

## Islam Nusantara and Religious Peacemaking: Nahdlatul Ulama's Ideas in Creating Peace in Afghanistan

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### Abstract

The socio-political crisis in Afghanistan shows a surprising consequence, especially after the return of the Taliban in seizing the country after being overthrown by the United States (US) in 2001. The international community has pursued peace negotiations for the last ten years. Indonesia, however, has played a significant role in reconciling the factions in Afghanistan by involving religious organizations, in this case, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Religious narratives cannot be excluded in conflict resolution because the Taliban use religious justification in their actions. This study aims to uncover the religious narratives used by NU to calm down the opposing factions, including the Taliban. The qualitative research method used is interviews with the key informants and supported by various sources. This study finds that Nahdlatul Ulama has contributed to peace with a religious approach, namely peace hermeneutics and empathy detachment. In its implementation, NU uses religious narratives of Islam Nusantara. In addition, NU has also succeeded in creating capacity, institution building, and agreement among the conflicting factions.

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*Krisis sosial politik di Afghanistan menunjukkan perkembangan yang mengejutkan, terutama setelah Taliban kembali berkuasa itu setelah digulingkan oleh Amerika Serikat (AS) pada tahun 2001. Masyarakat internasional telah mengupayakan perundingan damai selama sepuluh tahun terakhir. Indonesia telah memainkan peran penting*

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*dalam mendamaikan faksi-faksi di Afghanistan dengan melibatkan ormas-ormas keagamaan, dalam hal ini Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Narasi agama tidak bisa dikesampingkan dalam resolusi konflik karena Taliban menggunakan justifikasi agama dalam tindakan mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap narasi keagamaan yang digunakan NU untuk menenangkan faksi-faksi yang berseberangan, termasuk Taliban. Metode penelitian kualitatif yang digunakan adalah wawancara dengan informan kunci dan didukung oleh berbagai sumber. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa Nahdlatul Ulama telah memberikan kontribusi menciptakan perdamaian dengan pendekatan keagamaan, yaitu hermeneutika perdamaian dan detasemen empati. Dalam implementasinya, NU menggunakan narasi keagamaan Islam Nusantara. Selain itu, NU juga berhasil menciptakan kapasitas, pembangunan institusi, dan kesepakatan antar faksi-faksi yang bertikai.*

**Keywords:** empathetic detachment; hermeneutic of peace; Islam Nusantara; religious peacemaking; Taliban

## Introduction

Twenty years after the United States (US) invaded Afghanistan; there have been significant changes in the country with the complete withdrawal of US troops and the return of the Taliban to power. When the authors wrote this article, the dynamics in Afghanistan were still full of questions. However, academically we need to record and analyze the long historical journey that has been passed until finally, this significant change occurred. Biden's decision is an implementation of the Doha Agreement signed by the Trump administration in February 2020 and representatives of the Taliban.

The Doha Agreement was reached after the US agreed to withdraw its troops in full from Afghanistan. Conversely, the Taliban has promised not to allow Afghan soil to become a base for acts of terrorism that threaten the US and its allies and agreed to negotiate with the Afghan government. Therefore, in September 2020, the Intra-Afghan Negotiations were held, which brought together the Afghan government and the Taliban militia in Doha but no critical results from the negotiations.

Indonesia has a significant role in efforts to create peace in Afghanistan. During the opening ceremony of the US-Taliban negotiations, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno L. P. Marsudi, present virtually; likewise in the Intra-Afghan Negotiations. As stated by Foreign Minister Retno during the Intra-Afghan Negotiations, the involvement of the Indonesian government in the Afghan peace process began after an official request from the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani. When visiting Indonesia in 2017, President Ghani asked Indonesia, the largest Muslim country, to play an active role in the Afghan peace process. According to Foreign Minister Retno, Indonesia puts forward two essential elements in the peace process, the role of *ulama* (clerics) and women's empowerment (Marsudi, 2020).

President Jokowi then made a return visit to Afghanistan in 2018 and proposed the establishment of a committee of Indonesian, Pakistani and Afghan clerics to promote peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. This proposal was followed by organizing an Afghan, Indonesian, and Pakistani *ulama* meeting in Bogor in 2018. In July 2019, the Taliban delegation officially came to Jakarta and met with the then Vice President, Jusuf Kalla, the Executive Board of Nadhlatul Ulama (PBNU), and the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) (CNN Indonesia Reporter, 2019).

The involvement of the Taliban in the peace process, including their arrival to Jakarta, which official state institutions welcomed, aroused curiosity for the authors. The Taliban are radical militias and carry out armed violence to achieve their political goals. A faction within the Taliban still has strong ties to Al Qaeda, namely the Haqqani network (Farrell & Semple, 2015; Fitton-Brown, 2021)

From previous studies, the authors found that the involvement of the Taliban in the peace process began in 2011. In that year, US President Obama said that peace could not come to a land known so much war without a political settlement. America will join initiatives that reconcile the Afghan people, including the Taliban (T. Waldman, 2014). In the same year, representatives of the Taliban came to Indonesia to join the

Peace Forum for Afghanistan (*Forum Silaturahmi Perdamaian di Afghanistan-FSPA*) organized by Nahdlatul Ulama to coincide with the 85th NU Anniversary (*Harlah*), July 2011. The FSPA was attended by representatives of the Taliban, namely Abdul Salam Zaif, along with several other Afghan figures, including Burhanuddin Rabbani (former President of Afghanistan).

The Indonesian government has engaged Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) to assist peacemaking in Afghanistan since 2010 (the era of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono). The reason was that NU has access to militias and clerics (*ulama*), while official embassy channels are still unable to access these groups (Mun'im DZ & Damasky, 2018, p. 78). The Taliban's willingness to join the FSPA was motivated by their trust in NU, which had long previously approached the *ulama* in Afghanistan, including the *ulama* among the Taliban (As'ad Said Ali, personal communication, 2020). In coordinating the implementation of the FSPA, NU cooperated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, especially the Indonesian Embassy in Kabul. Thus, NU's activities were not taking over the government's role but helping the Indonesian government, which had promised to seek capacity building and become a mediator (Mun'im DZ & Damasky, 2018, p. 84).

There have been many previous studies that have focused on peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. Among them, Jarstad and Olsson (Jarstad, 2013; Jarstad & Olsson, 2012) emphasize the importance of the involvement of local actors or "local ownership" in the peace process in Afghanistan. Sedra discussed the security sector reform, which should prioritize local wisdom, and this failed to be done in Afghanistan (Sedra, 2013). Shahed also considers that the US military operation in Afghanistan has failed, so a political process should be carried out that prioritizes peace and reconciliation (Shahed, 2018). Boni observes that the democratic process is still ongoing in Afghanistan, but the government's failure to create security and unity creates insecurity that hinders the political process (Boni, 2019). Meanwhile, Giustozzi predicts that two

possibilities will occur after the US withdrawal, namely the ability of the Taliban to unite various factions or the collapse of the country when the opposite happens (Giustozzi, 2021).

Meanwhile, previous research on the role of NU in creating peace in Afghanistan was conducted by Damasky in 2016. In particular, Damasky uses mediation theory and concludes that NU uses mediation channels to bring together various warring parties in Afghanistan. In addition, Damasky uses social organization theory to explain NU's efforts to transfer values about tolerance and peace through the formation of NU Afghanistan (Damasky, 2016). Meanwhile, Faizin (2020) analyzes the role of NU in efforts to create national reconciliation in Afghanistan by using the concept of non-state actors, faith-based organization, and facilitative mediation. Research conducted by Pratama (2021) uses soft power theory framework, multitrack diplomacy, and public diplomacy to analyze the role of NU in Indonesia's public diplomacy in reconciling the Taliban and the Afghan government. Mahfudin and Sundrijo (2021) highlighted the role of NU in Afghanistan as a transnational non-state actor who contributes to creating peace in conflict areas.

This study aims to complement the various studies carried out previously. It focuses on why NU views that the Taliban, an armed radical militia, needs to be involved in peacemaking efforts and how the narrative of *Islam Nusantara* (the Islam of Archipelago) presented by NU in a mediation process involving various factions, including the Taliban. This study uses the concept of religious peacemaking presented by Little (2007), which has four forms: enforcement, peacekeeping, institution, capacity building, and agreement making. This research is expected to provide a new perspective on the peace process and peacebuilding in Afghanistan. The findings of this research, namely the *Islam Nusantara* narrative, which is used as the basis for religious peacemaking efforts carried out by NU, can be continued by the Indonesian government, considering the ongoing volatile situation of Afghanistan.

This research was conducted qualitatively to answer 'why' and 'how'. Barbour writes that qualitative research can reveal the mechanisms that

link between variables by seeking explanations from the people involved in a phenomenon (Barbour, 2014). Qualitative methods can help us understand various behaviors, including illogical behavior. Qualitative research involves collecting data, among other things, through interviews using open-ended questions, which allow respondents to focus on the issues that are most important to them. In addition, qualitative research also relies on pre-existing materials as data sources, such as historical documents or records (Barbour, 2014).

In this study, the research team interviewed the main informant, namely KH. Dr. As'ad Said Ali, an NU figure and former Deputy Chairman of the State Intelligence Agency (BIN) played a vital role in peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan. Interviews were conducted in June 2020 and August 2021 (after the Taliban returned to Afghanistan). Researchers employed KH. Abdul Mun'im DZ information for the triangulation process was directly involved in NU's peacemaking efforts, mass media coverage; UN documents; and various other data from books and academic journals. The data obtained were then analyzed using the concept of religious peacemaking.

### **Nahdlatul Ulama and Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan**

Peace needs to be carried out through three stages: peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding (Galtung, 1996). Peacekeeping is the process of stopping or reducing violence through military intervention. Peacemaking is a process of reconciliation between warring parties through negotiation, mediation, or arbitration to reach an agreement or peace agreement. Peacebuilding is a process of political transformation marked by the creation of positive peace, namely the permanent disappearance of violent acts and the realization of harmonious relations between the warring parties (Jemadu, 2014).

In this study, the authors focus on peacemaking efforts because the situation in Afghanistan is still in the process of reconciliation between various factions. In other words, the Afghan people have not yet reached the peacebuilding stage. One of the main stages in the peacemaking process

is mediation. The main goal of this stage is to achieve conflict resolution, such as formulating a peace agreement between the conflicting parties. Mediation is part of the conflict management process involving intervention from outside parties, individuals, groups, or organizations to create peace between the conflicting parties (Bercovitch, 1985). The mediator's involvement is voluntary and non-binding and is carried out without resorting to violence (Bercovitch, 1985). In other words, mediation can also be said as a method of conflict resolution by using persuasive means.

The involvement of NU in the peace process in Afghanistan began when the Government of Indonesia opened communication channels through the collaboration of BIN and NU with various parties, especially the *ulama*, in Afghanistan. Thus, behind the involvement of NU in promoting the peace process in Afghanistan, there is strong support from the Government of Indonesia, which began during the 2004-2014 period of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) administration. SBY's background as the Chief Military Observer of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Bosnia Herzegovina (1995-1996) made SBY see that Indonesia can significantly promote peace in Afghanistan (Ali, personal communication, 2020).

During SBY's era, in 2004, the Indonesian embassy in Kabul was re-opened after being closed during the reign of the Taliban regime. Initially, the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Kabul was led by an Ad-Interim Charge d'Affaires and began in 2006 led by an Ambassador. SBY assigned the Indonesian Ambassador to Afghanistan to establish contacts with Afghan clerics, considering that if Indonesia became a peacekeeping force in Afghanistan one day, Indonesia would already have many connections there. However, the situation is still precarious, making the Indonesian Embassy need BIN assistance (As'ad Said Ali, hereinafter referred to as Ali, personal communication, 2020).

At that time, the Deputy Chair of BIN was As'ad Said Ali, an NU figure. Ali then used his network, namely NU cadres who had studied in the Middle East, to carry out this task. In 2010, reports arrived that the mission was successful with communication to Afghan clerics in seven

provinces (Ali, personal communication, 2020). Since then, NU has been actively involved in the peace process in Afghanistan. NU acts as a mediator voluntarily by using a persuasive approach to all conflicting parties.

The mediation process is carried out through three stages: getting to the table, agreement, and implementing the agreement. At the initial stage, the mediator must bring the parties involved to the negotiating table to initiate communication and explore peace (getting to the table). From this stage, the mediator will take the parties to the next level: discussing and formulating a peace agreement between the conflicting parties (getting to an agreement). The final stage is for the parties to fulfill and implement the peace agreement (implementing the contract) (Walter 2002, in Greig and Dhiel 2012).

In 2010, in line with the planned withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, the SBY government wanted to play an active role in the transition process because it was estimated that the withdrawal of NATO troops would be followed by internal conflict. SBY then asked for help from NU, which had previously established contact with Afghan clerics, to carry out second-track diplomacy because formal diplomacy could not reach non-formal groups in Afghanistan, such as *ulama* and militias (Mun'im DZ and Damasky 2018: 80).

NU then initiated a forum for getting the various Afghan groups, including the Taliban, closer. This NU move is in line with the thoughts of (Wardak & Hamidzada, 2012). They offer "hybrid models of governance," namely government that involves non-formal elements such as mullahs, khans, local teachers, and community leaders. The forum, called "the Forum of Peace for Afghanistan" (abbreviated as FSPA), was held in conjunction with the 85th anniversary of NU's birthday in Jakarta.

As a preparatory step, on June 13-17, 2011, NU sent representatives to visit Afghanistan to invite the community and religious leaders to come to FSPA. After coordinating with the Indonesian Embassy and several community leaders during this visit, especially Fazal Ghani Kakar from



NECDO, 19 names would be invited to Jakarta. Among them, Abdul Salam Zaif, a member of the Taliban and former ambassador of the Taliban regime in Pakistan, and a member of the High Peace Council.<sup>1</sup> The delegation will be led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, former President of Afghanistan and the leader of the High Peace Council (Mun'im DZ & Damasky, 2018, p. 93). Other invitees included Wahiddullah Sabawoon (leader of the United Islamic Party of Afghanistan), Maulawi Hayatollah Talib Zada (a religious figure from Mingarhar Province), Maulawi Husseini (a religious figure from Herat Province), and Maulawi Qeyamuddin Kashaf (head of the Clergies Council) (Mun'im DZ & Damasky, 2018, pp. 93–94).

FSPA was finally implemented well in the Sumba Room, Hotel Borobudur, Jakarta, on 18-19 July 2011. This event took place behind closed doors. The dialogue begins with creating awareness about the history of the conflict then identifying the problem. Afterward, the Indonesian delegation explained their country's experience in realizing inter-religious harmony, then re-identified the main issue, looked for alternatives, and ended by formulating a joint statement.

This Joint Statement contains 9 points, which are as follows.

1. Affirming the principles of Islam as a religion of compassion, *rahmatan li-'l-'ālamīn*, which upholds moral honor (*al-akhlāq al-karīmah*), brotherhood among Muslims (*ukhuwwah Islāmiyyah*), and the principles of moderation (*tawassuṭ*), balance (*tawāzun*), tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), and justice (*i'tidāl*).
2. Affirming the need to build mutual acceptance, mutual trust, and brotherhood (*ukhuwwah sha'biyyah waṭaniyyah Afganiyyah*) among the various components of the Afghan nation.
3. Encourage establishing an independent and sovereign Afghan government free from all intervention, colonialism, and manifestations.

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<sup>1</sup> The High Peace Council is a council under the Afghan government and focuses on supporting peace efforts in Afghanistan (Damasky, 2016, p. 5).

4. Restore the role of representative institutions with attention to comprehensive representation in building the nation (*tanmiyyah waṭaniyyah*).
5. End all forms of conflict and strife throughout Afghanistan and the gradual return of refugees to their homes.
6. Guarantee the right of residence of all citizens, as part of the state, that they have the right to live anywhere join the organization, with due regard to local culture and policies.
7. To implement national reconciliation, it is necessary to strengthen the role of the Peace Council and Reconciliation Commission in Afghanistan and strengthen the integration of Afghanistan to solve various problems in the past.
8. All parties create public good (*al-maṣāliḥ al-āmmah*), including the rehabilitation of economic facilities and infrastructure, educational, health, and religious facilities.
9. Since peace is so essential, a reconciliation effort is needed, which requires a high level of involvement from facilitators, which is accepted by all components in Afghanistan (Mun'im DZ & Damasky, 2018, p. 117).

The success in these two stages was due to NU's position as a credible mediator, having a good reputation, being nonpartisan, neutral, trustworthy, and offering various alternative solutions. According to Sara Horowitz (in Webel & Galtung, 2007), the key to a mediator's success other than trust is persuasiveness, that is, the ability of the mediator to build communication and bargaining with the parties. According to Maoz and Terris (2009, in Vuković, 2015), mediators must have credibility, that is, the ability to provide various offers to the conflicting parties without any element of coercion and can be trusted by the conflicting parties.

The trust factor of Afghan clerics towards NU is a significant capital to open the door to mediation and make peace efforts in Afghanistan. This trust is earned through the approach process that has been carried out by NU since 2006, as previously mentioned. Evidence of this belief

emerged, among others, in the case of South Koreans being taken hostage by the Taliban in 2007. South Korea and the Taliban had agreed on a ransom payment. Still, the Taliban requested that the party who received the hostage handover must be an Indonesian diplomat (Ali, personal communication, 2020). Later in September 2007, the South Korean Ambassador specifically delivered a thank-you letter to the then General Chairman of PBNU, KH. Hasyim Muzadi (Muhaj, 2007).

In the same year, the then Taliban leader, Mullah Umar, also sent a thank-you letter to the Indonesian government and the NU Executive Board (PBNU) for their help in resolving the South Korean hostage affair. In the letter, Mullah Umar explained that the Taliban was not a terrorist organization but a struggle movement against colonialism. The reason the South Koreans were taken hostage, according to Umar, was because their government had sent troops to support the US occupation of Afghanistan. At the same time, the Taliban asked the Indonesian government to help Afghan people to free themselves from colonialism (Mun'im DZ & Damasky, 2018, pp. 228–229).

From this event, it appears that the Taliban views Indonesia as trustworthy. Another reason for the Taliban's trust in Indonesia, according to an observer and academic from Malikussaleh University, Al Chaidar, is that there are many students from the Taliban clerics in Indonesia, including Ustad Abu Tholut, who was a student of Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanikzai. Stanikzai came to Jakarta in August 2018 and met with some Indonesian officials (Wardah, 2019).

### **Nahdlatul Ulama's Arguments in Approaching the Taliban**

NU believes that Afghanistan's peace process needs to be carried out with a religious approach because Afghan people are very religious, and religion guides their life. However, due to the various interpretations of religion, some parties rigidly interpret religion. For this reason, it is necessary to have a dialogue with all parties regarding how to understand religion and how to translate religion into social life (Mun'im DZ & Damasky, 2018, p. 160).

In a theoretical framework, conflict resolution efforts require the involvement of all the main conflicting parties. In fact, the key to achieving conflict resolution is to accommodate the voices and demands of the rebel groups. Adapting does not mean justifying them as righteous but instead viewing them as a group that “represents legitimate grievances even though they do not use lawful means to achieve these demands” (M. Waldman & Ruttig, 2011). Previous studies from Sedra (2013) and Quie (2012) have also highlighted the failure of peace efforts in Afghanistan is because it does not accommodate local wisdom and establish communication with local actors. Moreover, Karell and Schutte (2018) found that aid projects involving all parties conducted inclusively are more successful than the other way around.

The involvement of NU in mediating peace in Afghanistan, including drawing in the Taliban, can be analyzed through this theory of conflict resolution. Moreover, the Indonesian government's effort to encourage NU's participation was due to NU's position as a religious organization that was expected to establish communication with the main actors in Afghanistan, which were generally religion-based, including the Taliban. In FSPA 2011, the *ulama* invited were from the Taliban and religious figures from various circles, as previously mentioned.

The Taliban is an armed militia formed in 1994 during the Afghan Civil War. However, creating this militia began in the Cold War era. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the United States looked for ways to defeat the Soviet Union. The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in 2009 recounted events at that time before the US Congress. She said,

“Let's remember here... the people we are fighting today we funded them twenty years ago... let's deal with the ISI and the Pakistan military, and let's go recruit these mujahideen. And great, let them come from Saudi Arabia and other countries, importing their Wahabi brand of Islam so that we can go beat the Soviet Union” (Dawn.com reporter, 2009).

In other words, Clinton acknowledged that the US sponsored the formation of the Mujahideen in cooperation with Pakistan. They recruited

mujahideen members from Saudi Arabia and other countries to fight against the Soviets. The recruitment was carried out by capitalizing on the religious sentiment "against communism." The US promotes a "culture of jihad" with full support (Latif et al., 2011). During the Cold War, the US spent millions of dollars supplying Afghan children's school textbooks containing "violent images and teachings of militant Islam, as part of a covert operation to encourage resistance against the Soviets." These textbooks, which were about jihad and filled with pictures of rifles, bullets, soldiers, and mines, later became part of the school curriculum and were even used by the Taliban regime (Stephens & Ottaway, 2002).

Because the Taliban grew out of religious education and based its movement on religious teachings, logically, to mediate with them, religious narratives are needed. The Taliban adhered to the Sunni-Deobandi sect centered in India. For the field of creed, it followed the Ash'ari and Maturidi, while for the field of *fiqh*, it followed the Hanafi school. The teachings of Ibn Taimiyah also entered into Deobandi's thinking, which later gave birth to the fundamentalism movement. The Taliban can be classified as followers of Deobandi fundamentalism and follow the notion of violence in jihad and Al Qaeda (Ali, 2014, pp. 105–107).

After the Soviet Union withdrew its troops in 1989, civil war broke out between the Mujahideen factions. In 1996 the Taliban defeated other factions and founded the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Only three countries recognize the Taliban government, namely Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates. At the same time, Al Qaeda, under the leadership of Osama bin Laden (who joined the Mujahideen in the war against the Soviet Union), developed into a global terrorist organization and carried out attacks on various US interests.

With the permission of the Taliban, Al Qaeda made Afghanistan the home base of its movement, and it was in this country that they opened training sites on a large scale. The Taliban and Al Qaeda have a common perception of Islam, especially the strict application of Islamic law. These two groups have the same interests in facing their opponents (the United

States and its affiliates) but also have different interests. The Taliban focused on control of Afghanistan, while Al Qaeda had international operations (Ali, 2014, pp. 105–107).

In 2001, the US and NATO invaded Afghanistan. They overthrew the Taliban because they refused to hand over the leader of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, who was accused of carrying out the September 9, 2001, World Trade Center bombing. It should also be noted that the Taliban is not a homogeneous organization; there are seven armed factions within it (T. Waldman, 2014). The Taliban parties willing to be involved in the dialogue forum initiated by NU and the Indonesian government are generally relatively moderate (Ali, personal communication, 2020). Currently, the leader of the Taliban is Maulawi Hibatullah Akhundzada (he took office in 2016). Three deputies assisted him, namely Mullah Yakub (son of the founder of the Taliban, Mullah Omar), Sirajuddin Haqqani from the Haqqani network, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar (BBC Reporter, 2021).

In an interview in August 2021, Ali stated that he had communicated with members of the Akhuzada group with NECDO facilitation. Akhuzada's presence in Qatar (which mediates between the Taliban, the Afghan government, and the United States) and his willingness to join negotiations with the US and intra-Afghan, indicate a shift in views towards a more moderate direction (Ali, personal communication, 2021).

After the Taliban returned to power on August 15, 2021, they provided more moderate narratives, including pledging not to take revenge, wanting peaceful international relations, and freeing women to school and work (Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 2021). But on the other hand, after the US pulled its troops out of Afghanistan, various frictions between ethnic groups' ideologies are still obstacles in the transition process. According to (Tariq et al., 2021), if the Taliban wants to create security in Afghanistan, they must learn tolerance and flexibility regarding people's rights regardless of caste, ethnicity, gender, and culture. The presence of NU Afghanistan (NUA) in 22 provinces in the country, among

its members are clerics who have joined the Taliban, indicates influence from the *Islam Nusantara* narrative that NU introduced to them (Ali, personal communication, 2021).

### **Islam Nusantara and Religious Peacemaking**

NU places *ulama* as the initiator or spearhead to bring about peace in Afghanistan. The reason is that the Afghan people are religious, so religious doctrines play a vital role in their lives. The most significant difference of opinion among political factions in Afghanistan is over the form of government. Therefore, if the *ulama* are at the forefront of peace efforts, they must formulate religious doctrines that lead to peace (Ali, personal communication, 2020).

In addition, the *ulama* also has strategic roles and functions in discussing forms of government that all parties can accept. Research by Rachman et al. also found that the involvement of *ulama* and women is the most critical factor in achieving peacebuilding success in Afghanistan (Rachman et al., 2020). In other words, in NU's view, reconciliation and peace in Afghanistan can only be realized with a political and religious solution at the same time. NU views that it is impossible to impose Western democracy on people who have a very religious culture and civilization and are guided by Islamic principles (Ali, personal communication, 2020). This aligns with Paliwal, Collins and Thiessen's view that imposing Western values on Afghanistan will increasingly lead to resistance. (Collins & Thiessen, 2020; Paliwal, 2017).

In the FSPA in Jakarta in 2011, in addition to explaining about Pancasila, NU also explained the principles contained in the concept of *Islam Nusantara*, such as *tawāzun*, *tawassuṭ*, *tasāmuḥ*, etc. The Afghan delegation, especially Burhanuddin Rabbani, also expressed their admiration and requested PBNU to bring this concept to be disseminated in Afghanistan. Rabbani said, "We in Afghanistan don't have this concept anymore" (Ali, personal communication, 2020). As Auld wrote, Afghanistan is in dire need of a deradicalization program (Auld, 2015).

The concept of Islam Nusantara is very appropriate when used as a reference in this case.

*Islam Nusantara* is defined as "the method (*manhaj*) and way (*kayfiah*) used by Muslim scholars in the archipelago to spread Islamic teachings" (al-Zastrouw, 2017). The scholars use various methods and ways to ensure that Islamic teachings are readily accepted. Although *Islam Nusantara* thought is developing in Indonesia, it is very likely to be adopted by Afghanistan, considering that the basis of *Islam Nusantara* thought is to provide a dynamic interpretation of religious texts. NU scholars view that there is always a "socio-historical and cultural background that surrounds the lives of these scholars which is also a reference in interpreting and actualizing a text" (al-Zastrouw, 2017). Thus, a textual understanding without regard to cultural aspects and political and social situations will jeopardize the unity of the *Muslim Ummah*. Apart from the US and NATO military invasion, the root problem in Afghanistan is also the lack of solidity of its citizens in formulating the form of nationality because there are still some parties who impose a single interpretation of Islam.

*Islam Nusantara* is a concept of moderation in Islam (*tawassut*) which teaches about tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) which always looks for a middle way (moderate), not extreme, not radical, far from fanaticism, and violence. It can synthesize religion, culture, and the times (Romli, 2016). *Islam Nusantara* is an Islamic model excavated from religious life in Indonesia that can build harmonious relations in diversity and pluralism. The concept of *Islam Nusantara* can be a role model or reference for the international community, especially Islamic countries in regulating the relationship between Islam and culture or Islam and democracy (Romli, 2016).

According to Azra (1998) orthodoxy of *Islam Nusantara* is the Ash'ariyah in *Kalām* (theology), Shāfi'i in *Fiqh*, and al-Ghazālī in Sufism. This is what NU said during a dialogue with religious leaders in Afghanistan. They were explained, among other things, that the basic views of NU were the same as religious views in Afghanistan in general,



namely Maturidiyah and Ash'ariyah *fiqh*. Although NU generally adheres to the Shāfi'i school, it also allows people to follow other schools of thought, including Hanafi. In the field of Sufism, NU uses al-Ghazālī's thinking. Among other things, NU follows al-Ghazālī's view that "religion and state are like twins, inseparable; religion is the foundation, and the state maintains that foundation" (Ali, personal communication, 2020).

The complete statement of al-Ghazālī is as follows, as stated in the book *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*:

الدنيا مزرعة الآخرة، ولا يتم الدين إلا بالدنيا، والمملك والدين توأمان، فالدين أصل،  
والسلطان حارس، وما لا أصل له فمهدوم، وما لا حارس له فضائع، ولا يتم المملك  
والضبط إلا بالسلطان.

"The world is the field of the hereafter, and religion will not be perfect except with the world. Power and religion are twins. Religion is the foundation, while power is the guardian. Without foundation will surely fall, while something without a guard will be wasted. Power will not be perfect without a ruler" (al-Ghazālī, n.d., Juz 1, p. 17).

The principles of the concept of Islam Nusantara are included in the Joint Statement signed by all members of the Afghan delegation. The following points further explain point 1 in the Joint Statement.

**a. Islam is a religion that is *rahmatan li-l-'ālamīn* (grace to the whole world)**

This principle is based on the word of Allah SWT in the Qur'an Surah al-Anbiyā verse 107: "And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds." (*al-Qur'an in English*, 2009)

This verse refers to the Prophet Muhammad SAW; in other words, Muhammad SAW is a blessing for the universe. Because the teachings conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad are the teachings of Islam thus, Islam is also a blessing for the universe.

**b. Islam upholds *al-akhlāq al-karīmah* (noble morals)**

One of Rasulullah SAW's primary missions to humankind is to spread noble morals. Narrated by Imam al-Bayhaqi, the Prophet SAW said: “*Verily, I was not sent except to spread noble character*” (al-Bayhaqi, 2003). In al-Quran surah al-Qalam verse 4, Rasulullah SAW is also mentioned as a figure who has great morals. “*And indeed, you are of a great moral character*” (al-Qur'an in English, 2009).

**c. Islam calls for brotherhood among Muslims (*ukhuwwah Islāmiyyah*)**

Islam strongly emphasizes the principle of brotherhood among fellow believers. Every believer, whatever his tribe and race and wherever he is, has a bond of brotherhood with other Muslims. In al-Quran surah al-Hujurāt verse 10 Allah says: “*The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. And fear Allah that you may receive mercy*” (al-Qur'an in English, 2009)

**d. Islam has the principle of moderation (*tawassuṭ*)**

Islam upholds moderation, which is the opposite of extremism. In surah Al-Baqarah verse 143, Allah SWT says: “*And it is thus that We appointed you to be the community of the middle way so that you might be witnesses to all mankind and the Messenger might be a witness to you.*” (Surah al-Baqarah 2, Verse 143, n.d.)

**e. Balanced (*tawāzun*)**

Islam obliges Muslims to always take a proportionate and balanced attitude in all areas of life. The creation of a balanced character is one of the purposes of transmitting Islamic teachings to human beings. In surah al-Ḥadīd verse 25, Allah SWT states: “*We have already sent Our messengers with clear pieces of evidence and sent down with them the Scripture and the balance that the people may maintain [their affairs] in justice*” (al-Qur'an in English, 2009)

**f. Tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*)**

Islam is a religion that respects differences, in all areas of life, including differences in the creed. When they have different views of life from others, a Muslim must have a good attitude, even when they invite debate. Even the Prophet SAW had no obligation to force others to convert to Islam. Allah SWT says in Surah Āli Imrān verse 20:

“If they argue with you (Muhammad), say, "I have devoted myself to God alone, and so have my followers." Ask those who were given the Scripture, as well as those without one, "Do you too devote yourselves to Him alone?" If they do, they are indeed rightly guided, but your only duty is to convey the message if they turn away. God is All-Seeing of His servants.” (Quran Garden, n.d.)

In another verse, al-Baqarah verse 256, Allah says: “*There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.*” (*al-Qur’an in English*, 2009)

**g. Fair (*i’tidāl*)**

*Al-i’tidāl* means to be straight when upholding justice, especially those related to law enforcement issues. Humans have generally been in trouble with the law. He may become a law enforcement officer or become a person involved with the law, either a defendant or a victim. A Muslim must be fair in law and justice enforcement, even if detrimental to himself or those closest to him. In al-Mā’idah verse 8, Allah SWT says: “*O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what you do.*” (*al-Qur’an in English*, 2009)

On September 18-21, 2013, scholars and community leaders from 12 provinces in Afghanistan and the High Peace Council representatives were again invited to Indonesia. They visited various Islamic boarding schools and institutions in Indonesia to understand better the implementation of Islam in life in the archipelago. They learned from the NU’s Kiai that the Prophet Muhammad SAW's core struggle was to spread Islam as mercy, which means that it cannot be limited by particular ethnic or sect

sentiments, or specific state ideologies, which will instead lead to conflict (Ali, personal communication, 2020). The delegation also went to the Sunan Pandanaran Islamic Boarding School, where they were greeted by around 7000 students who were very polite and respectful to the Kiai (*ulama*). Among the delegates, Mawlana Qolamuddin (former Minister of Amar Ma'rūf Nahi Munkar of the Taliban Regime) asked to give a speech. Weeping, she said, "This is the first time I have seen so many young people who have so much respect for the Kiai. Please quickly bring Islam like this to Afghanistan!" (Ali, personal communication, 2020).

In June 2013, NU clerics visited Afghanistan and spoke about their Islamic teachings in Indonesia. The increasingly intense communication between Afghan clerics and their direct experience in Indonesia, seeing that Islam and modernity can go hand in hand, has made NU's thinking on the principles of nationalism more accepted. Finally, in 2014 Nahdlatul Ulama Afghanistan (NUA) was founded. NUA is a non-political organization, independent, and not a branch of NU Indonesia (NUI), although NUA's Statutes and Bylaws (AD/ART) contents align with NUI. NUA has so far been established in 22 provinces in Afghanistan. An interesting fact is the joining of Abdul Rabb Rasool Sayaf, the leader of the hardline militant group Islamic Front Ittihad who once worked with Osama bin Laden. Sayaf's willingness to join NUA shows a shift in his attitude towards accepting the principles of *Islam Nusantara* promoted by NU, among others *tawassuṭ*, *tawāzun*, *tasāmuḥ* (Mun'im DZ & Damasky, 2018, p. 225).

In 2018, the Afghan delegation visited Jakarta once more. During the meeting, Afghanistan clerics (including Taliban figures) & NU figures signed an MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) on September 22 2018. The following is a copy of the MoU.

1. We believe in Moslem Brotherhood as a prime and crucial umbrella for building peace based on the teaching of the Holy Quran as says (believers are brothers) al-Ḥujurāt: 10; and the Hadith of Prophet as narrated, "Muslim are brothers to each other." We believe that works

for sustainable peace in Afghanistan are prime and principal need to end this long-term conflict that affects the Afghan Muslim nation, the region, and the Muslim ummah as a whole.

2. All actors of the conflict must be represented. This will prevail a sphere of understanding and change of anti-peace mentality.
3. The mediator should build trust between the conflict actors by remaining neutral during peacemaking.
4. The work for peace should be a step-by-step process due to the cause that the conflict in Afghanistan has its deep roots and various dimensions.
5. To reach a durable and sustainable peace, it's highly recommended to adopt both cultural and political approaches for making durable peace.
6. The mediator should take careful steps considering the rapid changes and local, regional, and international developments.
7. We highly recommend that the next step should be taken as soon as possible, an informal meeting with the medium or top-level leadership of the Taliban.
8. We recommend that the internal consolidation be given priority to mobilize the mass youth, ulama, CSOs, intellectuals, tribal leaders, activists, peacemaker individuals and institutions, and government bodies to work together for durable peace in the country.

The Afghan delegation signed this MoU, i.e., Mawlawi Wakil Ahmad Motawakil, Mawlawi Abdussalam Zaeif, Mawlawi Abdussalam Rocketi, Mawlawi M. Ishaq Nezami, and Fazal Ghani Kakar, as well as the Indonesian delegation, i.e., Dr. As'ad Said Ali, Dr. Ichsan Malik, Abdul Mun'im DZ, and Ubaidullah Shodaqoh.<sup>2</sup>

### **Hermeneutics of Peace and Empathetic Detachments Implemented by Nahdlatul Ulama**

There are two essential aspects in the concept of religious peace, namely peace hermeneutics and empathy detachment. Hermeneutic of

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<sup>2</sup> Source: unpublished document from a primary informant, Dr. As'ad Said Ali.

peace is an interpretive framework for theological concepts used as the basis for building concepts of peace and justice, for example, the use of sacred religious texts as a basis for calling for peace. Meanwhile, empathetic detachment is one aspect of the religious peacemaking process that makes religious identity a strength to build trust between conflicting parties (Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, 2007).

The narrative conveyed by NU in carrying out a persuasive approach to Afghan clerics from various factions (including the Taliban) is to provide a moderate interpretation (tafsir) of religious texts such as the Al-Qur'an, Hadith, and books as the basis for the concept of *Islam Nusantara*, as seen in the 2011 FSPA Joint Statement. This narrative can also be seen in the 2018 MoU, which emphasizes 'brotherhood among Muslims' based on the Qur'an Surah al-Hujurat verse 10 and the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad that 'a Muslim is another Muslim' (HR Bukhari). This shows that NU uses the hermeneutic aspect of peace using theological arguments (theology of peace).

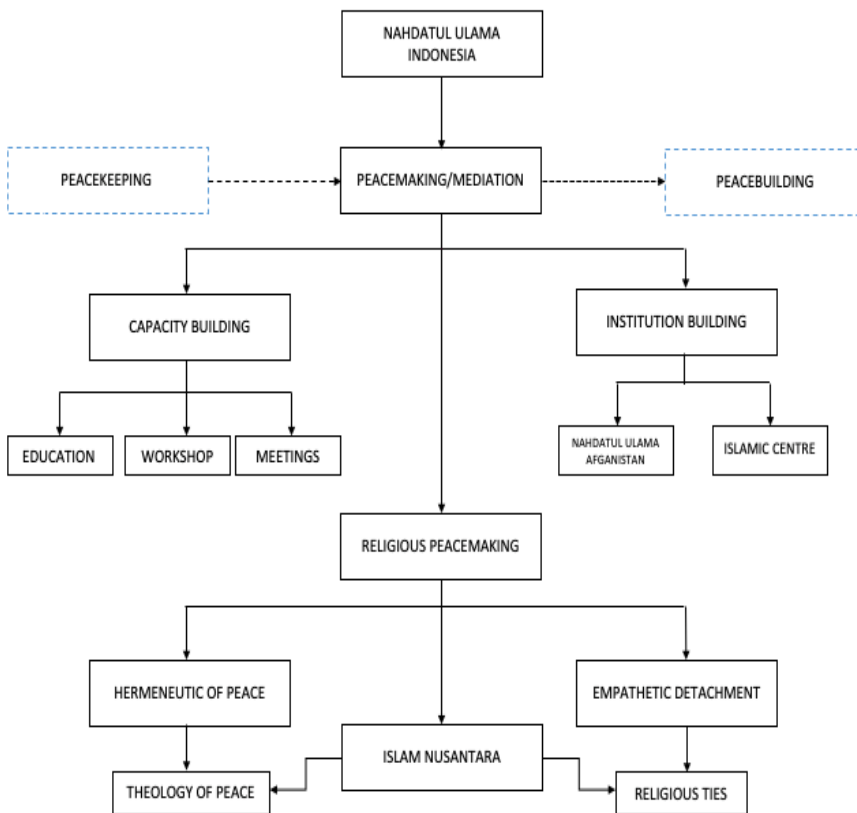
In addition, NU also puts forward the similarity of religious identity, which is the glue factor between all parties involved. This effort can be seen in the narration regarding the similarity of the Maturidiyah and Asy'ariyah beliefs. We could even conclude that NU was trusted as a mediator because of the same religious ties as the conflicting parties. This aspect is categorized as empathetic detachment.

### **Institution and Capacity Building Conducted by Nahdlatul Ulama**

In the concept of religious peacemaking, there are at least four possible forms of activity, namely enforcement, peacekeeping, institution and capacity building, and agreement-making (Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, 2007). Military or peacekeepers, who have the power to stop violent conflicts, usually execute enforcement and peacekeeping efforts. Institution and capacity building is part of the peacemaking process implemented by forming certain institutions or organizations to provide education and spread messages of peace.

Meanwhile, agreement-making is a process of continued interaction from all conflicting parties to work and accept a peaceful conflict resolution (Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, 2007).

Figure 1  
Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia Peacemaking Strategy



Source: The research team

As a religious organization, NU cannot take enforcement and peacekeeping actions because military forces usually carry out these actions with a special mandate from the United Nations to stop or prevent violence. NU has generally fulfilled the institutional and capacity building for the Afghan community, from the state apparatus to civil society. For capacity building, NU utilizes various meetings, conferences, and workshops to introduce the concept of *Islam Nusantara*. Several institutions were formed to proceed with these programs, such as the Nahdlatul Ulama Afghanistan (NUA) organization and the Islamic Center. These two institutions became the main locomotive in spreading the concept of *Islam Nusantara* to the Afghan people.

Meanwhile, at the agreement-making stage, these institutions signed the Joint Statement in 2011 and the MoU in 2018. The Figure 1 summarizes the religious peacemaking strategy carried out by NU.

## Conclusion

The Afghan conflict has been going on for twenty years, since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Even though this conflict involves the world's major powers, i.e., the US and NATO, Afghanistan must resolve the conflict resolution internally. These internal conflicts between factions in Afghanistan cannot be separated from religious factors because the actors use religious arguments in their decisions. The Indonesian government seeks to assist Afghanistan in achieving intra-Afghan peace, and NU has contributed.

As summarized in Figure 1, there are three stages in creating peace: peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. NU takes part in the peacemaking stage in the form of mediation. NU does two things in the mediation: capacity building and institution building. NU uses the concept of *Islam Nusantara* as the religious approach to carry out all these efforts. Therefore, NU made a religious peacemaking effort that included two aspects. First, the hermeneutic dimension of peace (the use of religious doctrine to promote peace or "theology of peace"), and second, the



empathetic detachment dimension by making religious ties between different parties. NU has conveyed this original thought to Afghanistan's *ulama* because the tensions in that country resulted from the lack of harmonious relations between Islam and modernity or nationalism.[w]

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