is essential to this discussion. Words are often characterized as part of narrative. Since narrative space is a holistic environment of all aspects that influence thought and action, and it includes the physical environment, then actions or deeds are narrative. All things that are observed and experienced are narrative.

Understanding narrative space morphology is not simply academic – it is crucial to achieving effective maneuver in the narrative space. ISIS achieves this effectiveness through a near-intuitive grasp of the narrative space morphology in which they operate. They understand the religious, cultural, linguistic and historical narratives present in their areas of operation. They know what motivates their followers, because it is their narrative. It is intuitive. For those nonnative practitioners of maneuver in the narrative space, we must recognize that we function in this space as an expeditionary force – foreigners, even if we are from the region wherein the conflict is waged. Acting in the role of an expeditionary force means that such an actor is seen as an invader.

Almost by definition, any invading force will approach the narrative space terrain at a disadvantage, fighting uphill, if you will. What is being advocated here is the importance of understanding just how much uphill the struggle will be. Is this a gentle slope, a steep mountain ascent or a vertical cliff? "Words-deeds-images" before and during the conflict can influence the morphology of the terrain. It is possible to erode and create advantageous or, at least, less disadvantageous terrain.

Conclusion: Implications for conflict

The center of gravity for opponents in 21st-century conflict lies within the narrative space. For groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda, that center of gravity lies in the specific belief that salvation may be obtained through martyrdom while battling infidels and apostates. This belief can only be engaged, and effectively countered, through maneuver in the narrative space.

Global leaders, policy makers and military officials need to recognize the vital role that influence plays in virtually all contemporary conflicts. Those who seek to prevail would

benefit from acknowledging the need to maneuver within narrative space, to acquire the desired influence. For to triumph, they must understand the morphology of any contested narrative space and master the history of this morphology. This knowledge provides contestants with an understanding of the refraction angle for any given engagement and the attendant perceptions. Successful maneuver in the narrative space thus requires an effective combination of ideology, strategy and tactical execution (ie, specific actions) in order to achieve the desired results. State and nonstate actors around the globe are constantly engaged in such maneuver. For example, Russian actions in Syria, Crimea and eastern Ukraine perfectly illustrate maneuver in the physical and narrative space. China's conduct in regard to the South China Sea also provides a textbook example of combined maneuver in the physical and narrative space.

The following essay in this edition's cover package, "Lessons from Islam Nusantara," describes how inhabitants of the Malay archipelago have successfully maneuvered in the narrative space for more than 500 years, to produce one of the most pluralistic and tolerant Islamic societies in the world today.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LIBFORALL FOUNDATION

Maneuver in the narrative space: Lessons from Islam Nusantara

C Holland Taylor is chairman and chief executive officer of the LibForAll Foundation, which he established in 2003 with the late Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid.

The history of Islam in the East Indies region, now dominated by Indonesia, is the history of maneuver in the narrative space. Strategically located at the junction of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, the vast archipelago, which Indonesians call *Nusantara*, has been a meeting point of different cultures and religions for thousands of years. It is also home to one of the world's pre-eminent "crossroads civilizations," whose encounter with Islam during the past 14 centuries has produced many object lessons of value to those concerned by the threat to international peace and security posed by Islamist extremism and terror.

The original inhabitants of the East Indies archipelago embraced an indigenous spirituality that was often centered on the worship of Sang

Hyang Taya – The Great Void, or Absolute – as the unmanifest source of creation. As the prominent historian and Islamic scholar Kyai Haji Agus Sanyoto explains in the film "Rahmat Islam Nusantara" ("The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam"), "Although the word 'taya' literally means 'That which is Not,' it does not imply nonexistence. 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's why the ancients used the term '*suwung*' or '*awang-uwung*': 'That' is ... yet is not. 'That' is not ... yet is."

Those familiar with the precepts of mysticism, such as "the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience" (Merriam-Webster), will immediately recognize a description of the Divine essence not unlike 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 expressions of a single reality, or truth, that was already long familiar to them. The 14th-century Javanese court poet Mpu Tantular gave voice to this unitary vision in his poem "Sutasoma," from which Indonesia's national motto, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Oneness Amid Diversity), is derived.

Islam arrived in the East Indies within decades of its birth, brought by Arab traders in search of spices or bound for the Tang dynasty port of Guangzhou, where a large Muslim community is known to have existed during the early 8th century. Arab and Persian merchant ships routinely sailed through the East Indies, their lives and precious cargo protected by a succession of maritime powers centered on the islands of Sumatra (the Buddhist kingdom of Srivijaya, 650-1288) and Java. The Spice Islands were an integral part of the Great Silk Road that linked China with the Middle East, Europe and North Africa. For more than 1,000 years, the precepts of Buddhism spread peacefully along a circular route from the original Buddhist heartland in the Ganges basin through modern-day Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia to China, Korea and Japan, and simultaneously along a southern maritime route that linked India with Southeast Asia and Han China. While competing empires and dynasties rose and fell from power throughout this vast region, the spread of Buddhism through Central, East and Southeast Asia, along with the sociocultural, economic and civilizational "flowering" that accompanied this spread, provide an outstanding example, in world history, of intercultural dialogue and the peaceful dispersion of knowledge, spirituality and trade.

This gradual evolutionary process of "deposition" and "erosion" within the "narrative space terrain" (cf, Brian L Steed, "Maneuvering within Islam's narrative space") was temporarily disrupted, in Central Asia, by the tectonic shift that accompanied

the Arab conquest, which the indigenous Persian-speaking population fiercely resisted throughout the Umayyad caliphate (661-750). This military and cultural resistance to Arab domination may explain why the Abbasid caliphate, which came to power with the support of an army composed of Arabs, Persians and Turks "carrying black flags from Khurasan" (ie, Central Asia), launched an era of scientific, philosophical and spiritual creativity that Dr Frederick Starr has described in his book, "The Lost Enlightenment," as "Central Asia's golden age." He writes: "By far the most conspicuous feature of Central Asia's crossroads civilization was its pluralism and diversity. This did not end with the Arab conquest but, as we shall see, continued to thrive for nearly four centuries after the arrival of Islam. Conversion proceeded very slowly. Indeed, Muslim theologians themselves acknowledged that many people of other faiths nominally embraced Islam but did not abandon their prior faiths. The British classicist Peter Brown speaks of Islam resting 'lightly, like a mist' over the highly diverse religious landscape. Only in the combative eleventh century did pluralism come to be seen as an evil and as a threat to the prevailing orthodoxy. By the time such a view took hold, the Age of Enlightenment was already approaching its end."

Ultimately, Central Asia's tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance fell victim to a combination of erosional and tectonic forces that overwhelmed the long-dominant Persian culture of the region. One was the spread and gradual entrenchment of religious formalism. Another closely related factor was the rise to military and political supremacy, throughout the Middle East, of Turkish tribes that tended to embrace those narratives, within Islam, that legitimize conquest and the subjugation of infidels. To this day, the name Mahmoud of Ghazni is employed by Hindu nationalists to evoke the cruelty of Muslim armies that laid waste to northern India during the 11th century, massacring and enslaving Hindus on a scale that far exceeds anything yet accomplished by the Islamic State (ISIS).

Less than two centuries later, a Turkic army destroyed the renowned complex of Buddhist monasteries at Nalanda, in eastern India, which had served as a hub of international Buddhism, linking the maritime and overland Silk Roads, for nearly eight centuries. Turkic warriors burned the ancient libraries and slaughtered monks who had not fled the approaching army. Although erosional forces had long been at work, it was a profound tectonic event that brought the Buddhist narrative to a close in its very birthplace, along the Gangetic plain of northeast India. A third, decisive factor in the eclipse of Central Asia's "age of enlightenment" was the Mongol conquest, which depopulated much of the region and systematically wrecked the vast and highly complex irrigation system upon which an ancient civilization depended for its agricultural productivity.

As we shall see, the tectonic forces that devastated Central Asia also led to the Islamization of the East Indies, more than 700 years after the initial appearance of Muslim traders and proselytizers in the Malay archipelago, during the reign of Caliph Umar bin Khattab (634-44 CE).

The Mongol armies that destroyed Central Asia (1219-21) and the Abbasid caliphate (1258) also conquered China. Kublai Khan, who founded the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), brought hundreds of thousands of Central Asians to China, where they served as a military and administrative interface between the Mongol overlords and their ethnic Chinese subjects, whom the Mongols did not trust. Marrying locally, these Central Asians came to form a major component of a distinct ethnic group within China known as Hui Muslims, whose prominent role within Chinese government was soon to have a profound influence on the sociocultural and political dynamics of Nusantara (East Indies) civilization.

In 1293, Kublai Khan sent a large punitive expedition against the Hindu/Buddhist Singhasari dynasty, based in Java, which had replaced the kingdom of Srivijaya as the dominant maritime power in the Malay archipelago and refused to acknowledge Mongol suzerainty. Small vassal states throughout the archipelago, including many along the coasts of Sumatra and the Malay peninsula, quickly submitted to Kublai Khan's maritime expedition, which was commanded by a Hui general and consisted primarily of Hui and ethnic Chinese soldiers. Although the Mongol expedition ultimately ended in defeat and disgrace at the hands of Raden Wijaya, founder of the Majapahit dynasty, it helped set in motion a process whereby, over the next two centuries, political power in the East Indies – and, hence, the official state religion – gradually shifted from Hindu/Buddhist to Muslim polities. It is noteworthy that the first Muslim state in present-day Indonesia was established in 1297, when the ruler of Pasai, in northern Sumatra, converted to Islam.

This process accelerated dramatically a century later, when the Yongle emperor of the Ming dynasty, who came to power with Muslim support and whose mother was said to be descended from Hui Muslims, dispatched a massive Chinese naval expedition to Southeast Asia led by a Hui admiral named Zheng He (aka "Cheng Ho"). Zheng He was the great-great-great-grandson of Sayyid Ajal Shams al-Din Omar, a Persian who served in the administration of the Mongol empire and was the governor of Yunnan during the early Yuan dynasty. Zheng He's grandfather was a *hajji*, a Muslim who had performed the pilgrimage to Mecca.

In 1405, Zheng He visited northern Java on the first of seven Chinese naval expeditions to Southeast Asia, India, Arabia and East Africa during the next 28 years. These expeditions, each comprising hundreds of ships and crews numbering more than 20,000, many of them Hui Muslims, were ostensibly commercial and diplomatic in character, yet also constituted an overwhelming display of force by the Ming dynasty, which was sufficient to permanently transform the political and religious dynamics of the East Indies. The expeditions' immediate impact was to stimulate trade, destabilize the Hindu/Buddhist Majapahit empire, which claimed suzerainty over the Malay archipelago, and accelerate the process of Islamization throughout the region. That these results were intentional is suggested by the fact that Zheng He not only shielded a rebellious minor principality in Melaka, whose ruler converted

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LIBFORALL FOUNDATION

to Islam in 1414, from Majapahit retribution, but also transformed the regional balance of power by designating Melaka as the primary base of the Chinese fleet in Southeast Asia and its commercial entrepôt.

Zheng He is also reported to have established an Overseas Chinese Bureau, based in Champa (present-day central and southern Vietnam), to govern diaspora Chinese in Southeast Asia and project strategic influence throughout the region. The bureau was controlled by Hui Muslims, handpicked and appointed by Zheng He himself, who encouraged diaspora Chinese to embrace Islam, financed the construction of mosques for Chinese communities and favored Chinese Muslims in the awarding of contracts for trade and service at his armada's many ports of call. This impetus for ethnic Chinese to embrace Islam was heightened by the access conversion provided to international trade networks dominated by Arab, Indian, Chinese (Hui) and Malay Muslim traders.

Thus, over a period of nearly three decades (1405-33), Majapahit's ability to govern its dependencies throughout the Malay archipelago was severely eroded by the Ming dynasty's foreign policy, which was designed to "fragment the barbarians" and encourage local rulers to establish a direct tribute relationship with China. Then, as suddenly and unexpectedly as they had appeared, the massive Chinese fleets vanished from Southeast Asian waters, leaving a power vacuum in their wake. Following Zheng He's death, the Ming emperor (Xuande) decided to cease funding naval

expeditions. This coincided with the fall of the eunuch faction at the Ming court in Beijing, many of whom were Hui Muslims, and the rise to power of Confucian scholar-bureaucrats who opposed engagement with the Outer Barbarians of the Western Ocean.

Its maritime – and, hence, economic – lifeline severed by Chinese intervention, the Majapahit empire fell into an advanced state of decay, enabling the spread of Muslim city-states along the coasts of Sumatra, the Malay peninsula, Borneo, Sulawesi and the Malukus, which promptly declared independence from their Hindu/Buddhist overlords. The tide of political Islam reached Java in 1478, when a Chinese Muslim harbor master named Jin Bun murdered an aristocratic Javanese governor (*adipati*), assumed the title "Raden Patah" and established the Islamic sultanate of Demak.

Closely allied with Chinese and Arab Muslims who lived in maritime ports along the north coast of Java, Demak drew upon familiar Islamic narratives to legitimize waging war (ie, *jihad*) upon the severely weakened Majapahit empire. These narratives were largely identical to those employed by Muslim conquerors throughout Islamic history and may be readily traced to specific elements of orthodox, authoritative Islam and its historic practice, including those portions of *fiqh* (classical Islamic law, aka *Shariah*) that enjoin Islamic supremacy, encourage enmity toward non-Muslims and require the establishment of an Islamic state, whose ruler unifies and leads the community of Muslims in what amounts to a perpetual state of war, which may be periodically interrupted by truce, against any who refuse to submit to Islam.

After decades of intermittent warfare, the Demak army, led by Raden Patah's son, Sultan Trenggono, finally sacked the infidels' (ie, Majapahit) capital, torched the sacred Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and scattered the indigenous Javanese nobility, priests and court followers across the mountainous landscape of southern Java, from whence many fled to Bali. For nearly 25 years, Sultan Trenggono waged annual *jihad* campaigns in southern and eastern Java, in order to break the resistance of the local Javanese aristocracy and landed gentry, known as *kyais*, who rejected his ultimatum to embrace Islam and refused to abandon their ancestral homes, land and followers to live in impoverished exile.

It was during this formative period of Islamic conquest that the first Javanese narratives about Islam began to take shape. Many of these concern the role of Muslim saints in adapting and propagating the essence of Islamic teachings within the context of Javanese culture, and contrast the saints' behavior with that of Arab and Chinese militants who weaponized specific elements of classical Islamic orthodoxy in order to justify their seizure of economic and political power.

Among the more famous, and controversial, of these narratives concerns the life, teachings and death of Seh Siti Jenar, whom Javanese historical narratives describe as "His Highness"; the "Prince of Gnostics"; the "Shaykh"; "Seh Sunyata Jatimurti," or "He Who Has Attained the Absolute Void as Reality Incarnate"; the "Susunan of Lemah Abang"; "a humble peasant risen to become a saint"; and "a worm, transformed by sacred knowledge into

the self-aware manifestation of God Himself."

Among Siti Jenar's disciples were the members of a Sufi (ie, Islamic spiritual) brotherhood of *kyais*, or local lords, numbering some 40 men, who led a network of mystical Islamic communities spread across rural central Java. Although all had pronounced the *shahada* (Muslim confession of faith) and converted to Islam, they remained steeped in the ancient Javanese tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance, and thus chose to embrace a mystical, rather than supremacist, interpretation and practice of Islam. Mapped out, their locations composed a web that skirted and nearly encircled Raden Patah's court-city of Demak. While Siti Jenar's network of disciples threatened Demak's temporal authority, his teachings were perceived as an even greater threat by orthodox religious leaders affiliated with the kingdom of Demak.

Siti Jenar dared to reveal the inner sanctum of truth (*haqiqa* and *ma'rifa*), without requiring that his followers observe even the most basic tenets of Islamic law, such as ritual prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Instead, he set about organizing the countryside along the lines of a great spiritual community, in which *kyais* ruled the local population with a gentle hand and left everyone free to worship according to their own conscience. Siti Jenar's example, and that of his disciples, was enough to attract a large following, and to incur a death sentence from the orthodox religious and political leaders in Demak.

Sunan Kudus, head of the militant Islamic faction in north-central Java, eventually executed Siti Jenar as a heretic, in Demak's great public square, before a crowd of thousands. Eyewitnesses later described how Siti Jenar had laughed in the face of death and went, ecstatic, to his apotheosis. At the slash of Sunan Kudus's sword, blood spat from Siti Jenar's severed neck to spell "*la illaha ilallah*" ("there is no God but Allah") in the dirt, and word quickly spread throughout the land of Java that this was a message from God himself – a divine symbol, indisputably proving that Siti Jenar, and not his executioner, was the true and faithful Muslim.

The late Indonesian president and longtime chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, once told this author that Siti Jenar was condemned for publicly teaching the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* ("the unicity of being") and for revealing spiritual practices that lead to the union of the individual soul with God (*manunggaling kawula gusti*), which undermined the authority of religious fundamentalists. To this day in Java, the narrative of Siti Jenar provides a clear demarcation between Muslim fundamentalists and those who are committed to religious pluralism and tolerance. Extremists often denounce Siti Jenar as an infidel and apostate, while spiritual luminaries, such as President Wahid, generally regard his mystical teachings as an expression of the highest truth of Islam and of reality itself.

As the Persian mystic Jalaluddin Rumi wrote of an Arab saint who encountered a similar fate in 10th century Baghdad: "When Mansur al-Hallaj attained the state of utmost friendship with God, he became his own enemy and cast away his life. He said, '*Ana 'l-Haq*'

('I am the truth'), meaning, 'Mansur al-Hallaj has vanished and God alone remains.' This is true humility. You who proclaim: 'Thou art God and I am your servant' display arrogance [rooted in egotism and profound spiritual ignorance], for you thereby affirm your own [transitory and illusory] existence, rather than divine unity (*tawhid*). To proclaim 'He is God' also affirms dualism, for until 'I' [the state of divine unity] exists, 'He' [personal knowledge of God's existence] is impossible. ... Therefore it was not Mansur al-Hallaj, but rather, God alone who proclaimed 'I am the Truth,' since Mansur's individual identity had already vanished."

They remained steeped in the ancient Javanese tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance, and thus chose to embrace a mystical, rather than supremacist, interpretation and practice of Islam.

Five hundred years after the death of Siti Jenar, narratives affirming or disputing his status as a saint (or infidel) continue to shape the religious and political landscape of Indonesia. In 2004, the most popular musical group in Muslim Southeast Asia, Dewa, whose previous album had sold approximately 10 million copies, released a new album titled "Laskar Cinta," or "The Warriors of Love."

It constituted a direct challenge and rebuke to those who sympathized with the group Laskar Jihad, which had participated in a religious civil war in eastern Indonesia and was founded by a veteran of the Afghan jihad who claimed personal familiarity with Osama bin Laden. Dewa's new album swiftly rose to the top of Indonesia's charts and two of its songs became number one hits in Indonesia and on MTV Asia. One of these songs, titled "Satu" ("Oneness"), was explicitly dedicated to Siti Jenar and employed, as its lyrics, a famous saying conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad but regarded by Muslims as a direct statement by God Himself (*hadith qudsi*), which affirms and validates the spiritual vision of al-Hallaj, Rumi and Siti Jenar.

As President Wahid wrote in *The Washington Post* ("From Indonesia, Songs Against Terrorism"): "Dhani and the other members of Dewa have presented Indonesia's youth with a stark choice, and one easy for most to answer: Do they want to join the army of *jihad*, or the army of love? Dhani and his group are on the front lines of a global conflict, defending Islam from its fanatical hijackers. In a world all too often marred by hatred and violence committed in the name of religion, they seek to rescue an entire generation from Wahhabi-financed extremists whose goal is to transform Muslim youth into holy warriors and suicide bombers. For every young Indonesian seduced by the ideology of hatred and fanaticism – including those

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LIBFORALL FOUNDATION

responsible for the recent, awful attacks in Bali – countless others see through the extremists' web of lies and hatred, in no small part thanks to the visionary courage of people like Ahmad Dhani. For as they listen to Dewa's music, the hearts of millions of young Indonesians have been inspired to declare: 'No to the warriors of *jihad*! Yes to the warriors of love!' "

In 2005, while publicly defending Ahmad Dhani and Dewa from extremist accusations of apostasy, President Wahid leaned over and whispered to me: "You know, Holland, fundamentalists are always trying to annihilate mysticism. But they can never succeed, because it's impossible to annihilate that which arises from the depths of human experience."

Subsequent developments in Ahmad Dhani's life only go to prove the incompetence and failure of governments to support such positive narratives.

For more than 100 years, from 1478 to 1586, these opposing forces struggled for the soul of Java – and, ultimately, for that of Islam – in a war whose decisive engagements occurred not only on the field of battle, but in the hearts and minds of countless individuals scattered across the lush, tropical landscape of Java. For in this conflict between fundamentalist *jihadists* and Sufi (mystically inclined) Muslims, the Sufis' profound spiritual ideology, popularized among the masses by storytellers and musicians, played

a role even more vital than that of economics or pure military force in defeating religious extremism in Java.

One such figure, Sunan Kalijogo, who to this day remains the pre-eminent patron saint of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest mass Islamic group, taught his disciples a mystical brand of Islam that readily harmonized with pre-existing elements of traditional Javanese culture. Revered by Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims alike, Kalijogo's teachings formed a stark contrast to the militant brand of Islam espoused by Sunan Kudus and were in fact aligned with the *wahdat al-wujud* doctrine of Seh Siti Jenar, which represents the core teaching of the great Sufi mystic Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (d, 1234 in Damascus, Syria) and his respected line of disciples, including Abd al-Karim al-Jili (1366-1424).

At the end of this multigenerational conflict, a new dynasty arose, founded on the principle of "the throne for the people," which established religious tolerance as the rule of law and restored freedom of conscience to all Javanese. This was 200 years before similar ideas took firm political root in the West, through passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The founder of that dynasty was a Javanese Sufi Muslim and disciple of Sunan Kalijogo named Senopati ing Alogo. The basis of his victory was the popular appeal of Senopati's message of religious freedom, justice, respect for Javanese cultural identity and profound inner spirituality, in contrast to the fanaticism and tyranny of his political opponents.

Mataram, the name Sunan Kalijogo's disciples gave to the region of south-central Java now known as Yogyakarta, and to the Islamic dynasty they founded, was loaded with symbolism. In addition to evoking the 9th century Mataram kingdom, which, centered nearby, was the first Javanese dynasty to adopt a syncretic form of Hinduism/Buddhism, the name explicitly combined the Sanskrit terms for "mother" (*matr*) and "*Ram*," the seventh avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, who came to earth to destroy the demon-king Ravana. Within the context of 16th century Javanese culture, the narrative was clear: Senopati ing Alogo was like Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu; his guru, Sunan Kalijogo, a contemporary *rishi*, or "seer of ultimate Reality"; his followers, the devout Hanoman and his army of *varanas* (forest-dwellers); and Demak, the equivalent of Lanka, the demon kingdom from which Ravana and his followers (ie, Arab and Chinese fanatics) had issued forth to massacre, rape and enslave human beings – thereby disrupting the harmony of nature and the tranquil worship of God by religious devotees.

Extremists often denounce Siti Jenar as an infidel and apostate, while spiritual luminaries, such as President Wahid, generally regard his mystical teachings as an expression of the highest truth of Islam and of reality itself.

The Javanese victory over Demak gave birth to a set of narratives that have continued to evolve to the present day, through the process of deposition and erosion so aptly described by Brian Steed in the lead essay, "Maneuver in Islam's narrative space." These narratives initially assumed the form of oral and written histories such as the "Babad Tanah Jawi" ("History of the Land of Java"), which were composed by highly skilled poets retained by the court of Mataram. Over time, these narratives found expression in virtually every mode of Javanese art, education and culture, and were both deliberately and spontaneously inculcated, from generation to generation, at every level of Javanese society, from the palace to remote villages.

As Jadul Maula, director of the film "Rahmat Islam Nusantara," has said: "When the saints molded their disciples and taught them how to achieve spiritual perfection, they deliberately chose not to alienate people from their own history, culture, traditions or physical environment. As a result, we can still discern their footprints, for a wide variety of Islamic identities emerged when the saints began to Islamize the East Indies archipelago: Javanese Islam, West Sumatran Islam, Achenese Islam, Sasak Islam, Buginese Islam. Yet a golden thread runs throughout these various expressions of Islam. For the process of Islamization encouraged the attainment of spiritual perfection, without annihilating the unique characteristics of each local culture that embraced the new religion.

"There is a basic teaching [within traditional Sunni Islam]: 'Invite people to travel the path to God' – and this needs to be emphasized: 'Invite people to travel the path to God,' not to join any particular sect or clique. Don't invite others to embrace [a specific] religion, but rather, to travel the path to God Himself. And in order to do this, people must travel an inner, spiritual path: ie, the path of the soul.

"To cite one example: many saints used art to convey their teachings. It is known from the ancient tales that Sunan Kalijogo wandered throughout Java, performing as a shadow puppet master. Using shadow-puppet theater (*wayang kulit*), Sunan Kalijogo taught people to engage in introspection, to know themselves. Many people nowadays have difficulty understanding this kind of *da'wa* (Islamic proselytism), especially if they're trapped by concepts regarding religious identity. For example, they may regard *wayang kulit* as a Hindu art form.

"Yet the reason saints adopted *wayang* is because its symbols and stories were extremely popular. They didn't want to alienate people from their own culture, and thus reworked these popular stories in such a way as to incorporate Islamic teachings that served as a mirror for self-reflection and a means to acquire self-knowledge. This illustrates how the early saints employed wise methods, including stories that were entertaining rather than didactic, and not in the least alien to their audience. People were encouraged to find their own path to God, and to encounter God, knowing that this encounter was the direct result of attaining a state of human perfection. "People were taught, first and foremost, to be fully human and thus humane. This differs from most contemporary *da'wa*, which encourages people to embrace religion

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LIBFORALL FOUNDATION

before they've become fully human. When inhumane people practice religion, they bring their personal defects to the practice of religion itself. By engaging in *da'wa* that emphasized spiritual perfection and its attendant humane behavior, the Wali Songo (Nine Saints) adopted an approach that was universally acceptable within Nusantara society. People of all faiths were willing to lend an ear to such teachings, which are of immense value to anyone, regardless of their ethnicity or religion. And thus the impact of the saints' *da'wa* was widely perceived as beneficial to society at large."

It is important to note that these narratives were not hostile to Islam or opposed to its primary message of *rahmah* (divine mercy and compassion). Rather, the disciples of Sunan Kalijogo who crafted these narratives succeeded in dominating the moral and theological high ground and neutralized religious supremacism by positioning Islam as the noble embodiment of truth and a source of universal love and compassion (Koran, 21:107). Similarly, these narratives portrayed the Prophet Muhammad as the Messenger of God, who came to earth for no purpose other than to perfect moral character and virtue. As may be evident from these scriptural citations, both of the aforementioned narratives regarding Islam and the Prophet are fully orthodox and consistent with the view of Islam and its Prophet held by the majority of the world's Muslims.

What distinguishes Indonesia from other regions of the Muslim world is one simple fact: only in Nusantara, and most notably Java, did a pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual understanding of Islam achieve lasting military and political dominance, which it has continued to maintain – despite numerous, sometimes bloody challenges – for more than 450 years.

The fundamental problem the Javanese faced, and that Indonesia continues to face today, lies in the fact that orthodox Islam also contains the violent and supremacist narratives employed to such devastating effect by Mahmud of Ghazni, Sultan Trenggono and contemporary social media *jihadists* who employ these very same narratives when summoning Muslims to join a global insurrection against the current world order.

As Kyai Haji A Mustofa Bisri, spiritual leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, told a gathering of 400 senior Islamic scholars in 2014, at the culminating event of a six-week-long Festival of East Indies Saints: "A previous speaker mentioned that it was my idea to hold this festival, and indeed it's been on my mind for quite some time. The idea arose from my concern that in recent years, Islamic proselytism (*da'wa*) has been violating the principles advocated by the noble Prophet Muhammad, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him. The Prophet advised those who proselytize to make things easy for other people, not cause them to flee in terror. And yet, lately, it is precisely *da'wa* that makes people feel horrified and appalled by Islam."

He continued: "Genuine Islam, Islam Nusantara, Indonesian Islam, the Islam taught by the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, has been supplanted by Saudi Islam ... a grasping and materialistic Islam ... coarse, cruel and savage. I am absolutely certain that our understanding of Islam is shared by the majority of Muslims worldwide, and that (the Wahhabi/ISIS) view is just a ghoulish nightmare that keeps the world awake at night, trembling in horror."

Indonesia's founding fathers were steeped in the history of Islam Nusantara and recognized the threat posed by religious supremacism, which influenced their decision to establish Indonesia as a multireligious and pluralistic state. Their wisdom and ability to maneuver in the narrative space also inspired Indonesia's founding president, Soekarno, and members of his cabinet to adopt Vishnu's mount, the eagle Garuda, tightly gripping a banner emblazoned with the phrase Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Oneness Amid Diversity) between its extended claws as the symbol of their new nation. When confronted by the Darul Islam rebellion (1949-62), which sought to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state, Soekarno, leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama and other Indonesian nationalists drew upon the legacy of Islam Nusantara to delegitimize and crush the armed rebellion, whose adherents routinely beheaded their opponents, much like ISIS today.

In the 1950s, when Islamists sought to implement *fiqh* (classical Islamic law) and transform Indonesia into an Islamic state through political means, Kyai Wahab Chasbullah, co-founder of Nahdlatul Ulama and chairman of its Supreme Council, withdrew NU from the Islamist-dominated political party Masyumi, aligned NU with

Soekarno and orchestrated the defeat of Masyumi's agenda at the polls. The relative success of Indonesia's democracy after the fall of Soekarno's successor, Soeharto, in contrast to the stark failure of the Arab Spring and the sociopolitical train wreck unfolding throughout the Middle East, may be attributed to Indonesian Muslims' heritage and their ability to maneuver in the narrative space. Yet Indonesia is not immune to the threat posed by religious extremism, which Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Pakistan and other state and nonstate actors have deliberately nurtured and exported worldwide for decades, in their struggle to maintain or acquire political, economic and military power.

The dramatic events on display before, during and after the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election illustrate the manner in which rival narratives, within Islamic orthodoxy, continue to shape the political landscape within the world's largest Muslim-majority nation and democracy. As reported in *The Diplomat*, "Mainstream political elites [used] religious and ethnic appeals to delegitimize a candidate ... to crush an opponent," referring to the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki "Ahok" Purnama.

As NU general secretary Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf observed at the time, the manner in which obsolete elements of Islamic orthodoxy were mobilized to defeat Ahok have "legitimized [Dutch politician] Geert Wilders' effort, in the Netherlands, to revoke Islam's protected status as a religion and instead declare Islam to be a subversive political ideology. Hopefully we will not witness Muslim minorities around the world experience restrictions upon their religious freedom, their right to enter other countries or even forcible expulsion" as a result of actions

by those who seek to weaponize Islam for political purposes.

Recognizing this danger, in May 2016 Nahdlatul Ulama hosted the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL), attended by approximately 400 traditional Muslim scholars from 30 nations. At the summit's conclusion, the NU central board promulgated a 16-point declaration that affirmed the mainstream nature of the NU's understanding and practice of traditional Sunni Islam; identified the salient factors driving Islamist extremism and terror

worldwide; and committed the NU to develop a global alliance capable of addressing the twin threats of Sunni and Shiite extremism.

The event featured expert presentations and detailed discussion of the relationship between Islam and nationalism; the unchecked spread of religious extremism, terror, armed conflict in the Middle East and a rising tide of Islamophobia in the West; the role of certain Middle East governments in fostering the spread of sectarian hatred; and the need for an honest appraisal of, and response to, Islamist extremism and terror.

Widely covered by international media, the summit and NU declaration explicitly identified "specific modes of interpreting Islam as the most significant factor causing the spread of religious extremism among Muslims" (point 8); cast a spotlight on Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran for their role in having "weaponiz[ed] sectarian differences ... nurtured religious extremism, and stimulated the spread of terrorism throughout the world" (point 9); identified religious extremism and terror among Muslims as "directly contributing to the rise of Islamophobia throughout the non-Muslim world" (point 10); called upon "people of good will of every faith and nation to join in building a global consensus not to politicize Islam" (point 15); and explicitly affirmed that the NU "will strive to consolidate the global *ahlussunnah 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" (point 16).

In response to the ISOMIL/Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration, the NU young adults movement, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, has taken concrete steps to operationalize this global effort, acting under the guidance of senior NU theologians.

Following months of careful preparation, in the spring of 2017 Ansor announced the launch of a concerted effort to promote humanitarian Islam (*al-islam li al-insaniyyah*) by developing and operationalizing a global strategy to recontextualize (ie, reform) the teachings of orthodox, authoritative Islam and thereby reconcile certain problematic elements of classical Islamic law with the reality of contemporary civilization, whose context and conditions differ significantly from those in which classical Islamic law emerged. As *The New York Times* headlined its coverage of the humanitarian Islam campaign: "Indonesians Seek to Export a Modernized Vision of Islam ... pressing governments around the world to bring Islamic law into line with 21st century norms."

Ansor quickly followed up in May 2017, when more than 300 Indonesian religious scholars gathered in East Java with colleagues from South Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North America to address "obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law, which are premised upon perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam."

A Mustofa Bisri opened the event with a prayer that the assembled scholars' deliberations would constitute "a humble act of religious piety and a blessing for all humanity ... [as well as] the starting point of a movement that may bring the rays of enlightenment to a desperate world." The two-day international gathering of *ulama* concluded with the

adoption of an 8,000 word analysis of the manner in which state and nonstate actors have "weaponized" orthodox Islamic teachings, and a detailed road map that calls for "a serious, long-term sociocultural, political, religious and educational campaign to transform Muslims' understanding of their religious obligations, and the very nature of Islamic orthodoxy."

In the words of Ansor chairman H Yaqut Qoumas, which also appear in the 21-page strategy document titled "Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam": "No progress can be made towards neutralizing a threat, unless it is understood and identified. It is false and counterproductive to claim that the actions of Al Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram and other such groups have nothing to do with Islam, or merely represent a perversion of Islamic teachings. They are, in fact, outgrowths of Wahhabism and other fundamentalist streams of Sunni Islam." The declaration goes on to state, "If Muslims do not address the key tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that authorize and explicitly enjoin such violence, anyone, at any time, may harness the orthodox teachings of Islam to defy what they claim to be the illegitimate laws and authority of an infidel state and butcher their fellow citizens, regardless of whether they live in the Islamic world or the West. This is the bloody thread that links so many current events, from Egypt, Syria and Yemen to the streets of Mumbai, Jakarta, Berlin, Nice, Stockholm and Westminster."

"Muslims face a choice between starkly different visions of the future. Will they strive to recreate the long-lost ideal of religious, political and territorial unity beneath the banner of a caliphate – and thus seek to restore Islamic supremacy – as reflected in their communal memory and still firmly entrenched within the prevailing corpus, and worldview, of orthodox, authoritative Islam? Or will they strive to develop a new religious sensibility that reflects the actual circumstances of our modern civilization, and contributes to the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal dignity and rights of every human being?" the declaration said.

These issues are of direct, legitimate and vital concern to every nation on earth. For state and nonstate actors' response to these questions, and their consequent maneuver in the narrative space, will shape the future of humanity for generations to come.