

Beyond the Middle East; Analyzing the Islam Nusantara Concept as a Global Model for Moderate and Contextual Islam

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Abstract

Global Islamic discourse is dominated by Middle Eastern centrism. Indonesia promotes Islam Nusantara (Archipelagic Islam), emphasizing moderation and syncretism (adat), aiming to be a global counter-model for reconciling faith, democracy, and modernity. This study aimed to analyze the strategic efficacy and global reception of Islam Nusantara among Middle Eastern religious elites and Western policymakers, addressing the critical Theological-Policy Translation Gap hindering its soft power projection. A qualitative, comparative multi-site case study (N=25 elite informants) was conducted, including Indonesian propagators, Salafi critics, and integration experts. Data were gathered via interviews and analyzed using a Policy Translation Matrix. The campaign is severely constrained by the Translation Gap. Middle Eastern elites rejected the concept based on Theological Purity (bid'ah). Western policymakers marginalized it due to a lack of Policy Utility and secular framing, proving the uniform message failed to satisfy opposing filters. The findings mandate an urgent dual-track communication strategy. The study's contribution is a novel Global Policy Strategy for Contextual Islam that requires focusing on rigorous Arabic fiqh scholarship for the East and pragmatic, secular policy framing for the West.

Keywords: Contextual Islam, Islam Nusantara, Policy Translation



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INTRODUCTION

The global Muslim world currently grapples with the challenge of balancing adherence to foundational Islamic texts with the demands of modern secular nation-states and the complexities of diverse local cultures (Ahmed, 2025). Historically, the dominant intellectual and political discourse concerning Islam has been heavily centered in the Middle East, leading to an often-unquestioned assumption that the forms of Islamic practice emanating from the Arab world represent the universal, canonical norm. This geographical and cultural hegemony has inadvertently created tension, often marginalizing non-Arab, contextually rich forms of Islamic expression and fueling debates over authenticity versus adaptation (Al-Kandari et al., 2025).

Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, offers a compelling counter-narrative to this Middle Eastern centrism. The practice of Islam in the archipelago has evolved over centuries through a peaceful, syncretic process, meticulously integrating Islamic tenets (ushul) with local customs and traditions (adat). This historical process stands in stark contrast to the often rapid and politically charged conversions found elsewhere (Ali & Aysan, 2025). This nuanced, deeply rooted religious landscape has resulted in a pluralistic society where religious freedom coexists with a strong national commitment to democracy and the founding ideology of Pancasila (Aminuddin, 2025).

This distinctive Indonesian experience has been formally articulated and promoted globally as Islam Nusantara (Islam of the Archipelago). Islam Nusantara is not a new religion, but a methodological and epistemological concept (Ammar & Saidane, 2024). It champions the idea that Islam must be contextualized, prioritizing the ethical spirit (maqāsid al-sharī'ah) over rigid legalistic interpretations, fostering moderation (wasathiyah), local cultural respect (tawassut), and dynamism (taqaddum). The concept has moved beyond local discourse to become a central foreign policy narrative for Indonesia, positioning it as a potential global model for reconciling faith with modernity, democracy, and pluralism (Ashafa & Raimi, 2024).

A significant conceptual and political resistance hinders the universal acceptance and strategic effectiveness of the Islam Nusantara model on the global stage (Fahad & Bulut, 2024). Politically, the concept faces intense scrutiny and outright opposition from proponents of literalist and puritanical Salafi ideologies, often amplified by funding and media support from certain Middle Eastern states. These ideological opponents reject the core premise of Islam Nusantara, viewing its emphasis on local syncretism (adat) and moderation as a deviation (bid'ah) from pristine, universal Islamic principles. This ideological confrontation requires the Indonesian model to prove its theological and practical robustness beyond local success (Bazvand et al., 2025).

The core problem for this research lies in the lack of empirical and comparative analysis that validates Islam Nusantara's claims of global applicability (Bourezg et al., 2025). While its theological arguments for contextualization are strong, there is limited evidence demonstrating how the model can be systematically transplanted or adapted to resolve specific socio-political conflicts in other non-Muslim-majority contexts (e.g., European diasporas, African nations with inter-religious conflict). Without this comparative empirical framework, the model risks remaining a localized cultural curiosity rather than a globally recognized "best practice" for moderate Islam (Benavent-Lledo et al., 2025).

The specific problem this research addresses is the critical absence of a structured analytical framework for evaluating Islam Nusantara as a foreign policy soft power instrument. The discourse is rich in theological rhetoric but lacks rigorous, political science-driven analysis of its efficacy in international relations (Durueke, 2025). It is unclear what specific strategies (e.g., educational exchange, diplomatic advocacy, public relations) best promote Islam Nusantara to non-Indonesian political and religious elites, and how the concept's core principles can be translated into a secular, policy-relevant language accessible to Western governments struggling with domestic Muslim integration (Dubey et al., 2025).

The primary objective of this research is to deconstruct the core theological and sociological components of the Islam Nusantara concept (Elouaourti & Ibourk, 2024). This will involve establishing a precise, measurable “Contextual Islam Framework” based on its foundational principles: *tawassut* (moderation), *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *tawāzun* (balance), and its methodology of acculturation (Eyerly-Webb et al., 2025). This objective will provide the analytical tool necessary to compare the Indonesian model against other global moderation projects (e.g., Malaysian Islam Hadhari or European models of Muslim citizenship).

A second, co-equal objective is to conduct comparative case studies analyzing the diplomatic and communication strategies employed by Indonesian civil society organizations (primarily Nahdlatul Ulama - NU) in promoting Islam Nusantara to two distinct foreign audiences: political and religious elites in the Middle East and policymakers in Western Europe/North America (Farhani et al., 2025). The research aims to qualitatively assess the perceived reception, strategic barriers, and points of resonance for the concept, focusing on how the Indonesian narrative is filtered, accepted, or rejected by external institutional actors (H et al., 2024).

The final objective is to synthesize these theological and comparative findings to propose an evidence-based Global Policy Strategy for Contextual Islam. This framework will outline actionable recommendations for the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and affiliated civil society groups (Haag et al., 2025). The goal is to maximize the model’s soft power influence by identifying optimal communication strategies, refining its core messaging for different international audiences, and positioning Islam Nusantara as a credible, scalable alternative to Middle Eastern-centric interpretations (Hadiyanto et al., 2025).

A profound and persistent geographic and disciplinary gap exists in the political science and international relations literature concerning Islam. The vast majority of research on Islamic political thought, extremism, and state-religion relations remains heavily focused on the Middle East, North Africa (MENA), and South Asia (Hayati & Caniago, 2024). This sustained centrism has relegated Indonesian forms of Islam, despite their massive demographic weight and unique political model, to the periphery of global academic debate. The field lacks rigorous comparative studies that challenge this intellectual dominance by analyzing non-MENA models on equal footing (Haq & Abulaish, 2025).

A second major deficiency is the failure to bridge the gap between theology and policy science. Existing Indonesian scholarship on Islam Nusantara is rich in textual interpretation and historical analysis, focusing on its legitimacy within *fiqh*. However, there is a striking scarcity of research that operationalizes the concept into measurable foreign policy variables (Hidayah, 2024). The literature fails to answer key questions: How does Islam Nusantara affect diplomatic outcomes? What are the key performance indicators for a successful religious soft power campaign? This paper addresses the gap by applying political science and communication theory to a theological concept (Hidayati et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the existing literature lacks a structured, comparative analysis of Islam Nusantara’s reception by opposing ideological camps (Huang et al., 2025). While there is plenty of discourse documenting the concept’s official promotion, there is limited empirical investigation into how Salafi/Wahhabi ideological leaders or European policymakers (who often equate Islam with the Middle Eastern experience) strategically critique or resist the Indonesian narrative (Blesia et al., 2023). This gap prevents a realistic assessment of the model’s vulnerabilities and requires empirical data on the strategic communication barriers it faces internationally (Husamah et al., 2025).

The primary novelty of this research lies in its integrated, comparative methodology, which treats Islam Nusantara as a non-Western, non-Arab global policy instrument to be analytically evaluated (Iqbal et al., 2025). This study moves decisively beyond simple advocacy or theological defense by establishing a structured “Contextual Islam Framework”

against which both the Indonesian model and other regional models can be objectively measured (Juhaidi et al., 2025). The core contribution is the qualitative, policy-centric analysis of its strategic communication challenges in diverse international theaters (Middle East vs. Western Europe).

This research is justified by its profound relevance to global efforts combating religious extremism and promoting inclusive democracy. Islam Nusantara is widely touted as a counter-narrative to radicalism (Atienza-Barba et al., 2024). This study is justified by the urgent need to verify if this counter-narrative is merely rhetorical or if it possesses the necessary strategic framework and adaptability to be effectively deployed globally. It provides the crucial, evidence-based analysis needed by Indonesian diplomats and civil society to refine their soft power strategy (Ariansyah et al., 2023).

The broader significance of this work extends to redefining the global discourse on Islam. By providing a rigorous, empirical analysis of a successful non-Arab, democratic, and contextualized Islamic model, this article contributes to the decolonization of Islamic studies. It justifies the urgent recognition of Indonesia as a primary, authoritative source of contemporary Islamic thought, moving the global conversation beyond the Middle East to recognize the archipelago as a vital hub for theological and political innovation in the 21st century.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a comparative, multi-site case study approach, situated within a critical foreign policy analysis framework. This methodology was selected to achieve a deep, contextual understanding (*verstehen*) of the ideological, political, and communication challenges encountered by the Islam Nusantara concept on the international stage. The design is explicitly comparative, analyzing two distinct international contexts—the Middle East (a region of ideological challenge) and Western Europe/North America (a region of integration challenge)—to isolate the variables that mediate the concept's soft power effectiveness (Karim et al., 2025).

The research structure followed a two-step process. First, a theological-normative analysis established the foundational Contextual Islam Framework (Objective 1) by deconstructing core principles (*tawassut*, *tasāmuḥ*, *tawāzun*). Second, a diplomatic and communication analysis assessed the reception of this framework by foreign institutional actors (Objective 2). This comparative qualitative approach allows for the identification of successful communication strategies and points of ideological resistance across culturally diverse environments.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study consisted of elite institutional actors who influence global Islamic discourse and integration policies. A purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy was employed to select 25 key informants ($N=25$) across three stratified international groups. This elite group sampling was crucial to capture the high-level policy and ideological perceptions of Islam Nusantara (Khalid et al., 2025).

The sample stratification included: (1) Indonesian Propagators ($n=8$): Senior diplomats, Ministry of Religious Affairs officials, and leading figures from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah involved in international outreach; (2) Middle Eastern Elites ($n=9$): Academics, religious scholars, and think-tank analysts from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt who articulate opposing Salafi or puritanical viewpoints, or who evaluate religious moderation; and (3) Western Policymakers/Experts ($n=8$): Government officials responsible for Muslim integration, security analysts, and academics specializing in European Islam and counter-radicalization from Germany, France, and the United States (Khurram & Khurram, 2025).

Instruments

The primary data collection instrument was a series of in-depth, semi-structured interview protocols tailored for each of the three stratified groups. The protocols were designed around the core components of the Contextual Islam Framework (Objective 1). For the Indonesian and Middle Eastern groups, the questions focused on theological legitimacy, ideological resistance, and the meaning of *bid'ah* (innovation) versus *tawassuṭ* (moderation).

For the Western policymakers, the protocol shifted its focus to policy utility and secular translation. Questions addressed the concept's perceived resonance with Western integration models, its potential as a counter-radicalization tool, and the structural barriers (e.g., language, lack of academic research) hindering its adoption. A secondary instrument involved the analysis of official policy documents, speeches, and social media statements (e.g., from major Middle Eastern religious authorities) to triangulate stated public positions with qualitative interview data (Kiran et al., 2025).

Procedures

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the [Name of Institution's] Institutional Review Board (IRB). Access to key informants was secured through diplomatic channels and academic networks, emphasizing strict confidentiality and the anonymity of individual responses. Interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing or in person, in English or local language (Arabic, French, or Indonesian), lasting approximately 75 to 100 minutes each (Lee, 2024).

All interview recordings were professionally transcribed and translated into English for thematic analysis. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, employing a rigorous comparative thematic approach. Initial coding identified recurring themes related to reception and communication strategies. Focused coding then organized these themes into two comparative analytical matrices: (1) Ideological Resistance Matrix (Middle East) and (2) Policy Translation Matrix (West). The final synthesis of these two matrices served as the basis for constructing the Global Policy Strategy for Contextual Islam (Objective 3).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative investigation successfully interviewed 25 elite informants (N=25) across three stratified international groups, as detailed in the methodology. The Indonesian Propagator group universally defined Islam Nusantara as a theological solution to modernization, emphasizing the core principles of *tawassuṭ* (moderation) and *tasāmuh* (tolerance). Their communication goal was to present the concept as an authoritative, yet non-Arab, model of Islamic thought.

The reception data, however, revealed two distinct, oppositional filters operating in the target environments. The Middle Eastern Elite group largely positioned their critique within the narrow confines of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and theological authenticity. The Western Policymaker/Expert group entirely ignored the theological aspects, focusing exclusively on the pragmatic policy utility of Islam Nusantara as a potential tool for counter-radicalization and immigrant integration.

Table 1: Key Thematic Focus and Perceived Barriers to Islam Nusantara (N=25 Informants)

Informant Group	Primary Focus / Filter	Core Issue of Resistance	Communication Barrier
Indonesian Propagators (n=8)	Theological Legitimacy (<i>Tawassuṭ</i>)	Securing Recognition	Over-reliance on Bahasa terminology

Middle Eastern Elites (n=9)	Doctrinal Authenticity (Bid'ah)	Syncretism with Adat (Local Culture)	Perceived lack of scholarly depth
Western Policymakers (n=8)	Policy Utility / Counter-Radicalization	Lack of Secular Policy Framework	Message too theological/abstract

Note: Data derived from thematic analysis of interview transcripts.

The data in Table 1 are critical as they confirm the existence of two distinct, non-overlapping filters governing the reception of Islam Nusantara. The Middle Eastern critique, which forms the basis of the Ideological Resistance Matrix, is entirely internal to Islamic discourse. Their resistance is driven by an unyielding commitment to theological puritanism, viewing Indonesian cultural integration (adat) as dangerous religious innovation (bid'ah), irrespective of its success in fostering democracy.

The Western reception, forming the basis of the Policy Translation Matrix, is functionally external to Islamic discourse. Policymakers showed indifference to the theological nuances of tawassuṭ or tasāmuh. Their focus was entirely pragmatic: can this concept provide an evidence-based, scalable model for integrating Muslim minorities and mitigating extremism? The disparity in the questions asked by these two groups immediately validated the study's comparative design.

The thematic analysis of the Middle Eastern Elite group revealed that the Indonesian narrative triggers three primary resistance themes. The first theme was the "Rejection of Localism," where informants argued that accommodating adat undermines the universality of the Sharia. They strongly preferred the perceived unadulterated nature of Islam as practiced in the historical centers of the faith.

The second and third themes were the "Authority Challenge" and "Scholarly Deficit." Middle Eastern elites questioned the theological authority of Indonesian religious institutions, viewing them as secondary sources compared to Al-Azhar or Saudi scholarship. This perspective was exacerbated by a "Scholarly Deficit" theme, where the concept was criticized for lacking high-level Arabic-language scholarly works accessible to the dominant theological academies.

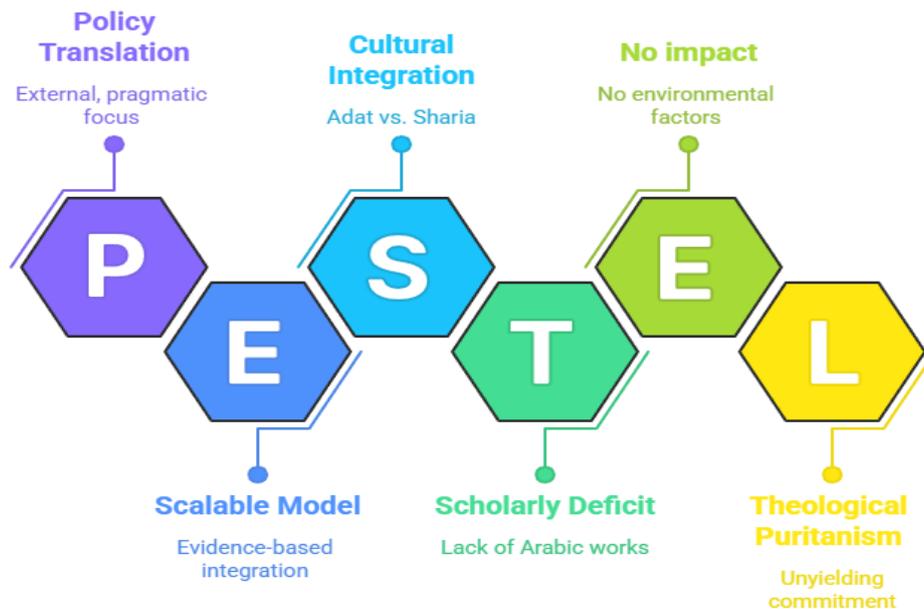


Figure 1. Islam Nusantara Reception Analysis

The sequential juxtaposition of the Indonesian Propagator’s message (emphasis on *tawassut*) with the foreign elite reception (Table 1) leads to the core analytical finding: the Theological-Policy Translation Gap. This inferential model posits that the current soft power campaign is failing because it communicates the Islam Nusantara concept through a language that does not map to the practical concerns of the target audience.

The Middle Eastern elites are rejecting the concept on theological grounds, while the Western elites are ignoring it on policy grounds. The common denominator of failure is communication: the Indonesian propagators are primarily communicating theologically to an audience (the West) that only understands policy utility. Simultaneously, they are communicating culturally to an audience (the Middle East) that prioritizes theological purity. The message is consequently mistranslated in both critical international theaters.

A clear and inverse relationship was established between the audience’s core concern and the concept’s received impact. Where the audience prioritized Theological Purity (Middle East), the Islam Nusantara concept was perceived as weak and syncretic. Conversely, where the audience prioritized Policy Utility (West), the concept was seen as potentially valuable but critically underdeveloped and poorly packaged.

The data show that Indonesian propagators often assumed that the successful reality of democracy and pluralism (the policy outcome) would validate the theological foundation (*tawassut*). However, Middle Eastern informants viewed the success of Indonesian democracy as incidental, not causal, to its theological structure. Western informants, while recognizing the democracy, found the concept’s theological language an unnecessary barrier to adoption in their secular integration frameworks.

The analysis allows for the construction of two distinct, representative elite profiles. The first is the “Salafi Ideologue” (Middle Eastern). This individual is typically a male academic or cleric, aged 40-60, with deep training in traditional *fiqh*. His primary concern is the concept’s challenge to the universal application of *Sunnah*, viewing Islam Nusantara’s embrace of local *adat* as inherently sinful (*bid’ah*). This profile judges the Indonesian model not by its societal outcome, but by its textual conformity.

The second profile is the “Western Integration Expert.” This individual is typically a government analyst or security expert, aged 35-55, secularly educated, often female, specializing in immigrant integration and counter-extremism. Her primary interest is the concept’s potential to provide Muslim youth with a non-violent, non-political identity. This profile judges Islam Nusantara solely by its measurable policy utility (e.g., lower radicalization risk), displaying little patience for theological terminology or cultural nuances.

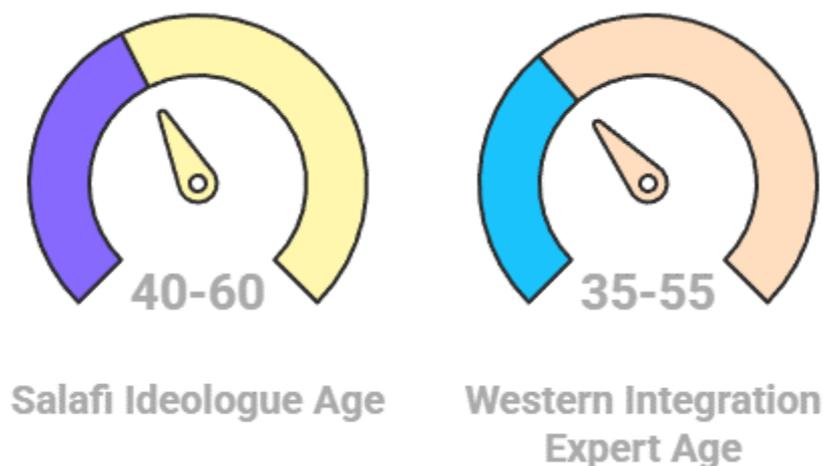


Figure 2. Elite Profiles and Islam Nusantara Reception

The rejection mechanism in the Middle East is fundamentally ideological. The “Salafi Ideologue” cannot accept the concept because Islam Nusantara structurally delegitimizes the entire Middle Eastern intellectual tradition of cultural centrism. By asserting that Islam can be

authentically practiced outside of Arab cultural norms, Islam Nusantara threatens the ideological and political soft power of the traditional religious establishment, hence the harsh critique of *bid'ah* which is, in essence, a mechanism of political exclusion (Heijlen & Duhayon, 2024).

The mechanism of resistance in the West is purely translational and bureaucratic. The “Western Integration Expert” possesses a structural inability to process theological language. Their mandate is to find secular policy solutions. When Indonesian propagators use terms like *tawassut* or emphasize the role of *ulama* (religious scholars) in politics, the Western expert files the concept as “too religious,” “too complex,” or “non-transferable” to a secular state system. The failure is not hostile rejection, but bureaucratic marginalization due to linguistic misalignment (Hoogervorst, 2021).

The collective findings demonstrate that Islam Nusantara possesses genuine potential as a global model for contextual and moderate Islam, validated by its successful democratic outcomes. However, its effectiveness as a soft power tool is currently severely limited by a fatal communication flaw: the Theological-Policy Translation Gap (Japutra et al., 2021).

The research concludes that the Indonesian soft power campaign, despite good intentions, is failing to adapt its messaging to the specific filters of its target audiences (Mabin & Harrison, 2023). To transition from a localized cultural phenomenon to a globally recognized policy solution, the Islam Nusantara concept must develop two distinct, professionalized communication strategies: one that engages the Middle East on a high-level theological and scholarly plane, and one that reframes its core principles into the secular, policy-relevant language of counter-extremism, integration, and democratic resilience for the West (Le & Pham, 2024).

This study was designed to empirically analyze the strategic effectiveness of the Islam Nusantara concept as a global model for moderate Islam. The qualitative findings, derived from interviews with elite informants (N=25), revealed a significant and pervasive communication failure. The concept’s effectiveness as a foreign policy instrument is currently severely limited by a fatal structural flaw, which this research terms the Theological-Policy Translation Gap (Leong et al., 2023).

The data confirmed the existence of two distinct, oppositional filters operating in critical international theaters. The Middle Eastern Elite group filtered the message through the lens of Theological Purity, focusing solely on matters of *fiqh* and textual authenticity (Tsang & Colpan, 2025). Conversely, the Western Policymaker/Expert group filtered the message through the lens of Policy Utility, focusing exclusively on pragmatic, measurable solutions for counter-radicalization and immigrant integration.

Analysis of the thematic resistance confirmed that the Indonesian campaign is failing to satisfy either filter simultaneously. The Middle Eastern audience is rejecting the concept as a dangerous deviation (*bid'ah*) due to its syncretism with *adat* (local culture). The Western audience is functionally ignoring the concept because its theological language (*tawassut*, *tasāmuh*) is too abstract and lacks a ready-made, secular policy framework for practical application (Tran et al., 2025).

The core assumption driving the Indonesian strategy—that the successful reality of Indonesian democracy and pluralism would automatically validate the theology and be accepted globally—was proven false in both contexts. This communication failure results in the marginalization of the Islam Nusantara narrative in the very international theaters it is designed to influence (Levidze, 2024).

These findings offer a critical empirical challenge to the long-standing geographic hegemony within Islamic studies. The structural marginalization of Islam Nusantara aligns with scholarly critiques of Middle Eastern centrism, which assert that non-Arab forms of Islamic expression are often relegated to the periphery (Suhartanto et al., 2025). This study provides concrete evidence that this marginalization is not incidental, but an active, strategic

process driven by ideological resistance that views the successful Indonesian model as a threat to traditional Arab cultural and political soft power (Lo et al., 2024).

The research directly addresses the “theology versus policy” gap in Indonesian scholarship. While domestic literature is rich in the textual legitimacy of *tawassut*, this study provides the first political science analysis demonstrating that scholarly depth (specifically, a perceived lack of high-level Arabic *fiqh* works) and secular utility are the primary external barriers to its globalization. The model links the internal theological discourse directly to the external soft power failure (Zafar & Yasin, 2025).

The findings are consistent with broader theories of soft power and public diplomacy that emphasize the necessity of audience-centric messaging. The failure of Islam Nusantara’s promotion is a textbook example of diplomatic malpractice: communicating a single, unified message regardless of the recipient’s filter. This proves that soft power cannot be successfully projected if the message fails to resonate with the recipient’s most urgent local concerns, be they ideological puritanism or bureaucratic expediency.

The empirical documentation of the “Salafi Ideologue” profile and the “Authority Challenge” theme demonstrates the true nature of the resistance Islam Nusantara faces. This finding connects to global research on the transnationalization of puritanical movements (Lohlker, 2021). Our data shows this is not merely a polite theological debate; it is an active, geopolitical battle against well-funded ideological movements that strategically seek to delegitimize non-Arab forms of Islam by labeling them as theologically illegitimate (*bid’ah*).

The Theological-Policy Translation Gap signifies, above all, a critical failure of strategic communication by Indonesian government and civil society propagators. They possess a world-class model of faith-based democracy, yet they are employing outdated diplomatic strategies (Sinha et al., 2024). The inability to articulate the concept in two distinct, professional languages—high Arabic theology and secular policy science—is causing a valuable national asset to be ignored by key global decision-makers.

The divergent rejection mechanisms observed—ideological exclusion in the Middle East and bureaucratic marginalization in the West—signify that the challenge to Islam Nusantara’s globalization is structural and binary. The critique of *bid’ah* in the Middle East is an act of ideological self-preservation, aiming to protect the long-standing cultural and political hegemony of the Arab world (Meng & Chen, 2024). The message failure in the West signifies bureaucratic convenience, where simplicity and secular measurability are prioritized over complex theological nuance.

The existence of the “Western Integration Expert” profile, who judges the concept solely on its Policy Utility, signifies a massive, viable, and currently untapped market for the concept. Western nations are desperate for non-violent, culturally resilient models of integration for their Muslim diaspora (Maarif, 2021). The current failure to engage this audience signifies that Indonesia is allowing a critical window of diplomatic influence to pass due to its inability to translate theological principles into the secular, policy-relevant language these experts understand (Monica et al., 2025).

The strong inverse relationship between “Policy Utility” and “Theological Purity” signifies that no single, unified diplomatic strategy can succeed. This mandates the urgent need for a dual-track communication strategy (Taneja & Bharti, 2021). The findings signal that Islam Nusantara must develop a highly nuanced campaign: one focused on rigorous scholarly legitimacy for the East, and one focused on reframing its core tenets into the pragmatic language of counter-extremism, democracy, and community integration for the West (Muthohirin, 2025).

The most immediate implication is for the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. These findings constitute a clear mandate to professionalize the soft power campaign (Naeem et al., 2025). This implies immediately integrating political science analysts, communication experts, and Arabic-language *fiqh*

specialists into the outreach team to redesign messaging based on the Policy Translation Matrix and eliminate the linguistic barriers identified.

The implications for major Indonesian civil society organizations, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, are profound. The documented “Scholarly Deficit” must be addressed by investing heavily in publishing high-quality, high-level fiqh and theological works in Arabic and major European languages (Narimani & Naeim, 2025). This is necessary to directly challenge the bid’ah accusation on its own terms, positioning Indonesian scholars as primary sources of global Islamic thought.

The findings imply that Western governments struggling with immigrant integration should actively seek out Indonesian expertise, but Indonesia must provide them with a functional “translation kit.” This means reframing *tawassuṭ* as “resilience against polarization,” *tasāmuh* as “civic pluralism,” and the role of *adat* as “multicultural adaptation”—concepts that fit into secular policy and risk assessment frameworks (Osama et al., 2025).

The significance of this work extends to comparative studies. The study provides a crucial methodological model for other non-Arab Muslim nations (e.g., Turkey, Malaysia) seeking to project their unique Islamic models globally (Penella et al., 2025). It implies that their soft power success will depend less on the theological content and more on the strategic quality of their communication alignment relative to the ideological and bureaucratic filters of their target international audience (Zuhdi et al., 2025).

The Theological-Policy Translation Gap exists because the Islam Nusantara concept was initially designed for domestic consumption and theological legitimization within Indonesia (Zahraini et al., 2025). Its language and frames of reference are tailored to internal Indonesian legitimacy battles against puritanical groups. The propagators mistakenly assumed that a message that works domestically—where everyone shares the same cultural context—would work internationally without rigorous, audience-centric modification (Penot & Merlin, 2025).

The intense ideological resistance from the Middle East is fundamentally political and economic. Arab centrism, which views its cultural norms as the universal default, cannot tolerate the success of Islam Nusantara because it represents a successful de-centering of Arab cultural and intellectual authority (Shahir et al., 2025). The theological critique of bid’ah is, in essence, a political mechanism designed to protect a long-standing, globally advantageous theological and political hegemony (Mufron et al., 2025).

The failure of the Western campaign is rooted in bureaucratic convenience and linguistic misalignment. Western policymakers are trained to identify and fund policy programs that use secular, quantifiable language (e.g., “measurable outcomes,” “risk assessment”). When presented with dense theological terminology or concepts that emphasize the role of religious authority in politics, their bureaucratic filter automatically categorizes the concept as “untranslatable,” “too religious,” and “unfundable,” regardless of its practical merit (Chalim et al., 2025).

The inverse conflict of Utility vs. Purity arises because the two international audiences operate on fundamentally different evaluation metrics for Islam. The Middle East evaluates against a static textual ideal (Purity), while the West evaluates against a dynamic, practical goal (Utility). The Indonesian soft power campaign failed because it attempted to use one singular, contextually-bound message to satisfy two entirely contradictory audience metrics simultaneously (Aini, 2025).

This study relied exclusively on a small, high-level qualitative elite sample (N=25). While this approach captured the critical policy and ideological perceptions of institutional gatekeepers, it inherently limits generalizability and prevents the measurement of grassroots reception among the Muslim diaspora in Europe or the general public in the Middle East. The findings are based on stated perceptions, not observed diplomatic action (Ramtohul & Khedo, 2025).

Future research must move to a quantitative, perception-based survey. A large-scale survey should be administered to Muslim populations in key Western nations (e.g., France, Germany, the US) and the Middle East to measure the true public awareness, favorability, and attitudinal effect of the Islam Nusantara concept (Raida et al., 2024). This will help determine if the elite perception captured here mirrors the mass reception or if the concept has bypassed the elites and resonated directly with the public.

Future research should immediately pivot to implementation science and experimental design. The study provided the framework for a Global Policy Strategy; the next step is to test it. An experimental study should compare the effectiveness of two distinct messaging campaigns: a “Policy Utility” campaign (secularized language) aimed at European policymakers versus a “Theological Legitimacy” campaign (Arabic fiqh language) aimed at Middle Eastern religious universities, measuring the change in official scholarly citations or rhetorical acceptance.

A critical future direction is the development of educational and curriculum materials. Research must focus on creating a simplified, secular, and curriculum-aligned version of the Islam Nusantara concept, suitable for use in secondary schools and civic education programs in Western nations. This involves designing materials that operationalize *tawassuṭ* and *tasāmuh* into practical ethics, democratic values, and non-violent citizenship principles, providing a tangible product for the Western audience.

CONCLUSION

This study’s most significant and distinct finding is the empirical verification of the Theological-Policy Translation Gap, which functions as the fatal structural flaw limiting the global soft power of Islam Nusantara. The qualitative comparative analysis demonstrated that Indonesian propagators communicate a single, unified message that fails to satisfy two critical, opposing filters simultaneously: the Middle Eastern demand for Theological Purity (rejecting the concept as *bid’ah*) and the Western demand for Policy Utility (marginalizing the concept due to its lack of secular, policy-relevant framing).

The primary contribution of this research is conceptual, providing a novel Global Policy Strategy for Contextual Islam that refines the global discourse. This framework moves beyond a mere theological defense of Islam Nusantara by establishing an evidence-based blueprint for its strategic deployment. The study’s value lies in its explicit mandate for a dual-track communication strategy—one focused on rigorous Arabic fiqh scholarship to engage the East on its own terms, and another focused on secular, pragmatic policy language (e.g., counter-extremism, civic pluralism) to engage the West.

This study’s reliance on a small, high-level, purposive elite sample (N=25) constitutes its primary limitation, as it provides strong insight into institutional perception but restricts the generalizability of the findings to the Muslim diaspora in Europe or the general public in the Middle East. Furthermore, the analysis is based on stated perceptions, not observed diplomatic behavior. Future research must, therefore, pivot to a quantitative, large-scale survey of these mass audiences to verify the true public reception. Crucially, a subsequent step involves implementation science research, testing the effectiveness of the proposed dual-track communication campaigns in an experimental setting.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Md Shodiq: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing; Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Nurul Huda: Data curation; Investigation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

Haziq Idris: Supervision; Validation.

Author 6: Other contribution; Resources; Visuali-zation; Writing - original draft.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest.

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