



The Struggle of Islam and Nationalism in Indonesia: A Study of Abdullah bin Nuh's Thought (1905–1987)

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Purpose

This study aims to analyze how Abdullah bin Nuh (1905–1987), an influential West Javanese Islamic scholar and intellectual, understood and developed the concept of Indonesian nationalism from an Islamic perspective, as reflected in his Arabic manuscript *Mādhā Naf'al fī Sabīl al-Islām bi Indūnīsiyā* (What We Have Done for the Path of Islam in Indonesia).

Method

This research employed a historical approach based on textual analysis of the manuscript *Mādhā Naf'al fī Sabīl al-Islām bi Indūnīsiyā* (Nuh, 1948) as the main source of data. The study applied philological approach and content analysis through four steps to find issues proposed in the research problems.

Results/findings

The study finds that Nuh formulated a dialectical relationship between Islam and nationalism. For him, nationalism is not the antithesis of Islam; rather, it can become the golden ring in the great chain of Islamic unity, provided it is built upon the foundation of *thughur* and directed toward justice. However, Nuh also identified four fundamental problems plaguing Indonesian Muslims: fragile faith (*aqidah*), weak unity, fractured brotherhood, and a low level of Islamic culture.

Conclusion

The study enrich the discourse on the relationship between Islam and nationhood in Indonesia, which is often viewed as an unresolved tension. Nuh's thought offers a nuanced perspective that sees potential synergy between Islamic principles and nationalist aspirations, contingent upon internal reform and strengthening of the Muslim community.

Keywords

Abdullah bin Nuh, Islamic nationalism, Indonesia, *thughur* (Islamic frontiers)

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Abstrak

Tujuan

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana Abdullah bin Nuh (1905–1987), seorang ulama dan intelektual Islam Jawa Barat yang berpengaruh, memahami dan mengembangkan konsep nasionalisme Indonesia dari perspektif Islam, sebagaimana tercermin dalam manuskrip Arabnya *Mādhā Naf'al fī Sabīl al-Islām bi Indūnisiyā* (Apa yang Kita Kerjakan di Jalan Islam di Indonesia).

Metode

Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan historis berdasarkan analisis teks terhadap manuskrip tersebut untuk mengkaji pemikiran Nuh.

Hasil/temuan

Studi ini menemukan bahwa Nuh merumuskan hubungan yang bersifat dialektis antara Islam dan nasionalisme. Baginya, nasionalisme bukanlah antitesis dari Islam; melainkan dapat menjadi—menggunakan istilahnya—"cincin emas dalam rantai persatuan Islam yang agung," asalkan dibangun di atas fondasi *thughur* (perbatasan/benteng pertahanan Islam) dan diarahkan pada keadilan. Namun, Nuh juga mengidentifikasi empat masalah mendasar yang melanda umat Islam Indonesia: rapuhnya akidah, lemahnya persatuan, renggangnya persaudaraan, dan rendahnya kebudayaan Islam.

Kesimpulan

Penelitian ini memperkaya wacana tentang hubungan Islam dan kebangsaan di Indonesia, yang sering dipandang sebagai ketegangan yang tak terselesaikan. Pemikiran Nuh menawarkan perspektif yang bernuansa yang melihat potensi sinergi antara prinsip-prinsip Islam dan aspirasi nasionalis, dengan syarat adanya reformasi internal dan penguatan komunitas Muslim.

Kata kunci

Abdullah bin Nuh, nasionalisme Islam, Indonesia, *thughur* (perbatasan Islam)

المخلص

الهدف

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل كيفية فهم عبد الله بن نوح (1905–1987) – وهو عالم إسلامي ومفكر مؤثر من غرب جاوة – وتطويرة لمفهوم القومية الإندونيسية من منظور إسلامي، كما يتجلى ذلك في مخطوطته العربية المعنونة "ماذا نفعل في سبيل الإسلام بإندونيسيا".

الطريقة

تستخدم هذه الدراسة منهجًا تاريخيًا قائمًا على التحليل النصي للمخطوطة المذكورة لفحص فكر نوح.

النتائج

تكشف الدراسة أن نوح صاغ علاقة جدلية بين الإسلام والقومية. ففي رأيه، ليست القومية نقيضًا للإسلام؛ بل يمكن أن تكون – باستخدام مصطلحه – "الخاتم الذهبي في سلسلة الوحدة الإسلامية العظيمة"، شرط أن تُبنى على أساس "الثغر" (حدود الإسلام الدفاعية) وأن تُوجَّه نحو تحقيق العدالة. ومع ذلك، حدد نوح أربع مشكلات أساسية تعاني منها الجماعة المسلمة في إندونيسيا: وهن العقيدة، وضعف الوحدة، وتصدع الأخوة، وتدني مستوى الثقافة الإسلامية. وأكد أن معالجة هذه القضايا أمرٌ جوهري لتحقيق قومية إسلامية حقيقية.

الخلاصة

تثري نتائج هذه الدراسة النقاش الدائر حول العلاقة بين الإسلام والهوية الوطنية في إندونيسيا، والتي كثيرًا ما يُنظر إليها على أنها توتر غير محلول. يقدم فكر نوح منظورًا دقيقًا يرى إمكانية التآزر بين المبادئ الإسلامية والتطلعات القومية، مشترطًا ذلك بإصلاح داخلي وتقوية للجماعة المسلمة.

الكلمات الرئيسية

عبد الله بن نوح، القومية الإسلامية، إندونيسيا، الثغر (حدود الإسلام).

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Islam and nationalism in Indonesia constitutes one of the longest and most complex intellectual debates in the nation's history. Since the early 20th century, Indonesian Muslim thinkers have grappled with a fundamental question: can loyalty to the nation and loyalty to religion proceed hand in hand, or are they in tension? (Maarif, 2006). On the one hand, nationalism was viewed as a product of secular Western thought with the potential to undermine the cross-border solidarity of the Muslim community (*ummah*). On the other hand, the reality of Dutch colonialism pushed Muslims to adopt the national framework as a vehicle for the independence struggle.

Within the context of this debate, Abdullah bin Nuh (1905–1987) emerges as a compelling figure for study. Born in Cianjur, West Java, he was an *ulama* (Islamic scholar) educated in the Middle East, yet also an intellectual who read English texts and was familiar with modern Western ideas. This dual position enabled him to mediate between two scholarly traditions often perceived as contradictory (Antonio, 2015). His extensive body of work shows he did not reject nationalism outright, nor did he accept it thoroughly. Instead, he offered a reformulation that placed nationalism within an Islamic framework of values. This is noticeable in one manuscript.

This research focuses on the figure of Abdullah bin Nuh (hereinafter referred to as Nuh). To trace his thought, the study relies on the primary source of an Arabic manuscript titled *Mādhā Naf'al fī Sabīl al-Islām bi Indūnisiyā*. For research and publication, the researcher translated it into Indonesian with the title *Apa yang Kita Kerjakan di Jalan Islam di Indonesia* (Nuh, 1948). Employing a manuscript-based historical approach and content analysis techniques, this study does not merely read the text as a linguistic document but treats it as a historical artifact laden with intellectual responses to the socio-political dynamics of its time. Within this framework, three key questions guide the analysis: what truly Nuh articulated in the manuscript; why his thought emerged within his specific historical context—i.e., what socio-political problems was he responding to; and how he negotiated the relationship between the concepts of nationalism and Islam within a coherent intellectual structure. Thus, this research aims to move beyond a mere description of the text's content toward a more holistic contextualization of his thought, so that Nuh's intellectual legacy can be understood not merely as a past idea, but as a contribution relevant to the discourse on Islam and nationhood in Indonesia to this day.

This study contributes in three respects. Historiographically, it addresses the underrepresentation of West Javanese *ulama* writing in Arabic within Indonesian Islamic intellectual history. Conceptually, Nuh's integration of nationalism into an Islamic framework offers an original perspective on the *fiqh* of nationhood. Practically, his ideas on unity, culture, and *aqidah* remain pertinent to contemporary Indonesian socio-religious dynamics.

Studies on Abdullah bin Nuh have attracted the attention of several researchers who have highlighted various dimensions of his thought. Ardi, Abdullah, and Cholil (2019b) examined Nuh's intellectual response to modern ideologies such as materialism, Marxism, and communism, which entered Indonesia through Western colonialism and imperialism. They concluded that Nuh consistently dedicated his life to critiquing these ideologies by demonstrating their incompatibility with Islamic values and Eastern, particularly Indonesian, culture (Ardi et al., 2019a). Meanwhile, Ardi (2017), in another study, also discussed Nuh's contributions to Islamic propagation (*dakwah*) and education, through the establishment of two Islamic institutions in Bogor, *al-Ghazaly* and *al-Ihyaa*, as well as his consistency in translating classical Arabic works, especially those of al-Ghazali, into Indonesian and Sundanese. These studies position Nuh as a figure who is not only theological in dimension but also practical-social within the context of the Islamic movement in Indonesia.

Regarding the dimensions of nationalist thought and the Pan-Islam movement, Haq's thesis (2025) provides the contribution most closely aligned with the focus of this study.

He argues that for Abdullah bin Nuh, nationalism is not an ideology opposed to Islam; rather, it is a divine mandate aligned with the principle of *rahmatan lil-'alamin* (a mercy to all worlds) and can serve as a stepping stone towards Pan-Islamism. He also demonstrates that the main foundations of Nuh's Pan-Islamic thought are *Ukhuwwah Islamiyyah* (Islamic brotherhood) and *Tadhammun Islami* (Islamic solidarity), two concepts emphasizing moral brotherhood and tangible solidarity in the social, political, and economic spheres. This aligns with the findings of the study on *Ukhuwwah Islamiyyah* as the foundation of Islamic moderation where Nuh asserted that Islamic brotherhood transcends national, sectarian, and ethnic boundaries, as long as the *ummah* remains bound by the one *shahadah* (Ardi et al., 2019). Together, these two studies reveal that Nuh's thought on nationhood does not stand alone but is rooted in an inclusive and moderate vision of universal Islamic unity.

From the perspective of manuscript-based historical research, Khusniah (2017) provides a viewpoint that complements these studies. She positions Nuh as an informal historian, whose contribution to writing the history of Islam in Indonesia is based on his mastery of various foreign languages—Arabic, English, Dutch, and French—and his use of local sources such as *babad* (chronicles) and genealogies of *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet). Nuh's position as a writer operating between local and international scholarly traditions is relevant for understanding why his thought possesses a rich comparative nuance. In a broader context, Saraswati (2011) emphasizes the importance of studying ancient manuscripts as documents of a nation's civilization capable of building historical and emotional memory, while Kytö and Peikola (2014) stress that philology and manuscript studies continue to evolve methodologically in the 21st century. These two perspectives serve as methodological foundations for research that uses Nuh's manuscript as a primary source.

For manuscript-based historical methodology, this study draws upon Nugraha (2023) on philological approaches in Indonesian Islamic studies, as well as Kytö and Peikola (2014) on evolving methodological frameworks in 21st-century manuscript studies. These works establish the analytical foundation for treating Nuh's manuscript not merely as a textual document but as a historical artifact embedded in specific socio-political contestations.

Methodologically, this study follows the manuscript-based historical approach exemplified by studies on Indonesian political thought in the 1940s. Laffan (2003) demonstrates how Arabic and Malay manuscripts from this period reveal the negotiation between Islamic universalism and territorial nationalism, while Federspiel (2001) traces the ideological contestations that shaped the emerging Indonesian state. These frameworks inform the present study's analysis of Nuh's manuscript as a situated response to the specific political conjuncture of 1948.

While Haq (2025) has examined Nuh's reconciliation of Islam and nationalism through the lens of Pan-Islamism, emphasizing *rahmatan lil-'ālamīn* and *ukhuwwah islamiyyah* as theological foundations, his study does not analyze how Nuh constructed the architecture of this synthesis within a single situated text, nor how Nuh critiqued secular nationalism from within that textual structure. His work operates at the level of intellectual biography and theological systematization; the present study employs a manuscript-based historical approach to trace how Nuh's concept of nationalism emerges organically from his four-fold diagnosis of the Indonesian *ummah* (fragile *aqidah*, weak unity, fractured brotherhood, low Islamic culture) and is anchored in the classical jurisprudential concept of *thughur*. This distinction is methodological as well as conceptual: whereas he synthesizes Nuh's thought across multiple works, this study treats the 1948 manuscript as a historical artifact whose argumentative structure reveals the specific intellectual labor through which Nuh negotiated nationalism within an Islamic framework during a precise political conjuncture.

METHOD

This study employed a manuscript-based historical approach (Nugraha, 2023) grounded in the dual philological protocol of external and internal criticism (Kytö & Peikola, 2014). External criticism verified the manuscript's authorship through handwriting comparison with authenticated specimens and institutional provenance analysis. Internal criticism assessed textual integrity, continuity of pagination, and absence of interpolation. Having confirmed the manuscript's authenticity and integrity through external and internal criticism, the study then proceeded to content analysis.

The manuscript *Mādhā Naf' al fī Sabīl al-Islām bi Indūnīsiyā* (Nuh, 1948) is held in the collection of *Jam'iyat Anṣār al-Ḥaqq* founded in 1940, Bogor. The researcher accessed the original handwritten manuscript and produced an independent Indonesian translation titled *Apa yang Kita Kerjakan di Jalan Islam di Indonesia*. To analyze Abdullah bin Nuh's rare 1948 Arabic manuscript, the researcher used a four-fold framework. First, external criticism verified authenticity by matching handwriting, paper, ink, and watermarks to mid-20th-century archives, treating it as the sole surviving copy. Second, internal criticism confirmed textual integrity, finding continuous 47-folio pagination with no edits or missing pages. Third, a three-stage translation protocol combined diplomatic transcription, dual-reviewer translation into modern Indonesian, and back-translation of core terms. Finally, contextual triangulation cross-referenced Nuh's vocabulary with contemporary press releases to avoid anachronisms, directly citing original Arabic terms whenever terminological ambiguity remained.

Content analysis was also systematically applied across four stages. First, close reading mapped the text's argumentative structure and logical flow. Second, core concepts—such as *thughur*, unity, faith, and Islamic culture—were categorized to examine their structural interrelationships. Third, discursive tracing mapped the overarching structure of Nuh's thought. Rather than relying on quantitative word counts, this qualitative hermeneutic evaluated strategic concept placement, rhetorical force, and logical interrelations within specific argumentative clusters to avoid interpretive distortion. Fourth, historical contextualization linked these conceptual findings directly to surrounding socio-political dynamics, producing a reading of the manuscript that is both textually accurate and historically meaningful.

This study recognized that a single manuscript cannot fully capture the 'intellectual contestations' of its era without comparative engagement with counter-arguments, institutional documents, or contemporary newspaper debates (Kytö & Peikola, 2014). However, Nuh's manuscript itself contains internal dialogicity—it explicitly positions itself against identifiable ideological opponents (secular nationalists, materialists, colonial apologists) and cites broader discursive contexts. To mitigate the risk of intellectual isolationism, this study triangulates the manuscript's claims with: (a) historical studies of 1940s Indonesian politics (Ricklefs, 2008; Suryanegara, 2017a); (b) secondary scholarship on Nuh's institutional activities and network (Ardi, 2017; Haq, 2025); and (c) comparative literature on Pan-Islamism and Indonesian nationalism (Laffan, 2003). This multi-layered contextualization allowed the manuscript to be read as a situated intervention rather than a self-contained system.

RESULT/FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Indonesian Islam in Abdullah bin Nuh's View

The starting point of Nuh's thought in this manuscript is a clear and honest diagnosis of the condition of Islam in Indonesia. He acknowledges that although Islam possesses an intrinsic, unparalleled strength in its faith (*aqidah*), law (*shari'ah*), and ethics (*akhlak*), the reality he witnessed in Indonesia fell far short of the ideal. Nuh views Islam as having arrived in this archipelago not during its golden age, but when Western powers were exerting pressure. Unlike its entry into Persia, India, or nearby Arab lands, which occurred

during its zenith, power, and flourishing, Islam entered Indonesia when the Islamic empire in Andalusia was already weakened (Nuh, 1948). Soon after Islam shone in these islands, the first wave of colonizers from the West arrived (Ricklefs, 2008).

This historical condition, according to Nuh, is one factor explaining why Islam in Indonesia suffers from structural weakness. However, Nuh does not stop at historical determinism. He points out that the weakness of Islam in Indonesia lies not in the religious teachings themselves, but in the weakness of "hearts torn by the fangs of ancient Eastern ignorance and the claws of new Western misguidance" (Nuh, 1948). By referencing the Prophet's hadith about a lump of flesh in the body (the heart), Nuh formulates an anthropological-religious thesis: the reform of the *ummah* must begin with the reform of the heart, not merely institutional or political reform. This argument arises in response to the phenomenon occurring in Indonesia at the time that was the ideological conflict between religious and secular groups (Suryanegara, 2017a).

Nuh's characterization of Indonesian Islam as arriving during colonial weakness rather than imperial strength parallels Mitsuo Nakamura's (1981) study that Javanese *pesantren* tradition developed under conditions of political subordination, producing a 'defensive' religious culture. However, Nuh's diagnosis of 'hearts torn by Eastern ignorance and Western misguidance' goes beyond structural analysis to propose an anthropological-religious reform agenda—a move that distinguishes his framework from both classical *tajdid* (renewal) discourse and later liberation theology approaches.

Yet Nuh's analysis goes even deeper. The two main adversaries he identifies are *jahiliyyah* of the East and *dalalah* of the West. *Jahiliyyah* of the East refers to the legacy of pre-Islamic religions and sects that left traces in people's souls in the form of *bid'ah* (innovation), superstition (*khurafat*), and myths (*takhayul*). Meanwhile, *dalalah* of the West refers to the dark side of European civilization—not all of it, as Nuh acknowledges the benefits of European civilization—but the part that has become mixed with modern life and threatens moral destruction. This dual diagnosis is crucial because it shows that Nuh was not simply anti-West or anti-modernity; he carefully distinguished between beneficial and destructive Western elements. Nuh writes:

"As for the ignorances of the East, what I mean by them is what was left behind by the religions and sects that preceded Islam as traces in the souls, and what emerged from them in terms of innovations (bid'ah), superstitions (khurafat), and the like, from whose power we have not yet been freed. As for the misguidances of the West, what I mean by them is what has become mixed with the benefits of European civilization in terms of harms through which the West's own destruction will occur, if Allah does not prevent it with His mercy and save humanity from this great calamity" (Nuh, 1948).

To address these challenges, Nuh structures his thought around four fundamental questions that form the backbone of his argument: (1) what must be done to safeguard the Islamic creed (*aqidah*) in Indonesia; (2) what must be done to repel the deceptions of the attackers of Islam; (3) what must be done to strengthen the sense of Islamic brotherhood; and (4) what must be done to elevate Islamic culture in Indonesia (Nuh, 1948).

These four questions are not merely a pragmatic to-do list; they reflect a comprehensive vision of what it means to be a responsible Muslim within the context of a nation in the making. Within these four questions, we can discern the specific phenomena Nuh was responding to, and from there, we can trace Nuh's concept of nationalism, which is constructed not as a separate topic but as a dimension of the third question concerning Islamic brotherhood. This placement is significant: for Nuh, nationalism is an issue related to the bonds of brotherhood and solidarity, not merely a matter of political identity.

Safeguarding the Creed: Between Tradition and Modernity

Nuh's response to the first question reflects his ability to stand between two worlds, mirroring the socio-political context that was then converging in Indonesia. He rejects a hardline, confrontational approach towards beliefs that contradict Islam, as that path requires great caution and risks igniting fanaticism and sterile debates that bear no fruit. Instead, he advocates for a more open and persuasive approach: demonstrating the superiority of Islam through convincing arguments so that people can see with their own eyes the vast difference that tramples them between truth (*haqq*) and falsehood (*batil*). Nuh writes:

"(And secondly) that we defend the creed (aqidah) with all the strength that Allah has bestowed upon us, and we explain to people the virtues and distinctions contained in the upright religion (al-din al-hanif), until they see with their own eyes the vast difference that tramples them between truth and falsehood, and we bring them out from darkness into Light" (Nuh, 1948).

This sentence written by Nuh conveys a meaning that can be interpreted that it reflects Nuh's belief that the truth of Islam, when conveyed appropriately, possesses an inherent appeal and does not need to be supported by coercion or confrontation that demeans the opponent. It is interesting that Nuh's method of differentiating his proselytization (*dakwah*) approach was based on the target audience. Have a look at how Nuh identifies society as divided into two groups. Nuh writes:

"And people in this era are divided into two groups: a group whose thoughts are influenced by Western civilization, so that they have developed a specific mindset we can call the Westernized mindset. And a group that remains with the old ways, unaffected by this civilization except in purely external matters" (Nuh, 1948).

It can be seen that Nuh identifies two groups in Indonesian society not as religious versus secular, but as the following: a traditional group that remains with old thought patterns and is less touched by modernity, and a modern group whose thinking has been shaped by Western civilization, thus possessing a Westernized mindset. This division is not merely a descriptive sociological typology but a strategic framework demanding different pastoral responses.

For the first group, the most effective approach is conveying religion with abundant *targhib* (encouragement) and *tarhib* (warning), inspirational stories about righteous people, and the gradual cleansing of *bid'ah* (innovations) and superstitions (*khurafat*) that have taken root in their religious life. Nuh was aware that sudden, forced change would only provoke resistance; thus, a gradual approach emphasizing gentleness and exemplary conduct was deemed far more successful in this context.

For the second group, what Nuh calls modern tools and modern methods are required, including opening doors to thought about scientific cosmology, humanistic philosophy, and demonstrating that revelation is a necessary complement to human reason and experience. The influx of Western knowledge into Indonesia which was unstoppable, indeed demanded a new approach in Islamic proselytization (Ricklefs, 2008). Nuh clearly understood that for educated circles familiar with Western epistemology, classical theological arguments alone were insufficient. An intellectual bridge was needed to show the coherence and relevance of Islam in the face of modern scientific achievements, without sacrificing fundamental creedal principles.

Nuh even explicitly mentions the importance of quoting the words of just Western judges about the goodness of Islam and the testimonies of converts about their reasons for choosing Islam. The rationale for this strategy is sound, as history proves that Islam also brought with it a wealth of knowledge (Toer, 1965). He considered this strategy more beneficial and effective than compiling logical proofs and theological arguments (*dalil-dalil kalam*). Here we see an intellectual pragmatism based on a deep understanding of

audience psychology. By utilizing voices from within the Western tradition itself as witnesses to Islam's excellence, Nuh cleverly reverses the logic of inferiority often constructed by colonial discourse. For Nuh, truth is not enough to be stated; it must be communicated in a way that is acceptable, even appreciated, by its listeners.

He also discusses the importance of contextual Quranic interpretation for the modern group—not arbitrary interpretation or following the spirit of the age, but interpretation that is under the Westernized mindset while still respecting linguistic rules and religious law (*shari'ah*). Nuh offers a structured epistemological categorization. He divides Islamic texts into three groups: texts about Allah's creation that can be linked to certain, verified scientific findings; texts about the unseen (*al-ghayb*) that may only be interpreted based on definitive scriptural evidence (*nass*) and do not allow room for speculative interpretation; and texts about the names and attributes (*asma' wa sifat*) of Allah that must also be understood only through the guidance of the Quran and Sunnah (Haq, 2025). This categorization is likely influenced by the education Nuh received in Egypt, for instance, from the thought of Abduh and Rashid Rida, which was highly popular. This categorization is not merely a technical division but a hermeneutic manifesto reflecting Nuh's epistemological sophistication in balancing openness to modern science with steadfast loyalty to Islamic theological tradition. Through this framework, Nuh successfully demonstrates that Islam does not have to choose between intellectual relevance and creedal integrity, as both can proceed hand in hand when handled with adequate methodological precision.

Nuh's differentiated *dakwah* strategy—*targhib/tarhib* for traditionalists, scientific-philosophical argumentation for modernists—anticipates what Ardi, Abdullah, and Cholil (2019b) identify as his 'intellectual pragmatism.' Yet the manuscript reveals a more nuanced epistemological architecture than the 2019 study captures: Nuh's threefold categorization of Qur'anic texts (creation-linked, unseen, divine attributes) represents a hermeneutic manifesto that operationalizes Abduh-Rida influence into a method for Indonesian conditions.

Nationalism within the Framework of Islam's *Thughur*

The core of Nuh's thought on nationalism lies in his discussion of Islamic brotherhood. Here, he employs the concept of *thughur*—an Arabic term meaning "frontier" or "defensive fortress"—to reinterpret Indonesia not as a political-national entity, but as part of the expanse of the Islamic world that must be safeguarded and managed with full awareness. This conceptual choice is not arbitrary. Indonesia's history shows that nationalism resonated powerfully during Nuh's active years in preaching (considering Nuh's lifespan from 1905 to 1987 (Toer, 1965), including when this manuscript was written. However, conceptions of nationalism often stop at matters of land and territory, not values (Suryanegara, 2017a). Moreover, within classical Islamic jurisprudence and history, *thughur* refers to frontier regions serving as the first line of defense for the Muslim community—a zone demanding presence, sacrifice, and collective responsibility. By borrowing and applying this concept to the modern Indonesian context, Nuh implicitly asserts that every inch of the homeland is theologically sacred, not merely politically significant (Nuh, 1948). The emphasis is on values, prompting Nuh to write:

"It is obligatory for our national movement to be built upon the consideration of this thughur (frontier) as one of Islam's thughur; it is obligatory upon us to work to manage its affairs, elevate the standard of living within it, restore rights to their rightful owners, and ensure that oppression and humiliation are not inflicted upon its children—alongside all else that free, rational people cherish for their homeland. Thus, this nationalism does not contradict Islamic brotherhood; rather, it is a golden link in the great chain of Islamic unity" (Nuh, 1948).

Nuh asserts that the national movement in Indonesia must be built upon considering this *thughur* as one of Islam's *thughur*. This statement simultaneously acknowledges the

legitimacy of the national movement and situates it within a broader framework of responsibility. Nationalism is not merely about national identity, but about managing a territory that is part of the Islamic world. Within this framework, the struggle for independence and the struggle to imbue independence with values of justice are not just national agendas, but Islamic ones. Nuh appears to recognize that without a solid theological foundation, nationalism can easily devolve into mere primordial sentiment, vulnerable to manipulation by narrow interests. Therefore, he provides Indonesian nationalism with a justification that transcends the boundaries of ethnicity, regionalism, or tribalism.

Furthermore, Nuh formulates the relationship between nationalism and Islamic brotherhood as positive and complementary. This thought can undoubtedly be traced to the influence of the Pan-Islamism movement with which Nuh was engaged (Haq, 2025). For him, this nationalism does not contradict Islamic brotherhood; rather, it is “a golden link in the great chain of Islamic unity” (Nuh, 1948). The metaphor of a “golden link in a chain” deserves further analysis. Nuh in this context implies that Islamic unity is pluralistic, composed of many links—each with its own integrity (a nation, a community, a region)—yet all connected within a larger, inseparable whole. Healthy nationalism, in Nuh’s view, is not nationalism that closes itself off from the universal solidarity of Islam, but one that strengthens a link within that network of brotherhood. The stronger and more dignified a Muslim nation, the more robust the entire chain of Islamic unity becomes. Here, Nuh successfully transforms the tension commonly assumed between national and religious identities into a relationship of mutual support and reinforcement.

This perspective carries significant and multi-layered implications. First, Nuh rejects exclusive nationalism that treats national borders as moral and solidarity boundaries, as if a Muslim’s obligations end at the shores of their own archipelago. Second, he also rejects an Islamic cosmopolitanism that ignores the contextual realities and responsibilities of a specific region—a rootless idealism often unproductive in facing the real challenges of the *ummah*. What he offers is a self-aware Islamic nationalism: one that stewards the homeland as a trust within the framework of a broader responsibility to the entire Muslim community. This middle ground reflects Nuh’s intellectual maturity, resisting the lure of either extreme—narrow nationalism or ungrounded universalism. Again, this thought can be traced to Nuh’s engagement with Pan-Islamism.

This formulation appears even more mature and ethically weighty when Nuh elaborates on the content of national responsibility, “*to work to manage its affairs, elevate the standard of living within it, restore rights to their rightful owners, and ensure that oppression and humiliation are not inflicted upon its children*” (Nuh, 1948). This list of obligations is not empty rhetoric. It contains a concrete social justice program: welfare development, upholding citizens’ rights, and eliminating all forms of oppression. Thus, Nuh’s Islamic nationalism is not a nationalism that stops at flag or anthem symbolism, nor merely an instrument for mass mobilization for power purposes. It is a moral commitment demanding tangible work, siding with the weak, and a determination to realize a just, dignified society worthy of inheritance by future generations. This emphasis on justice, unity, and love for the homeland also resonates with the findings of Setiadi & Lubis (2022) on religious nationalism.

Noah’s Critique of Secular Nationalism and Internal Division

While Noah accommodates nationalism within an Islamic framework, he also offers sharp criticism of tendencies that weaken the Muslim community. One of his most fundamental critiques concerns the impact of Western thought on Muslim communal cohesion. A historical perspective helps us understand this critique. The penetration of Western knowledge, whether or not intentional, brought with it a materialistic outlook that rejects metaphysics. It is also difficult to overlook how the genealogy of the concept of nationalism in Indonesia derives from Western knowledge (Suryanegara, 2017b). This, he argues, is among the divisive elements introduced to us by Western civilization. Whereas Mus-

lims once considered themselves one ummah, some now speak in different languages and frameworks of thought—a fragmentation that is not only cultural but also epistemic (Nuh, 1948). In Noah's view, Western modernity did not bring material progress; it also imported conceptual categories foreign to Islamic tradition, such as the separation between public space and religion, between citizenship and faith, and between national loyalty and loyalty to the ummah, as these ideas developed. When these categories seeped into the consciousness of Indonesian Muslims, they defined themselves not as part of a single body of believers, but as citizens with often divergent national interests. The importance of the relationship between an underlying worldview and political thought is evident in (Hadi, 2024) who shows to close connection between metaphysics and political theory.

This critique is highly relevant in the rise of national identities that overshadowed or even replaced Islamic identity during Noah's active years of preaching and writing (Suryanegara, 2017a). Noah feared that nationalism not built upon Islamic consciousness would instead become a tool for dividing the unity of the ummah. This concern was not a naive anti-modern reaction but a diagnosis of the socio-political reality he witnessed firsthand: the struggle between Islamic groups and secular nationalists in formulating the foundation of the Indonesian state, debates surrounding the Jakarta Charter, and the marginalization of Islamic political aspirations in the early decades of independence (Ricklefs, 2008). In this context, Noah asserted that *"the gravest sin and the greatest injustice is to stir discord among the ummah and weaken its strength through division"* (Nuh, 1948). This statement is not an abstract moral appeal but an ethico-political judgment that places internal division as a threat equal to (or even greater than) external threats.

Noah also criticized differences in religious viewpoints that became grounds for division. He provided a framework for managing such differences proportionally: if differences occur in the branches of religion (*furū'*), it is not fitting to harbor enmity; if they occur in the fundamentals of religion (*usul*), one must distinguish between those that lead to disbelief and those that do not (Djalil, 2014). This framework demonstrates Noah's deep mastery of the classical Islamic intellectual tradition. He did not treat all differences as threats but established an epistemological hierarchy that allows the ummah to remain united on fundamental matters while accommodating diversity in particular issues. This approach reflects the maturity of classical fiqh tradition: holding firm to shared principles while being tolerant in matters of disagreement (Djalil, 2014). Thus, Noah positions himself not as a figure who rejects differing opinions, but as a thinker striving to ensure that such differences do not exceed boundaries that harm collective solidarity.

Moreover, Nuh employed visual and communicative analogies to illustrate the concrete impact of division. He likened those who attack Islam to *"a band of thieves descending upon a town... stealing everything, cheap and valuable alike"* because the townspeople were not united. This analogy is effective because it speaks not in abstract ideological terms but in the logic of everyday life that is easily understood: a divided community is a vulnerable community. Collective strength is not just about numbers but about unity of purpose and direction. Conversely, Nuh quoted Khalid ibn al-Walid saying *"For people like us, unity is the best opinion, because when people like us are united, we will not be defeated due to our small numbers"* (Nuh, 1948). Noah's choice to quote an Islamic military commander is not without meaning; he consciously drew upon Islam's strategic heritage as an argument for contemporary unity. This military-strategic rhetoric is not merely literary ornamentation; it reflects Noah's understanding that the struggle of Islam requires strategy, organization, and measured leadership, not merely fragmented individual piety. In this sense, Noah's thought on the unity of the ummah is not only a spiritual call but also a political program based on realistic considerations of collective strengths and weaknesses in the face of contemporary challenges.

Unity as the Foundation of Resistance

In discussing how to repel attacks against Islam, Noah places unity as the most funda-

mental and irreplaceable foundation. He recounts a real incident in a town in West Java: a Jewish resident living next to a mosque became angry because of the sound of the *bedug* (a traditional mosque drum) and damaged the mosque. However, when the entire townspeople rose with one voice and demonstrated a united stance, the individual eventually surrendered, apologized, and even promised to repair the damage he had caused (Nuh, 1948). In the researcher's attempt to verify this account, the exact year of the incident could not be confirmed. Nevertheless, what can be understood is that Noah uses this story not to incite hostile sentiments against non-Muslims, but to illustrate something far more substantive: that unity is a peaceful yet effective instrument of resistance. The power demonstrated was not physical force or violence, but the social strength of a community that stands whole, cohesive, and undivided by partial interests. This narrative also carries an important pedagogical dimension—Noah is showing his readers that an organized, united response is far more powerful than individual, emotional, yet uncoordinated reactions.

This illustration is important to understand in a broader context, namely that of Indonesian nationalism in the process of finding its form. This struggle unfolded over a long period, continuing even after Noah's passing. A figure who later focused on this issue is Nurcholish (Majid, 2008). The unity Noah speaks of is not one built upon shared ethnicity, race, or language (categories that form the basis of ethnic nationalism), but rather a unity built upon shared higher values and goals. This is what makes his concept of unity both compatible with and transcendent of conventional nationalism. Nationalism unites people based on territorial and cultural identities that are often *given* and unchosen; Islamic unity within Noah's framework unites them based on a consciously and actively chosen commitment to values of justice, truth, and piety. In this context, Noah wrote, which translates as:

"How could it be otherwise, when their religion has commanded them that the great among them should care for the small, the rich should show compassion to the poor, that no neighbor should be wronged among them, no oppressed person be left unsupported, and no stray soul be abandoned? It urges them not to neglect any form of goodness and piety except that they cooperate in it, and not a single kind of sin and oppression except that they uproot it from its foundations. Indeed, among the greatest acts of virtue and piety is to work toward revealing what atheistic civilization conceals of the beauty of a civilization of faith, and to take a firm stance in strengthening the state of justice and virtue against the assaults of the rulers of oppression and the violators of rights. And verily, the gravest sin and the greatest injustice is to stir discord among the ummah and weaken its strength through division and disunity" (Nuh, 1948).

Thus, Islamic unity in Noah's view possesses an ethical dimension absent from ordinary nationalistic spirit—it is not merely solidarity based on common origin, but solidarity based on shared direction and aspiration. Nuh also did not hesitate to quote Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib to critique the weaknesses of a community reluctant to unite, easily complacent, and quick to neglect looming threats. Quoting a figure of such high authority in the Islamic tradition serves a dual purpose: it strengthens Noah's argument rhetorically while demonstrating that the call for unity is not a novel idea he invented himself, but a long-embedded heritage within the Islamic treasury. The use of authoritative figures from Islamic tradition—both the Prophet's companions and the imams—clearly shows that Noah was not innovating beyond the boundaries of tradition, but rather excavating moral resources from within the tradition itself to address the concrete challenges of his time. This kind of intellectual strategy reflects Noah's position as a scholar deeply rooted in classical tradition, yet simultaneously responsive to contemporary realities—a synthesis that renders his thought relevant not only to *pesantren* circles, but also to those grappling with major questions of identity, resistance, and the future of Muslims in an independent Indonesia.

Nuh's fear that Western-derived nationalism would fragment the ummah echoes (Roff, 1967) analysis of how Malay nationalism's territorial focus eroded pan-Malay Islamic solidarity. Yet Nuh's solution—reframing national responsibility through *thughur* ethics rather than rejecting nationalism—differs from both Masyumi's political instrumentalization of Islam and DI/TII's secessionist Islamism (Formichi, 2012).

The Relevance of Nuh's Thought in the Discourse of Islamic Nationalism

The thought of Abdullah bin Nuh, as presented in this manuscript, places him within the Islamic intellectual tradition that seeks to integrate (rather than oppose) religious commitment and national commitment. Within the map of Indonesian Islamic thought, Noah's position can be between two poles: on one side, those who reject nationalism for being considered contradictory to the universal concept of the *ummah*; on the other, those who accept secular nationalism unconditionally. Noah offers a more nuanced middle path: nationalism can and must be Islamized, not by altering the substance of Islam, but by infusing the substance of nationhood with Islamic values. A similar tension between religious and national commitments can be seen in the historical negotiation between Muslim-nationalist and secular-nationalist actors, as documented by Ilyas, (2020).

This middle path does not emerge in an intellectual vacuum. It was born from a historical context fraught with tension, where the debate between Islamic groups and secular nationalists on the Indonesian political stage post-independence had yet to find a conclusive point of reconciliation. Figures like Sukarno, on one hand, sought to build a nationalism that embraced all elements of the nation without formally establishing Islam as its foundation; while figures like Mohammad Natsir, on the other hand, firmly held the view that Islam must be the foundation of the state. Between these two major currents, Noah chose a more organic position: rather than debating the institutional form of the state, he operated on a more fundamental level, namely the formation of the character and culture of the *ummah* (Majid, 2004). For him, the Islamization of national life is not about the constitution, but about morality and civilization that grows from the ground up.

The specific timing of Nuh's manuscript—1948—demands contextual precision. This was the year of the Second Dutch Military Aggression, the Madiun Affair (September 1948) that pitted the Republic against the Indonesian Communist Party, and the consolidation of the Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII) movement under Kartosuwiryo, which formally declared an Islamic state in West Java in 1949. Nuh's 'organic synthesis' must be understood against this tripartite polarization: the secular nationalist Republic under Hatta, the communist left, and the Islamist insurgency. His rejection of 'exclusive nationalism' that 'treats territorial borders as moral boundaries' can be read as a critique of Republican secularists; his simultaneous rejection of 'Islamic cosmopolitanism that loses contextual grounding' implicitly distances him from DI/TII's territorial secessionism. His emphasis on 'internal reform' over 'instant structural change' further distinguishes his position from both the political instrumentalization of Islam by Masyumi and the armed struggle of DI/TII. Nuh's 'golden ring' metaphor thus functions not merely as abstract theology but as a situated political intervention: it legitimizes nationalist commitment while subordinating it to Islamic ethical horizons, thereby occupying a mediating space that was rapidly narrowing in the violent polarization of 1948–1949.

The relevance of this approach becomes even more apparent when we consider that the discourse on Islamic nationalism in Indonesia to this day still grapples with essentially similar questions: how can Islamic identity live authentically within the framework of a plural nation-state? Noah provides an answer that transcends the legal-formal dichotomy: what matters most is not labels or symbols, but the substantive values that drive communal life. His thought bears a resemblance to what later became known in academic literature as "civil Islam" – an expression of Islam that is productive, democratic, and oriented towards the public interest without necessarily imposing the institutional formalization of Sharia law.

What distinguishes Nuh from a mere religious apologist is his willingness to honestly acknowledge the weaknesses of the *ummah*. He does not conceal the fact that Islam in Indonesia appears among us as a weak stranger (Nuh, 1948). This acknowledgment is a crucial starting point, as it opens space for critical evaluation and substantive reform, rather than mere rhetorical defense. This kind of intellectual honesty, rare among religious defenders of his time, becomes a unique strength in Noah's arguments. He does not speak from a defensive, apologetic position, but from the position of a reformist who sees great, yet neglected, potential.

Noah believed that the true strength of Islam lies within its teachings, not in the actual condition of its followers; and therefore, improvement must begin from within, from the heart, from faith, and from culture. This belief makes his intellectual project long-term and deeply rooted; he does not pursue instant structural change, but profound cultural transformation. From this perspective, Nuh is essentially a civilizational thinker: he believes that the glory of a nation is not determined solely by its political configuration, but by the moral and spiritual quality of the individuals who constitute it. It is this legacy of thought that keeps Noah relevant as a reference in the effort to formulate a relationship between Islam and nationhood that does not negate one another, but mutually strengthens each other.

Nuh's 'golden ring' metaphor has been read by Haq (2025) as evidence of Pan-Islamic orientation. However, the manuscript-based reading proposed here emphasizes the *thughur* concept's jurisprudential specificity. Fealy and Bubalo (2005) note that Indonesian Islamists' engagement with Middle Eastern thought often involved 'selective appropriation' rather than direct transplantation. Nuh's use of *thughur* exemplifies this: he activates a classical administrative-military category for a non-caliphal, post-colonial context, thereby 'Indonesianizing' a concept that in classical fiqh presupposed the *Dār al-Islām*/*Dār al-Ḥarb* binary.

CONCLUSION

Based on a historical analysis of the manuscript *Mādhā Naf'al fī Sabīl al-Islām bi Indūnīsiyā*, Nuh emerges as a thinker who critically responded to two simultaneous threats encircling Indonesian Muslims in his time: the *jahiliyyah* of the East, manifested in the legacy of pre-Islamic innovations (*bid'ah*) and superstitions (*khurafat*), and the *dalalah* of the West, represented by materialism and the ideological fragmentation brought by the tide of colonial modernity. In the struggle between Islamic groups and secular nationalists vying over the face of post-independence Indonesia, Nuh did not align himself with either pole. Instead, he proposed a more organic synthesis: nationalism is to be Islamized not through the formalization of *Sharia* in the constitution, but by infusing the substance of nationhood with the values of justice, brotherhood, and morality. His use of the concept of *thughur* (frontier regions), serves as a hermeneutical key that elevates Indonesia from a mere political-territorial entity to a land endowed with theological sanctity—a part of the expanse of the Islamic world that must be managed with full responsibility.

Thus, in Nuh's view, nationalism is not an independent category but a dimension of the broader responsibility of Islamic brotherhood. He rejects an exclusive nationalism that treats territorial borders as moral boundaries, while also rejecting an Islamic cosmopolitanism that loses its contextual grounding. What he offers is a self-aware Islamic nationalism: working for the homeland as a sacred trust, upholding justice, and rejecting all forms of oppression—not for the sake of primordial sentiment, but for the sake of a higher civilizational ideal. Nuh's 'organic synthesis,' as within the violent polarization of 1948–1949, must be understood not as abstract theology but as a political intervention occupying a narrowing mediating space.

A critical qualification is necessary regarding Nuh's diagnostic terminology. His characterization of local practices as '*jahiliyyah* of the East' and Western modernity as '*dalalah*' operates within a reformist epistemology that hierarchies 'pure' Islam over syn-

cretic or *abangan* expressions (Geertz, 1960; Ricklefs, 2008). While this study has analyzed Nuh's framework on its own terms, scholarly distance requires acknowledging the exclusivist potential of such classifications. The labeling of *bid'ah*, *khurafat*, and *takhayul* as 'Eastern ignorance' risks delegitimizing the lived religiosity of Indonesian Muslims whose practice incorporated pre-Islamic and local elements—a reality that Nuh acknowledged but evaluated negatively.

A final conceptual tension, however, requires explicit address. The study has argued that Nuh's use of *thughur* elevates Indonesia from mere territory to theologically charged space, while simultaneously claiming that he rejects "exclusive nationalism that treats territorial borders as moral boundaries." This formulation appears paradoxical: classical *fiqh* understands *thughur* as territorial boundaries—zones where *Dār al-Islām* confronts *Dār al-Harb*, requiring military defense and demographic fortification (Fadl, 1994; Khadduri, 2006). How can a concept so embedded in territorial exclusivism serve as the foundation for an inclusive, non-exclusive nationalism?

The resolution lies in Nuh's hermeneutic transformation of *thughur*. In classical usage, *thughur* designates the *edge* of Islamic political authority; for Nuh, it designates the *center* of Muslim ethical responsibility. The classical *thughur*-defender protects territory against external enemies; Nuh's *thughur*-steward manages internal affairs—welfare, justice, rights—for the inhabitants of that territory, regardless of their religious affiliation. This shift from military-defensive to social-ethical stewardship de-territorializes *thughur* without de-materializing it: the "frontier" is no longer a line against the non-Muslim world but a field of moral obligation toward all who reside within it. Nuh thus retains the classical term's connotation of sacred responsibility while stripping it of its exclusionary geopolitical baggage.

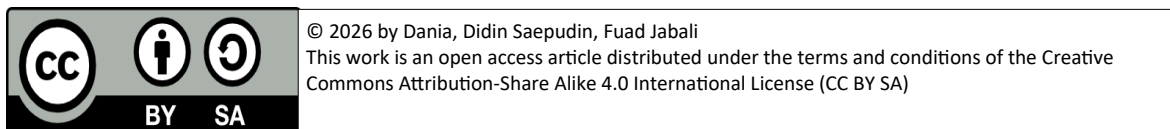
Rather than retrospectively categorizing Nuh within late-20th-century frameworks, this study proposes that his thought be understood through his own conceptual vocabulary: as an effort to constitute "Islamic stewardship of the homeland" (*kifāyat al-waṭan fī ṭā'at al-Islām*), a formulation that integrates national territorial responsibility within *thughur* ethics and *ukhuwwah* obligations, without presupposing the institutional forms (democratic, authoritarian, or theocratic) that later debates would impose. This intellectual position ensures that Nuh's legacy remains relevant to contemporary efforts in formulating a relationship between Islam and nationhood that does not negate but rather mutually strengthens each other.

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