

The role of nahdatul ulama (NU) in ptomoting islam wasatiyyah (moderate islam) as a counter- narrative to global radicalism

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Article Info

Received: February 16, 2025

Revised: April 26, 2025

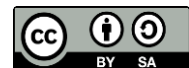
Accepted: Mei 18, 2025

Online Version: August 24, 2025

Abstract

The rise of global radicalism in recent decades has posed significant challenges to the integrity and peace of the Muslim community. In response to this, Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) have become pivotal in promoting Islam Wasatiyyah, or moderate Islam, as an antidote to extremism. NU's unique position in Indonesia and its global influence present an opportunity to examine its role in counteracting radical ideologies. This study aims to explore the contributions of Nahdlatul Ulama in promoting Islam Wasatiyyah as a counter-narrative to the growing threat of global radicalism. It investigates how NU's teachings and activities advocate for moderation, tolerance, and inclusivity in Islamic practices. This qualitative study employs a literature review and content analysis of key NU texts, official statements, and related theological works. Interviews with NU scholars and activists further enrich the understanding of NU's strategies in promoting a moderate Islam. The findings suggest that NU's emphasis on the middle path of Islam has provided a strong theological foundation against radical ideologies. Through its educational programs, interfaith dialogues, and advocacy for pluralism, NU has successfully advocated for Islam Wasatiyyah as a key component of peace-building efforts. Nahdlatul Ulama plays a significant role in fostering a moderate interpretation of Islam, thereby offering an effective counter-narrative to global radicalism. Its efforts are crucial in the global fight against extremism.

Keywords: nahdlatul ulama, islam wasatiyyah, radicalism, counter-narrative, islamic moderation



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Journal Homepage

<https://research.adra.ac.id/index.php/ijnis> ISSN: (P: 3048-1147) - (E: 3048-2658)

How to cite:

Daheri, M., Amir, R., Rahman, R. (2025). The Role of Nahdatul Ulama (NU) in Ptomoting Islam Wasatiyyah (Moderate Islam) as a Counter- Narrative to Global Radicalism. *Journal of Noesantara Islamic Studies*, 2(4), 191-198. <https://doi.org/10.70177/ijnis.v2i4.3227>

INTRODUCTION

The global spread of radical ideologies has raised significant concerns for international security and interfaith relations. In recent years, extremist groups have manipulated religious rhetoric to advance their divisive agendas, distorting the essence of Islam to justify violence and intolerance. In response, Islamic organizations worldwide have sought to counter these ideologies by promoting an interpretation of Islam that emphasizes moderation, tolerance, and peace. One such organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has played a key role in advancing the concept of Islam Wasatiyyah, or moderate Islam (S. Arifin et al., 2025; Mahmudah et al., 2025; Nurish et al., 2025). As one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, NU's influence extends beyond the borders of its home country, positioning itself as a leading advocate for a balanced approach to Islam in the face of growing global radicalism.

Islam Wasatiyyah, which literally translates to "moderate Islam," embodies a middle path that rejects both extremism and passivity, encouraging a balanced and harmonious practice of faith. NU's commitment to this concept stems from its long history of promoting pluralism, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among Muslims and with other religious communities. The organization's ideology challenges the rise of extremist movements by offering a counter-narrative that reaffirms Islam's core values of peace, compassion, and justice (Masruri et al., 2024; Nugraha et al., 2025; Sahad & Asni, 2018; Sibawaihi & Alsulami, 2022). This study explores how NU has utilized Islam Wasatiyyah to combat the increasing threat of radicalism, examining its strategies and contributions to fostering a more inclusive and peaceful interpretation of Islam on both a local and global scale.

Despite the growing interest in the role of Islamic organizations in countering radical ideologies, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the specific contributions of large, influential organizations like NU. While previous studies have focused on state-led efforts or the ideological foundations of Islam Wasatiyyah, there is limited research on the practical ways in which organizations like NU promote moderate Islam and engage with communities to challenge radical narratives (Arbak et al., 2020; Azra, 2023; Rizapoor & Rahimi, 2023; Syahidin et al., 2023). This research aims to address this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of NU's efforts to promote Islam Wasatiyyah as a response to global radicalism. The study will explore the key strategies and activities undertaken by NU, including its involvement in education, interfaith dialogue, and political advocacy.

The problem this research addresses is the growing global threat posed by radical ideologies and the urgent need for effective counter-narratives that can challenge these views. Radicalism, particularly in the form of violent extremism, has been fueled by a variety of factors, including political instability, socio-economic inequalities, and global conflicts. These issues have been exacerbated by the spread of extremist ideologies, which often present themselves as the only true interpretation of Islam (Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024; Ebrahimi & Yusoff, 2020; Zahid & Hasan, 2018). The research will specifically examine how NU's advocacy for Islam Wasatiyyah provides an alternative that counters these extremist interpretations. The study will analyze NU's theological, educational, and social efforts in promoting a more moderate and inclusive understanding of Islam that stands in opposition to the divisive and harmful ideologies associated with radicalism.

While there has been substantial research on the ideological aspects of Islam Wasatiyyah, there is a lack of comprehensive studies focusing on the practical implementation of this concept by large Islamic organizations. Most existing literature either focuses on theoretical frameworks or on the role of state actors in combating radicalism. The gap in the literature regarding grassroots efforts by influential Islamic organizations, particularly in the context of Indonesia, highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how local organizations

contribute to the global fight against radicalism. This research aims to fill this gap by focusing on the specific actions of NU and examining how its promotion of Islam Wasatiyyah can be an effective strategy in countering extremist ideologies.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on Nahdlatul Ulama as a key player in promoting Islam Wasatiyyah as a counter-narrative to radicalism. Although there is existing literature on the concept of Islam Wasatiyyah, few studies have examined its practical application by large, grassroots Islamic organizations (Dastagir & Ramzy, 2019; Ghobadzadeh, 2022; Helmy et al., 2021; Yusuf et al., 2025). This study also introduces the unique context of Indonesia, where NU operates as a significant religious and social force. By exploring how NU has implemented Islam Wasatiyyah in its daily activities and engagement with both the Muslim community and the wider society, this research offers fresh insights into the ways that moderate Islam can be effectively promoted as an alternative to extremism. Additionally, the study contributes to the broader academic discourse on counter-radicalization by providing a detailed case study of NU's work in shaping religious and social dynamics in Indonesia and beyond.

The importance of this research extends beyond the academic field and has significant practical implications for the ongoing struggle against radicalism. In an era where the effects of global radicalism are felt across multiple regions, the role of moderate Islamic organizations in countering extremist ideologies cannot be overstated. NU's advocacy for Islam Wasatiyyah offers a powerful counterpoint to the divisive narratives of radical groups, providing a model for other Islamic organizations to emulate. This research will contribute to the broader effort of developing effective counter-radicalization strategies by highlighting the importance of local religious institutions in promoting peace and stability. Moreover, the findings of this study could inform policymaking, educational initiatives, and interfaith dialogue efforts aimed at fostering a more inclusive and peaceful global society.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in promoting Islam Wasatiyyah (moderate Islam) as a counter-narrative to global radicalism. The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of NU's influence and strategies in shaping the Islamic discourse within Indonesia and beyond, focusing on its educational, social, and political contributions (Sarabdeen, 2025). This design is particularly suitable for understanding complex social phenomena in real-world contexts, enabling the study of NU's multifaceted role in countering radicalism.

Research Target/Subject

The study's population consists of key members of Nahdlatul Ulama, including leaders, scholars, and activists involved in Islamic education and community outreach programs. A purposive sampling technique is employed to select participants who have direct experience or involvement in NU's initiatives to promote moderate Islam. The sample will also include individuals from different regions of Indonesia to reflect the diversity of NU's impact. The final sample size will be determined based on the principle of data saturation, ensuring comprehensive insights.

Research Procedure

The procedures for this study include obtaining informed consent from all participants, conducting interviews and discussions in a comfortable and confidential setting, and analyzing the collected data using thematic analysis. Data will be coded and categorized into themes related to NU's strategies for promoting moderate Islam, such as interfaith dialogue,

community engagement, and educational reforms. The study will follow ethical guidelines, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants throughout the research process.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data collection is conducted using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The interview protocol will include open-ended questions, allowing participants to share their perspectives on NU's efforts in countering radical ideologies. Focus group discussions will be conducted with NU members from different regions, providing a platform for collective reflection and debate. Document analysis will be used to examine NU's official publications, speeches, and educational materials that promote Islam Wasatiyyah.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of this study demonstrate that Nahdlatul Ulama plays a sustained and systematic role in promoting Islam wasatiyyah through educational institutions, religious discourse, and socio-cultural engagement. NU's contribution is evident in its integration of moderate Islamic values into formal education, pesantren curricula, and community-based learning forums that reach diverse social groups.

Empirical evidence indicates that NU's educational strategies emphasize contextual religious understanding, civic responsibility, and peaceful coexistence. These strategies function not merely as religious instruction but as formative processes shaping students' attitudes toward pluralism, nationalism, and non-violence. Educational practices become a medium for embedding moderation as lived experience rather than abstract doctrine.

Results also reveal that NU's counter-narrative to global radicalism operates through continuity of tradition rather than confrontation. The reinforcement of classical Islamic scholarship combined with contextual interpretation provides an alternative epistemic framework that weakens absolutist and exclusivist religious claims.

Overall results confirm that NU's role extends beyond reactive deradicalization efforts. NU actively constructs a proactive educational ecosystem that normalizes moderation, resilience, and ethical citizenship, thereby reducing the appeal of radical ideologies among learners and community members.

These findings align with previous studies that identify NU as a central actor in Indonesia's Islamic moderation landscape, particularly through pesantren-based education and cultural da'wah. Similar research highlights NU's emphasis on tolerance, balance, and social harmony as key characteristics of its religious orientation.

Distinctive contribution of this study lies in positioning NU explicitly as a producer of counter-narratives rather than merely a custodian of moderate values. Earlier research often treats moderation as a normative identity, while this study frames it as a strategic educational response to transnational radical ideologies.

Comparative analysis suggests that unlike state-driven counter-radicalism programs, NU's approach relies on moral authority, community trust, and pedagogical continuity. This contrasts with securitization-oriented studies that focus on surveillance, regulation, or ideological suppression.

This study also diverges from research that emphasizes digital radicalization alone by showing that NU's strength lies in hybrid engagement, combining traditional learning spaces with contemporary media literacy initiatives to reach younger generations.

These results signal that religious moderation is most effective when rooted in indigenous educational traditions rather than imported policy frameworks. NU's success reflects the power of culturally embedded pedagogy in shaping religious consciousness.

Findings indicate that resilience against radicalism is not primarily achieved through ideological confrontation but through long-term character education and epistemic formation.

NU's approach suggests that moderation emerges as a habitus cultivated over time (Eliza et al., 2025; Kholiq et al., 2025; Priyono et al., 2026). The results also signify a shift in understanding counter-radicalism from reactive intervention to preventive education. NU exemplifies how mainstream religious institutions can function as early-warning systems by nurturing critical yet faithful religious reasoning.

These findings mark NU as an example of how civil society organizations can act as knowledge producers, not only transmitting values but shaping interpretive authority in contested religious spaces. Implications of this study highlight the importance of integrating moderate Islamic pedagogy into national and local education systems. Educational policymakers can draw from NU's model to design curricula that combine religious depth with civic ethics.

Findings suggest that counter-radicalism strategies should prioritize partnerships with trusted religious institutions rather than relying solely on top-down interventions. NU's experience demonstrates that legitimacy enhances educational effectiveness.

Results imply that teacher training and religious educator development should incorporate wasatiyyah-oriented pedagogical competencies (Alnasser Mohammed et al., 2025; Z. Arifin et al., 2025; Sukardi et al., 2025). Educators function as mediators of meaning who can either reinforce or mitigate extremist interpretations.

Broader implication points to the need for sustainable investment in community-based education as a long-term strategy to counter global radicalism. NU's model shows that moderation thrives where education, culture, and social trust intersect.

The outcomes emerge because NU possesses deep historical legitimacy and social embeddedness within Indonesian Muslim communities. This legitimacy enables NU to transmit values without resistance or suspicion.

Educational effectiveness is also shaped by NU's balanced epistemology that harmonizes classical Islamic scholarship with contextual reasoning. This balance prevents binary thinking that often characterizes radical ideologies.

Results are influenced by NU's decentralized educational structure, allowing local adaptation while maintaining shared theological principles. Such flexibility increases relevance across diverse socio-cultural settings.

The findings further reflect NU's emphasis on moral exemplarity rather than ideological coercion. Educational actors affiliated with NU embody moderation in practice, making values observable and credible.

Future research should examine the longitudinal impact of NU-based education on learners' resilience to online radical narratives. Such studies would deepen understanding of moderation in digital contexts.

Policy development can focus on scaling NU's educational practices through collaborative frameworks involving state institutions, universities, and civil society organizations.

Curriculum innovation should explore how NU's wasatiyyah principles can be translated into interdisciplinary learning models that address global citizenship, ethics, and peace education. Continued engagement requires strengthening NU's capacity in digital pedagogy and media literacy to ensure that its counter-narrative remains effective amid evolving forms of global radicalism.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study lies in demonstrating that Nahdlatul Ulama functions not merely as a guardian of moderate Islamic values but as an active producer of a coherent counter-narrative to global radicalism through education. NU's role is distinctive because moderation is institutionalized as a lived educational practice embedded in curricula,

pedagogy, and socio-religious engagement, rather than framed as a reactive ideological stance. This finding differentiates the study from earlier works that primarily describe moderation as a normative identity without explicating its operational mechanisms in educational contexts.

The added value of this research lies primarily in its conceptual contribution. The study advances a conceptual framework that positions Islam wasatiyyah as an educational ecosystem shaped by tradition-based epistemology, community trust, and adaptive pedagogy. Methodologically, the research contributes by integrating educational analysis with counter-radicalism discourse, thereby bridging a gap between religious education studies and global security-oriented radicalism research. This integration offers a more holistic understanding of how moderation is cultivated, sustained, and transmitted across generations.

Limitations of the study include its focus on institutional and educational perspectives without extensive longitudinal measurement of learners' attitudinal change over time. The scope is also geographically and organizationally bounded, which may limit broader generalization to other Muslim contexts beyond Indonesia. Future research directions should include comparative cross-national studies, longitudinal designs assessing the durability of moderate orientations among learners, and deeper exploration of NU's engagement with digital education spaces as arenas of emerging radical narratives.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Mirzon Daheri: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing; Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Syafiq Amar: Data curation; Investigation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

Rashid Rahman: Supervision; Validation; Other contribution; Resources; Visualization; Writing - original draft.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest.

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