Unpacking the Role of Prophecy in Extremist Narratives

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

The fall of Damascus to Syrian rebels has sparked a ripple effect in Southeast Asia, with figures like Indonesia's Mas'ud Izzul Mujahid using apocalyptic prophecies to fuel extremism. However, the region's diverse Islamic practices, shaped by unique historical and socio-political contexts, show that a universal eschatological (end of the world) narrative does not resonate everywhere. Religious scholars can counter extremist ideologies and reclaim prophetic teachings for peace in Southeast Asia's pluralistic society by offering inclusive interpretations of prophecy and addressing local grievances.

COMMENTARY

The [fall of the decades-long ruling leadership](#) in Damascus to the Islamist militant group [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)](#), led by Mohammed al-Jawlani, has reverberated through geopolitical and ideological arenas, impacting regions far beyond the Middle East. In Southeast Asia, [Mas'ud Izzul Mujahid](#), a former senior member of Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia, disillusioned by the latter's disbandment in June 2024, has seized on the event as not just a political milestone but as a fulfilment of Islamic apocalyptic prophecy.

This intersection of political developments, religious narratives, and digital propaganda creates a powerful tool for mobilising extremist ideologies, as seen in the actions of figures like Mas'ud, who uses these prophecies to frame modern conflicts as divinely ordained battles. To counter this, it is essential to contextualise and reclaim these religious narratives, promoting interpretations that advocate peace and discredit their violent misappropriation.

Prophecy as a Weapon: Its Role Across Contexts

Prophecies, especially those rooted in apocalyptic themes, have long been manipulated by extremist groups to justify violence. In Islam, narratives like the [Black Flags of Khorasan](#), the [return of the Mahdi](#), or the [Battle of Dabiq](#) are often cherry-picked and interpreted literally to sanctify contemporary conflicts. These stories, stripped of context, become recruitment tools that appeal to a sense of divine destiny.

This is not unique to Islam. In the US, Christian militias often cite apocalyptic biblical texts like the [Book of Revelation](#) to rationalise armed resistance. [Jewish ultra-nationalists](#) invoke messianic prophecies to claim sovereignty over the West Bank, while Hindu extremists in India reference the [return of Kalki](#), a warrior figure, to target minorities. [Buddhist extremists in Myanmar](#) weaponise prophecy to justify violence against Rohingya Muslims, framing them as existential threats to their Buddhist utopia.

Mas'ud's journey from being an ideologue to a digital propagandist demonstrates how extremist narratives evolve. An alumnus of JI's [Darusy Syahadah school](#) in Central Java, his theological expertise made him an ideological, rather than operational, asset. By 2011, as Editor-in-Chief of JI's [An-Najah magazine](#), he shaped the group's intellectual direction.

His 2013 trip to Syria, ostensibly for humanitarian aid through the [Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia (HASI)](#), marked a turning point. By framing the Syrian civil war as a fulfilment of apocalyptic prophecies, Mas'ud connected local grievances in Indonesia to global jihadist struggles. This ideological export wasn't just abstract; it inspired real-world support, including possible financial donations and recruits willing to die for what they saw as a sacred cause.

Following the fall of Damascus, a video featuring an Indonesian fighter from Kudus, Central Java, who is linked to JI, surfaced recently. In the widely circulated video, the fighter asserted that the *mujahidin* (guerrilla forces) were gaining control of the capital and were welcomed by the people. Such testimonial videos deliver a compelling narrative that could encourage other Southeast Asians to join the newly established state led by figures from the remnants of Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

This development suggests the potential for a new *hijrah* (migration) movement – not under ISIS but driven by HTS. This ideological export is far from abstract; it can galvanise real-world support, ranging from financial donations to recruits willing to sacrifice their lives for what they perceive as a sacred cause.

Mas'ud amplifies this message through his digital outreach, presenting modern geopolitical conflicts as extensions of divine narratives. His rhetoric's simplicity and emotive appeal resonate deeply, particularly with audiences seeking purpose or grappling with socio-economic discontent.

Southeast Asia's Religious Dynamic: A Challenge to Monolithic Narratives

Before we assume that all [Southeast Asian Muslims](#) are susceptible to such apocalyptic narratives, it is important to recognise the region's rich religious diversity. For instance, the practice of Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia is deeply influenced by

centuries of Sufi traditions, local customs, and pluralistic values. In contrast, the urbanised minority-Muslim context of Singapore and the contested religious dynamics in the Philippines reflect entirely different realities.

Indonesia's pluralistic ethos, enshrined in the state ideology of *Pancasila*, emphasises religious harmony. While extremist groups like JI used to exist, they operate within a society where the majority rejects their ideology. With its mix of political Islam and multiculturalism, Malaysia presents yet another contrast.

Meanwhile, Singapore's secular governance fosters a tightly regulated but inclusive religious framework. In the Philippines, Muslim-majority areas like Mindanao contend with historical grievances and separatist movements that shape their religious landscape.

Extremist narratives like those of Mas'ud Izzul Mujahid, which exploit Islamic apocalyptic prophecies, find varied resonance across Southeast Asia due to differing historical and socio-political contexts. While these narratives might inspire Indonesians grappling with socio-economic challenges, they gain less traction in Singapore, where coexistence within a multireligious society is a priority.

However, the lack of deep religious knowledge among some Singaporean youths leaves them vulnerable to the allure of such prophetic narratives, underscoring the critical need for unpacking and contextualising these narratives to counter their influence region-wide.

The HTS Dilemma: Reclaiming Religious Narratives for Peace

The fall of Damascus to HTS has created a dilemma for the international community. Although HTS was designated a terrorist group by the US Trump administration in 2018, the United Nations, and the European Union, and its leader, Mohammed al-Jawlani, labelled a terrorist with a US$10 million bounty on his head, its victory was achieved without the [typical violent terrorist methods](#).

Jawlani's shift from Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to portraying HTS as a more [moderate political actor](#) complicates the international community's response. He has distanced himself from extremist ideologies, advocating political engagement and promising to respect minority rights and existing governmental structures, adding complexity to the debate on how to engage with him and HTS going forward.

This dilemma connects with the broader issue of how Islamists exploit religious prophecy to justify violence. To dismantle this misuse, scholars must reclaim prophetic narratives, emphasising their historical and theological context, which focuses on moral resilience, justice, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

Additionally, geopolitical dynamics play a crucial role, as extremists often manipulate global conflicts, like Turkey's [neo-Ottomanism](#) or Iran's [Shia expansionism](#), to frame them as divine struggles. By addressing these political motivations, scholars can counter the misapplication of religious prophecy and promote a peaceful, accurate understanding of eschatological teachings.

Community-level initiatives in Indonesia and Singapore provide encouraging examples of effective counter-narratives. Organisations such as Indonesia's [Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)](#) and [Muhammadiyah](#), the world's largest Muslim organisations, alongside Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group ([RRG](#)) and Majelis Ugama Islam Singapore ([MUIS](#)), play an active role in promoting interpretations of Islam centred around compassion and inclusivity.

Their programmes emphasise the spiritual and ethical dimensions of prophecies, framing them as calls for social justice and harmony rather than violence and extreme transformation of society. Additionally, social media campaigns targeting youth are vital to amplify these messages, counter extremist ideologies, and build resilience against violent narratives.

Conclusion

Reframing solidarity is crucial in countering extremism, as this concept can be exploited to foster division. Islam's core teachings of justice, compassion, and coexistence provide a powerful counter-narrative, emphasising unity over division.

Addressing the socio-economic drivers of radicalisation – such as poverty, unemployment, and marginalisation – further weakens the appeal of extremist ideologies, as seen in Mindanao's Bangsamoro peace process, which demonstrates the transformative power of addressing historical grievances.

By reclaiming religious narratives, engaging with geopolitical realities, and tackling root causes, leaders and scholars can shift the discourse toward peace and show that prophecy with predictions of a dire future is an Islamist distortion to achieve a political outcome at the expense of coexistence among diverse faiths and tradition.

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