



SECTARIANIZING GEOPOLITICS: Responses of Indonesian Muslims to the 2026 US-Israel vs. Iran War

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ABSTRACT

The open warfare between the US-Israel alliance and Iran in early 2026 not only escalated Middle Eastern geopolitics but also triggered a sharp theological polarization in Indonesia. This study aims to analyze how this transnational geopolitical conflict was domesticated and constructed into a religious cleavage within Indonesia's digital sphere. Utilizing a qualitative approach framed by Raymond Hinnebusch's sectarianization theory and conflict theory, this article dissects the narrative responses of two main factions in Indonesia. The findings reveal a stark fragmentation of religious authority. On one hand, mainstream Islamic organizations (PBBU, Muhammadiyah, and MUI) employed the lenses of international law and universal humanitarian solidarity, rooted in institutional-procedural authority. On the other hand, popular digital preachers utilized a puritan-Salafi approach, framing the conflict exclusively through internal theological (aqeedah) doctrines, collective memories of anti-Shia sentiments, and end-times narratives. Social media functioned as an identity reinforcement machine, accelerating the transition from geopolitical analysis to theological judgment. The implications of this polarization not only erode social cohesion and threaten the domestic Shia minority through local boundary making but also marginalize the core Palestinian solidarity. This study underscores the critical need for public maturity in separating global geopolitical dynamics from domestic sectarian manipulation.

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ABSTRAK

Perang terbuka antara aliansi AS-Israel dan Iran pada awal tahun 2026 tidak hanya menjadi eskalasi geopolitik di Timur Tengah, tetapi juga memicu polarisasi teologis yang tajam di Indonesia. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana konflik geopolitik transnasional tersebut didomestikasi dan dikonstruksikan menjadi pembelahan keagamaan di ruang digital Indonesia. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan pisau analisis teori sektarianisasi (sectarianization) Raymond Hinnebusch dan teori konflik, artikel ini membedah narasi dari dua faksi utama di Indonesia. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan adanya fragmentasi otoritas keagamaan yang kontras. Di satu sisi, organisasi kemasyarakatan (ormas) Islam arus utama (PBBU, Muhammadiyah, dan MUI) menggunakan lensa hukum internasional dan solidaritas kemanusiaan universal yang berbasis pada otoritas institusional-prosedural. Di sisi lain, para dai populer-digital menggunakan pendekatan puritan-salafi yang membingkai



konflik secara eksklusif melalui doktrin akidah internal, memori kolektif sentimen anti-Syiah, dan narasi akhir zaman. Media sosial berperan sebagai mesin penguat identitas (*identity reinforcer*) yang mempercepat pergeseran analisis geopolitik menjadi penilaian akidah. Implikasi dari polarisasi ini tidak hanya mengikis kohesi sosial dan mengancam minoritas Syiah di tingkat lokal melalui penegasan batas kelompok (*boundary making*), tetapi juga mengaburkan substansi solidaritas terhadap Palestina. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya menjaga kedewasaan publik dalam memisahkan dimensi geopolitik global dari manipulasi sektarian domestik.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of global politics in 2026 have witnessed one of the most critical phases in the modern history of the Middle East. The escalation of the conflict involving the United States (US) and Israel on one side, against the Islamic Republic of Iran on the other, has shifted from a shadow war and proxy warfare into a full-scale open war. This development is no longer merely a concern for geopolitical observers; rather, it has expanded into the Muslim public sphere across various countries, including Indonesia.¹

At the geopolitical level, the Iran vs. US/Israel conflict, which culminated in the war of February 28, 2026, is no longer perceived as a limited episode. Instead, it is viewed as a critical juncture with the potential to reshape the security landscape and political coalitions in the Middle East. For instance, the attack that killed Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has been interpreted by many analysts as a catalyst for a new wave of shocks spilling over into global energy issues, oil price stability, and the economic vulnerability of developing nations, including Indonesia. In such a situation, tensions in the Middle East are easily translated as a comprehensive "crisis of the Islamic Ummah," thereby amplifying emotional resonance within the Indonesian Muslim public sphere.²

At the same time, the transnational dimension of religious authority plays a pivotal role in shaping how Indonesian Muslims perceive this conflict. Through networks of education, Islamic propagation (*da'wah*), and international organizations, the conflict flows into Indonesia framed within a sectarian lens that emphasizes Sunni-Shia identity. Articles and statements by key figures in various regional forums indicate that theological differences are frequently juxtaposed with

¹ Bonfilio Mahendra, "Konflik AS-Israel Kontra Iran Bisa Jadi Perang Regional di Timteng," RMOL.COM, 2026; Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," CSIS, 2019; Ahmad Zainal Mustofa dan Nurur Syarifah, "Politik Ofensif Amerika Serikat Terhadap Sikap Defensif Iran: Dari Perang Proksi Hingga Dominasi," *Indonesian Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 2 (2021): 118–39, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32787/ijir.v5i2.203>.

² Muchlis Fadjarudin, "Mahfuz Sidik: Perang Iran–Israel Berpotensi Ubah Peta Politik Timur Tengah, Israel Jadi Musuh Kawasan," Suara Surabaya, 2026; Mohammad Nur Rianto Al Arif, "Dampak Serangan Amerika-Israel ke Iran Terhadap Ekonomi Global," uinjkt.ac.id, 2026.

foreign policy choices; consequently, support for or rejection of Iran, Israel, or the US is interpreted as an indicator of theological purity and Islamic commitment.³

A third factor intensifying this polarization is the mechanism of digital media. Social media and online platforms enable narratives of the Middle East conflict to circulate rapidly, fragmentedly, and emotionally, devoid of adequate historical context or geopolitical analysis. Diverse content, ranging from video clips of attacks and statements by prominent figures to partisan memes and infographics, is reproduced and commented on by Indonesian users, who frequently adopt the vocabulary of Sunni and Shia. Under these conditions, a geographically distant geopolitical conflict is virtually brought into the domestic space, triggering symbolic tensions that could carry implications for relations between Islamic mass organizations (*ormas Islam*), sectarian communities, and even fellow citizens in Indonesia.⁴

As the country with the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia exhibits high sensitivity to upheavals in the Middle East. However, the domestic responses that have emerged demonstrate a unique yet concerning phenomenon. A conflict fundamentally rooted in struggles over geopolitical influence, security, and territorial sovereignty is repeatedly reproduced by a segment of Indonesian Muslims through a theological lens. As a result, the landscape of domestic response is no longer singular or grounded in universal humanitarian solidarity; instead, it has fragmented into sharp poles of religious polarization.⁵

This paper argues that such polarization is not a spontaneous symptom. It arises from the convergence of three elements: the logic of geopolitical conflict in the Middle East, transnational networks of religious authority, and the operational mechanics of digital media that accelerate the dissemination of sectarian framing. Within this framework, the issue of Iran vs. Israel/ America is not read merely as an interstate war, but rather as a war of dogma (*aqeedah*), a sectarian war, or even a war of "truth" against "deviance" by certain Salafi circles in Indonesia.

Accordingly, this study attempts to map the developing narratives in Indonesian mass media and social media regarding the US/Israel versus Iran conflict, particularly the open war that commenced on February 28, 2026. In the authors' observation, this geopolitical conflict has been responded to differently by various Islamic groups in Indonesia. Some view it as a war against an arrogant

³ Barsihannor, "AS-Israel Agresi Iran, Muslim Indonesia Malah Terjebak 'Kafirisiasi,'" *uin-alauddin.ac.id*, 2026; A Fahrur Rozi, "Perang Iran Picu Polarisasi Muslim di Filipina, Ancam Persatuan Bangsamoro," *mui.or.id*, 2026.

⁴ Abdullah Siddiq Notonegoro, "Mengapa Ada Kelompok Beragama yang Sulit Bersimpati Pada Iran?," *islami.co*, 2026.

⁵ Arnoldy Alexadria, "Menyikapi polarisasi agama dan dampak perang timur tengah vs Israel terhadap kehidupan beragama di Indonesia Konten ini telah tayang di Kompasiana.com dengan judul "Menyikapi polarisasi agama dan dampak perang timur tengah vs Israel terhadap kehidupan ber," *kompasiana.com*, 2025.

superpower, while others view it strictly through the lens of sectarian identity. This divergence in response constitutes the core problem addressed in this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To examine this phenomenon, this study employs three analytical tools. First, the realism and constructivism approaches within International Relations. Second, the concept of sectarianization.⁶ Third, the social conflict theories of Lewis Coser and Ralf Dahrendorf.⁷

Realism explains the Middle East conflict as a struggle for power, security, and strategic influence among nation-states. However, realism falls short in explaining why a primarily material conflict gains such powerful theological resonance in Indonesia.⁸ This is where constructivism becomes useful, as it emphasizes that identity, perception, and discourse shape how actors conceive their interests. Hinnebusch demonstrates that the Middle East regional system operates on a dual-layer structure: the state logic and the transnational community logic, both of which overlap.⁹

The concept of sectarianization helps explain how sectarian identity is manufactured into a political instrument. In this view, the Sunni-Shia divide is not the primary cause of the conflict, but rather a medium utilized by state elites and militia actors to mobilize support and harden dividing lines.¹⁰ Studies on the Saudi-Iran rivalry also indicate that proxy wars in Syria and Yemen have reinforced sectarianism as the political language of the region.

Social conflict theory complements this analysis. Coser views conflict as a mechanism that can clarify group boundaries and strengthen internal solidarity, whereas Dahrendorf emphasizes that conflict arises from the unequal distribution of authority.¹¹ Within the Indonesian context, these two theories help explain why the Iran-Israel conflict can reinforce the identity of specific groups while simultaneously fragmenting social cohesion among Muslims.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT

To comprehend the depth of the US-Israel vs. Iran conflict in 2026, one must trace back to 1979, a year that marked ground zero for a radical transformation in

⁶ Nader Hashemi dan Danny Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

⁷ Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Illinois: The Free Press, 1956), 151–59; Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).

⁸ Fred H. Lawson, “International Relations Theory and the Middle East,” in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. oleh Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25–45.

⁹ Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 20–23.

¹⁰ Hashemi dan Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*.

¹¹ Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*.

the region's geopolitical relations. Prior to 1979, under the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran stood as one of the most strategic allies for the United States and Israel in the Middle East. Close diplomatic ties, military cooperation, and economic exchanges heavily intertwined the nations, positioning Iran as a crucial pillar of US foreign policy in the Gulf region. It could be argued that during this era, Iran served as one leg of the US-Israel stance in the Middle East, while Saudi Arabia constituted the other.¹²

This constellation shifted completely when the Iranian Islamic Revolution culminated on February 11, 1979. Under the leadership of Imam Khomeini, the pro-Western monarchy was overthrown and replaced by an Islamic Republic anchored in the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist). This fundamental shift introduced a new, more confrontational foreign policy doctrine. The United States was branded as "The Great Satan", while Israel was unrecognized and viewed as an illegal entity occupying Palestine.¹³

Since then, Iran adopted a foreign policy doctrine oriented toward "exporting the revolution" throughout the Islamic world. This doctrine aimed to awaken the oppressed (*mustad'afin*) to resist Western hegemonic powers and their regional allies. This strategic move materialized through the formation of a transnational alliance network known as the Axis of Resistance (Poros Perlawanan). For more than four decades, the confrontation between Iran and the US-Israel bloc predominantly played out through proxy warfare. Iran provided logistical, financial, and military support to various regional militia groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Ansarullah (Houthi) movement in Yemen, and various Shia militias in Iraq.¹⁴

The dramatic shift from proxy war to direct military confrontation began accelerating in April 2024. Tensions peaked when Israel struck the Iranian consulate building in Damascus, Syria, killing several high-ranking Iranian military officers, including Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi. The attack was widely condemned as a violation of international conventions on diplomatic immunity,

¹² Ananda Armando Chandra, Putra Aldi Septian, dan PutraDheny Wiratmoko, "Transformasi Hubungan Diplomatik Teheran–Washington Pascarevolusi Islam Iran 1979," *RIGGS Journal of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Business* 5, no. 1 (2026): 12397–405, <https://doi.org/10.31004/riggs.v5i1.7772>; Dian Nugraha Ramdani, "Hubungan Iran-Israel Sebelum dan Sesudah Berdiri Republik Islam Iran," *detik.com*, 2024.

¹³ Aufa Ulil Abshar Abdalla dan Ghazali Said, "Manuver Iran dalam Kontestasi Geopolitik Timur Tengah," *Carita: Jurnal Sejarah dan Budaya* 3, no. 1 (2024): 16–36, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.35905/carita.v3i1.10927>.

¹⁴ Alex Wagner, "Bush Labels North Korea, Iran, Iraq an 'Axis of Evil,'" Arms Control Association, 2002; Renad Mansour, Hayder Al-Shakeri, dan Haid, "The shape-shifting 'axis of resistance'" (London, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136369>; Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East"; Mustofa dan Syarifah, "Politik Ofensif Amerika Serikat Terhadap Sikap Defensif Iran: Dari Perang Proksi Hingga Dominasi."

forcing Tehran to abandon its doctrine of “strategic patience”.¹⁵ In retaliation, Iran launched Operation True Promise I in April 2024, marking its first-ever direct strike onto Israeli territory. This retaliatory cycle persisted with Operation True Promise II in October 2024, and Operation True Promise III during the 12-Day War in June 2025. This sequence shattered the boundaries of proxy warfare and brought both sides to the brink of total confrontation.¹⁶

The year 2026 witnessed the conflict explode into an open war involving direct military forces from the US, Israel, and Iran. The peak of this escalation occurred on February 28, 2026, when the US-Israel coalition forces launched a massive aerial and missile assault targeting Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz. This attack resulted in the deaths of hundreds of female school students, as well as Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, along with his family.¹⁷

The loss of this central figure did not cause Iran to surrender. The Islamic Republic launched fierce and continuous military retaliation against US military facilities in the Middle East and Israel, utilizing its vast network of underground missile tunnels and drone technology to strike strategic enemy targets (Nasrullah, 2026). While some media reports indicated substantial losses on the American and Israeli sides, the coalition countered by striking various locations across Iran, devastating military, civilian, and energy infrastructure. The hostilities only began to subside slightly following mediation efforts facilitated by Pakistan (Hussain, 2026; Staniland, 2026). Nonetheless, the conflict remains difficult to resolve as all parties hold firmly to their respective stances.¹⁸

Sociologically, the 2026 war reinforces the perception that the Iran-Israel conflict has entered an existential phase. For much of the public in the Middle East, this war is no longer merely a military engagement; it has become a struggle for survival as a regime, a nation, and a symbol of resistance. At this juncture, religious, national, and geopolitical identities heavily overlap, yielding increasingly emotional interpretations.

THE RESPONSE OF INDONESIAN MUSLIMS

As war raged in Iran, its sociological aftershocks reverberated as far as Indonesia. Indonesian Muslims became sharply polarized into two opposing camps

¹⁵ “Apa itu ‘Operation True Promise’, Serangan Iran ke Israel?,” *cnnindonesia.com*, 2024; “Di Balik Nama ‘Operation True Promise’, Operasi Serangan Iran ke Israel,” 2024.

¹⁶ “Di Balik Nama ‘Operation True Promise’, Operasi Serangan Iran ke Israel”; “Apa itu ‘Operation True Promise’, Serangan Iran ke Israel?”

¹⁷ “Pemimpin Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, wafat dalam serangan AS dan Israel,” *bbc.com*, 2026; Sabpri Piliang, “Perang AS-Iran: Kematian Khamenei, dan Infinite Game,” *republika.co.id*, 2026.

¹⁸ Nashih Nasrullah, “Garda Revolusi Iran: Kami akan Balas Kematian Khamenei dengan Telak,” *republika.co.id*, 2026; Paul Staniland, “Why Pakistan is Mediating Between the United States and Iran,” *globalaffairs.org*, 2026; Abid Hussain, “Pakistan to continue with Iran-US mediation despite ‘obstacles,’” *aljazeera.com*, 2026.

of response: the pro-Iran and the anti-Iran factions. The first camp was represented by mainstream Islamic mass organizations (*ormas*) such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, Al-Jam'iyat al-Washliyah, and several others. Conversely, the second camp was occupied by a number of popular preachers, including Khalid Basalamah, Felix Siau, Ali Musri Semjan Putra, and Firanda Andirja.

The pro-Iran group tended to view the conflict through the lens of international law and solidarity with the party under attack. Muhammadiyah, for instance, officially expressed profound concern over the victims of the US and Israeli attacks in Iran, condemning the assault as a violation of human rights and international law, calling for UN sanctions, and urging dialogue and diplomacy. In its official stance, articulated in the Central Board of Muhammadiyah Statement Number 16/PER/I.0/B/2026 concerning the Conflict in the Middle East issued on March 2, 2026, the organization conveyed its deep condolences over the demise of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, alongside other casualties resulting from the US-Israeli attacks. Condolences were also extended to the civilians who fell victim to Iran's retaliatory strikes across several Arab countries.¹⁹

Muhammadiyah evaluated the US-Israeli military actions as a severe violation of human rights, international law, and a blatant disregard for United Nations (UN) resolutions. The organization called upon the UN to take immediate concrete steps and impose strict sanctions on the United States and Israel for their unilateral actions. Furthermore, Muhammadiyah urged the UN and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to promptly halt the escalation of violence in the Middle East, including the acts of genocide against the Palestinian nation, while advising both the Iranian government and Arab nations to exercise mutual restraint from further military escalation, prioritizing diplomacy and dialogue among OIC member states. This stance reinforced Muhammadiyah's consistent position of condemning all forms of military aggression in order to safeguard global peace and justice.²⁰

Similarly, the Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) expressed deep concern over the escalating Iran-Israel tensions, interpreting the Israeli assault on Iran as an indication of the international system's failure to maintain global stability. In addition to condemning the US-Israeli attack on Iran, PBNU, through its official letter Number 51/PB.01/A.II.08.47/99/03/2026, requested the UN Security Council to act justly by imposing sanctions on America and Israel for attacking Iran. PBNU also instructed its Nahdliyin members to perform *qunut nazilah* (a special

¹⁹ Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, "Surat Pernyataan PP Muhammadiyah Nomor 16/PER/I.0/B/2026 tentang Konflik di Timur Tengah dan Belasungkawa atas Wafatnya Pemimpin Iran" (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2026).

²⁰ Muhammadiyah.

supplication during calamity) for the safety of the Muslim Ummah and peace in the Middle East.²¹

A corresponding stance was declared by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI). Through a Tausyiah (guidance) Letter dated March 1, 2026, MUI expressed profound grief over the death of Ali Khamenei, honoring him as a martyr (*syahid*). MUI strongly condemned the United States and Israeli attacks on February 28, 2026, and defended Iran's subsequent retaliatory measures as a legitimate form of self-defense. Beyond that, MUI also requested that Indonesia withdraw from the Board of Peace (BoP), an initiative established by Donald Trump.²²

Meanwhile, al-Jam'iyat al-Washliyah condemned the Israeli attack, which was backed by the United States, arguing that it contradicted humanitarian values and the preamble of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution. The General Chairman of Al-Washliyah, Masyhuril Khamis, viewed the American-Israeli attack as a systematic effort to weaken Iran's strategic position in the region, while simultaneously curtailing Iranian support for the Palestinian independence struggle. Consequently, he called upon the global Muslim community to strengthen *ukhuwah* (Islamic brotherhood) in facing Zionist Israel, which he argued sought to pit Muslims against one another and occupy Palestine.²³

Indeed, support for Iran did not solely emanate from mainstream Islamic organizations. Various other Islamic groups also sympathized with Iran and condemned the American-Israeli attacks, such as the Alumni Association of the Indonesian Islamic Students (KB PII/Keluarga Besar Pelajar Islam Indonesia), which characterized Trump and Netanyahu as "bandits of civilization".²⁴ The solidarity of Indonesian Muslims toward Iran was also demonstrated through monetary donations, which amassed to over 9 billion IDR.²⁵

The stance of these mainstream Islamic organizations carries the logic that the US-Israel vs. Iran conflict is not fundamentally a matter of Shia or Sunni sectarianism, but rather about halting war and protecting human lives. The position of these mainstream groups is significant because it demonstrates that within the Indonesian Muslim community, there exists a religious authority that continues to prioritize humanitarian solidarity and international law.

²¹ Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama, "Surat Resmi PBNU Nomor 51/PB.01/A.II.08.47/99/03/2026: Mengutuk Agresi Global dan Instruksi Qunut Nazilah bagi Warga Nahdliyin" (Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama, 2026).

²² Majelis Ulama Indonesia, "Surat Tausyiah MUI: Duka Mendalam atas Wafatnya Syahid Ali Khamenei dan Pembelaan terhadap Hak Kedaulatan Negara" (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2026).

²³ Syamsir, "Serukan Umat Islam Dunia Bersatu, Washliyah Kutuk Serangan Israel-Amerika ke Iran," washliyah.or.id, 2026.

²⁴ Lia Hutasoit, "KB Pelajar Islam Indonesia: Trump dan Netanyahu Bandit Peradaban Dunia," *IDN Times*, 2026.

²⁵ Adinda Jasmine, "Donasi WNI untuk Rakyat Iran Tembus Rp 9 Miliar," *tempo.co*, n.d.; Ronald Seger Prabowo, "Solidaritas Tanpa Batas: Donasi WNI untuk Rakyat Iran Tembus Rp9 Miliar," *suara.com*, 2026.

Conversely, the anti-Iran camp constructed their arguments through a combination of theological doctrine and a sectarian reading of the Middle East conflict. For this group, Shia Islam is viewed as a deviant sect, rendering any support for Iran problematic from the outset. They also accused Iran of being responsible for the suffering of Sunni Muslims in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen through its backing of the Assad regime and various pro-Iranian militia groups. Some narratives went so far as to describe the Iran vs. US-Israel conflict as an insincere political drama.

In various viral snippets of his lectures, Khalid Basalamah urged Muslims in Indonesia not to join in defending or supporting Iran, given that the Islamic Republic adheres to Shia Islam. Basalamah emphasized that the conflict with Shia Iran is not merely a dispute over minor legal rulings (*fiqh*), but rather a divergence in the very foundations of belief (*aqeedah*). He frequently reminded his audience of the extreme doctrines held by certain Shia scholars who declare the Prophet's companions to be disbelievers and accuse them of altering the text of the Qur'an. Basalamah also cast doubt on Iran's alignment with Palestine, arguing that there is no concrete historical evidence demonstrating that Iran genuinely and sincerely defends Palestine. In his view, the war between Iran and Israel is their own private geopolitical affair, rather than a pure jihad to liberate Baitul Maqdis.²⁶

Furthermore, Khalid Basalamah highlighted the military involvement of Iran and its proxies, which he assessed as having carried out massive massacres against Sunni Muslims in conflict-ridden nations such as Syria (under the Bashar al-Assad regime), Iraq, and Yemen. In addition, Basalamah frequently connected the geographical location of Iran (specifically Khorasan) with end-times eschatological hadiths regarding the city of Yahudiyyah, the place from which the *Dajjal* is prophesied to emerge along with his followers. Therefore, he urged grassroots communities to equip themselves with sufficient knowledge and not easily sympathize simply because they witness Iran in conflict with Israel or the United States.²⁷

A similar sentiment was echoed by Nizar Saad Jabal. In one of his videos, Nizar expressed gratitude that these two "oppressive entities" were waging war against each other. Here, Nizar equated Iran with America in terms of oppression. "May Allah destroy them all," he expressed. Furthermore, Nizar asserted that Iran

²⁶ Khalid Basalamah, "Apakah Iran Serang Israel Untuk Membela Palestina?" (YouTube, n.d.); Khalid Basalamah, "Begini Respon Khalid Basalamah Soal Iran & Amerika Israel" (YouTube, n.d.); Khalid Basalamah, "Gak Usah Ikutan Soal Iran Israel" (YouTube, n.d.).

²⁷ Basalamah, "Apakah Iran Serang Israel Untuk Membela Palestina?"; Basalamah, "Begini Respon Khalid Basalamah Soal Iran & Amerika Israel"; Basalamah, "Gak Usah Ikutan Soal Iran Israel."

has never represented Palestine, because the Shia will never harbor genuine concern for the *Ahl al-Sunnah*.²⁸

Felix Siauww also cast doubt on Iran's defense of Palestine. In a viral video, Siauww stated that Iran fought against America simply because it was attacked first, not because it was defending Palestine. Siauww characterized Iran as a proxy of Russia and China used to counter America in the Middle East.²⁹ Siauww expressed hope that Muslims would not place excessive expectations on Iran to liberate Baitul Maqdis and Palestine, pointing to the nation's historical actions against Muslims in Syria and other regional events.³⁰

Although there are no specific videos of him responding directly to the 2026 US-Israel vs. Iran war, Firanda Andirja has consistently voiced highly critical views against both the regime and the state ideology of Iran through his widely circulated lecture videos over the past several years. This stance is rooted in Andirja's rejection of the Imami Shia sect, which serves as the theological foundation of Iran. Andirja also highlights conflicts across Middle Eastern nations (such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen) where militias or regimes backed by Iran stand accused of committing atrocities and oppression against local Sunni communities. Consequently, Andirja advises Muslims not to glorify Iran merely due to its seemingly anti-Western political rhetoric. According to him, the community must remain discerning regarding the danger of the spread of Shia teachings hidden behind Iran's foreign policy propaganda.³¹

WHY IT BECOMES A THEOLOGICAL ISSUE

The responses of mainstream Islamic organizations toward the US-Israeli attacks on Iran on February 28, 2026, demonstrate that the Iran-Israel conflict is not understood through a sectarian lens in Indonesia, but rather through the vocabulary of international law and humanitarian solidarity. Meanwhile, popular preachers more frequently employ a sharp, emotional language of identity, which easily leads to a moral cleavage between the "defenders of the Ummah" and the "enemies of the faith (*aqeedah*)."³² This divergence in style plays a crucial role in determining how the public understands the conflict; within the digital sphere, the form of delivery often carries greater influence than the substance transmitted.

²⁸ Nizar Sa'ad Jabal, "Menyikapi Perang Iran Dan Israel," umee_habeeba, 2026.

²⁹ Hamkazankir, "Menyikapi perang Iran vs Israel," @IslamicShorts7-y5l, 2026; Felix Siauww, "Proxy War di Timur Tengah! Felix Siauww Bongkar Dalang Sebenarnya: AS, Rusia, atau Cina?" (YouTube, n.d.); Felix Siauww, "Apa Iran Menyerang Israel Karena Pro Palestina?" (YouTube, n.d.).

³⁰ Felix Siauww, "Saya Kecewa Dengan Serangan Iran," Felix Siauww Official, 2026.

³¹ Firanda Andirja, "Inilah Gambaran Aqidah Syi'ah Nya Negara Iran" (YouTube, n.d.); Firanda Andirja, "Iran Menyokong Syi'ah" (YouTube, n.d.); Firanda Andirja, "Stop Bela Iran!! Kisah Gelap Syiah Rafidhah Yang Jarang Di Bahas" (YouTube, n.d.).

The pivotal question remains: why is this geopolitical conflict so seamlessly translated into a theological polarization in Indonesia? One compelling answer lies in the fact that Middle Eastern politics has long been domesticated through propagation (*da'wah*) networks, educational institutions, and social media platforms in Indonesia. A conflict that is geographically distant becomes emotionally proximate because it is interpreted as an identity conflict of the *Ummah*.

The most critical structural factor is the global ideological rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Post-1979, Iran exported its Islamic revolution, while Saudi Arabia exported Wahhabism/Salafism to the Muslim world, including Indonesia. This contestation has turned Indonesia into a significant arena for transnational religious discourse. Consequently, when the Iran-Israel war erupted, a segment of the Salafi community in Indonesia already possessed a ready-made interpretive framework: Shia, *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), the defense of *aqeedah*, and a deep-seated suspicion toward Iran as the "internal enemy" of the *Ummah*.³²

Sociologically, this phenomenon can be explained as a process of framing. The same event is selected, highlighted, and interpreted through pre-existing evaluative frames within *da'wah* networks. Thus, the public does not receive news of the war neutrally, but through the filter of religious authorities that have long shaped their perceptions. In constructivist terms, identity does not merely "exist"; rather, it is continuously produced through discourse.

Social media plays a monumental role in transforming a geopolitical conflict into a theological debate. In a widely circulated lecture, Felix Siauww stated, "Did Iran attack Israel because it is pro-Palestine? The answer is no." He further asserted that Iran attacked Israel "because it was attacked first," thereby reading Iran's actions as a geopolitical response rather than pure Palestinian solidarity. This quote is significant because it illustrates that the conflict is understood not only through facts on the ground, but also through how religious figures frame those facts for the public.

³² Rifki Abror Ananda, Muh. Khamdan, dan Ahmad Khoirul Fata, "Salafisme di Indonesia: Identitas dan Kontestasi Ideologi di Indonesia," *Al-Ittihad* 10, no. 2 (2024): 16–33, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.61817/ittihad.v10i2.210>; Ihsan Hamid dan Ozi Setiadi, "Arab Saudi dan Iran: Kontestasi Ideologi dan Dampaknya di Kawasan Timur Tengah Pasca The Arab Spring," *Politea: Jurnal Pemikiran Politik Islam* 4, no. 1 (2021): 129–40, <https://doi.org/10.21043/politea.v4i1.10453>; Saradiva Azzahra, "Analisis Geopolitik terhadap Perang Proksi Arab Saudi-Iran sebagai Bentuk Pergolakan Kawasan Timur Tengah," *Journal of Integrative International Relations* 5, no. 2 (2020): 114–27, <https://doi.org/10.15642/jiir.2020.5.2.114-127>; Hasbi Aswar, "Politik Luar Negeri Arab Saudi dan Ajaran Salafi-Wahabi di Indonesia," *Jisiera* 1, no. 1 (2016): 15–30, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4606669>; Ibnu et al., "Selective Openness to Modernity: The Islamic Legal Methodology of Indonesian Salafis," *Addin* 19, no. 1 (2025): 255–90, <https://doi.org/10.21043/addin.v19i1.31513>; Oki Setiana Dewi, Ahmad Khoirul Fata, dan Mahfudh Fauzi, "The Middle-Class Muslims' Responses Toward the Salafi Da'wah: A Study on Hijrah Celebrities," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik* 27, no. 3 (2024): 277–90, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22146/jsp.72138>.

The core issue is that such framing rarely stops at political explanations. Within the digital space, video snippets, sensationalized titles, and public commentary tend to shorten the distance between geopolitical analysis and theological judgment. As a consequence, the audience is no longer prompted to read the war as an interstate relationship, but rather as an enforcement of faith boundaries: who is deemed righteous, who is considered manipulative, and who is seen as siding with the “enemy of the Ummah.” Here, social media operates not merely as a distribution channel for information, but as a reinforcement machine for group identity.

An event never presents itself as raw fact; it is always selected, spotlighted, and linked to specific moral categories. In the case of the Iran-Israel war, certain Salafi preachers opt for a theological frame because it is the most effective tool for building vigilance, loyalty, and suspicion toward the Shia. Consequently, what takes place is not merely the dissemination of opinion, but the production of meaning that structures how the audience conceives the contemporary Islamic world.

SECTARIANIZATION AND THE AUTHORITY OF INTERPRETATION

The concept of sectarianization offers a sharper analytical entry point. Hinnebusch demonstrates that sectarianism in the Middle East is the product of an interaction between material power structures and regional identity contestations. This implies that sectarianism is not the primary cause of conflict, but rather a medium utilized by state elites and militia actors to mobilize support and harden dividing lines.³³ Within the Saudi-Iran rivalry, proxy wars in Syria and Yemen have reinforced the deployment of Sunni-Shia identities as the political language of the region. Other studies indicate that proxy warfare hardens sectarian divides and increases the risk of interstate conflict. Put simply, the more intensely state elites and militia actors utilize sectarian symbols, the greater the likelihood that the public will perceive the conflict as a religious war rather than a clash of strategic interests.

For Indonesia, this pattern is highly relevant because Middle Eastern discourse enters through transnational propagation (*da'wah*) channels and digital media. The public does not receive news from the Middle East neutrally; they consume it through narratives already framed by religious authorities, influencers, and ideological communities. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the Iran-Israel war is subsequently reduced to a Sunni-Shia battle, despite the conflict being substantively far more complex.

³³ Raymond Hinnebusch, “The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East,” *R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues* 4, no. 1 (2016): 120–152.

The theological narrative surrounding the Iran-Israel conflict is easily accepted because it resonates with the collective memory of a segment of Indonesian Muslims regarding the Shia, a group that has long been positioned as “the other”.³⁴ In such a scenario, the Middle East conflict is not read as a state dispute, but as a symbolic battle between Sunni and Shia. When Iran emerges as the central actor confronting Israel, a segment of the public immediately links this to the sectarian identity already embedded within prior *da’wah* discourses.

This process can be thoroughly explained through the lens of sectarianization theory. Hinnebusch demonstrates that sectarianism in the Middle East is not an inherent, standalone natural fact, but rather the result of an interaction between power structures, regional rivalries, and the instrumentalization of sectarian identity as a tool for political mobilization.³⁵ In other words, the Sunni-Shia identity gains salience not merely due to theological differences, but because geopolitical conflicts are continuously translated into religious vocabulary. Once that language enters Indonesia via social media, video snippets, and *da’wah* networks, the public receives the conflict in a format that is ready to ignite emotional reactions.

This explains why complex geopolitical explanations are frequently defeated by simplistic theological narratives. Theological narratives are easier to remember, quicker to share, and more effective in constructing a sense of group identity. Within the framework of framing theory, international events do not present themselves as neutral facts; instead, they exist as a series of narrative choices that emphasize certain aspects while marginalizing others. When the dominant narrative is anchored in suspicion toward the Shia, Iran is no longer read as a state with strategic interests, but as a symbolic threat to the purity of faith (*aqeedah*).

The pronouncements of public figures such as Felix Siauw, Khalid Basalamah, Nizar Saad Jabal, or Firanda Andirja demonstrate that religious authority in the digital era no longer relies solely on formal institutions, but also on platform reach, virality, and the ability to shape public conversation. In this context, figures with large audience bases can shift public interpretation much faster than religious institutions delivering official statements in diplomatic language. Therefore, the distinction between mainstream mass organizations and popular preachers is not merely a matter of message content, but also about the mechanism of delivery.

This comparison is sociologically significant. On one side stands institutional authority that emphasizes procedures, laws, and public responsibility; on the other side sits personal-digital authority that speaks through a direct, emotional style of preaching that is easily spliced into viral content. When the themes under

³⁴ Rifa’i Abubakar, *Pergulatan Syiah dalam Konstelasi Politik Keagamaan di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: SUKA-Pres, 2020), 390.

³⁵ Hinnebusch, “The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East.”

discussion are Iran, Israel, and the Shia, the latter style influences the lay audience much more rapidly. This explains how a geopolitical conflict can pivot into an *aqeedah* debate with astonishing speed in Indonesia.

Social media amplifies this effect by shortening the distance between authorities and audiences. Spliced video lectures, provocative titles, and short quote snippets spread far more easily than lengthy analyses that require contextual background. In the case of Felix Siauw, for example, the assertion that Iran attacked Israel “not because it is pro-Palestine” triggered immense debate because it was read not merely as a political explanation, but as a marker of ideological positioning. In the digital space, a single sentence of that nature can be weaponized to support, reject, or even declare others as disbelievers (*takfir*), depending on the community receiving it.

From the perspective of conflict theory, this situation demonstrates that what is being contested is not merely the interpretation of war, but the very authority to interpret the war itself. Dahrendorf emphasizes that conflict is inherently tied to unequal relations of authority.³⁶ In this context, the authority to interpret the Middle East becomes a competitive arena between formal institutions, *da'wah* figures, and digital influencers. Whoever holds the strongest sway over public emotion is most likely to determine the conflict's analytical frame.

Consequently, the crucial question is not merely “who is correct regarding Iran-Israel?”, but rather “who has the right to frame the conflict for the Ummah?” When the answer to this question is dominated by sectarian discourse, geopolitical conflicts will continue to be seamlessly read as theological issues. It is precisely at this juncture that the problem becomes critical: the Ummah is no longer guided to comprehend global geopolitical structures, but is instead pushed to adopt rigid theological stances against groups perceived to belong to a different school of thought (*mazhab*).

Table 1
Comparison of Religious Attitudes in Indonesia toward the Iran Conflict
(2026)

Comparative Aspects	Pro-Iran Camp	Anti-Iran Camp
Primary Actors	PBNU, PP. Muhammadiyah, MUI, Al-Jam'iyat al-Washliyah.	Khalid Basalamah, Firanda Andirja, Ali Musri Semjan Putra, Felix Siauw, Nizar Saad Jabal.
Primary Lenses	• International law • Multilateral diplomacy • Universal humanitarian solidarity	• Internal <i>aqeedah</i> doctrine • Sectarian jurisprudence (<i>Fiqh</i>) • History of sectarian conflict

³⁶ Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*.

Nature of Authority	Institutional Authority: Emphasizes procedures, official law, and written organizational statements.	Personal-Digital Authority: Utilizes social media, virality, and mass-follower-based <i>da'wah</i> .
Perception of the Conflict	• Purely interstate conflict. • Struggle for geopolitical interests. • Not a Sunni-Shia war.	• A war of aqeedah and mazhab. • Iran's political rhetoric is deemed a theatrical drama. • Deception directed at the Muslim Ummah.
Stance on the Iranian Regime	• Conveyed condolences over the demise of Khamenei. • MUI honored Khamenei as a martyr (syahid). • Recognized Iran's right to self-defense against US-Israeli aggression.	• Rejected the legitimacy of Iran's Shia ideology. • Deemed Iran's akidah deviant. • Rejected the narrative of Iranian heroism.
Specific Narratives	• Condemned US-Israeli aggression as a human rights violation. • Urged UN sanctions against the aggressors. • Called for an end to the Palestinian genocide. • Instructed congregational Qunut Nazilah prayers.	• Doubted Iran's sincerity in defending Palestine. • Brought up the massacres of Sunnis in Syria/Yemen. • Linked Iran's geopolitics to end-times hadiths regarding the Dajjal. • Urged the Ummah not to be deceived by Iranian propaganda.
Linguistic Style	• Official-diplomatic. • Measured and institutional. • Oriented toward global peace.	• Sharp and identity-based. • Direct application of Al-Wala' wa Al-Bara'. • Ignites emotional responses within the digital sphere.

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IMPACTS

The theological polarization resulting from this conflict carries several profound consequences for Indonesia. First, the social cohesion of the *Ummah* is threatened as divergent foreign policy perspectives are transformed into moral labels cast upon fellow Muslims. Second, the core Palestinian cause risks being marginalized by debates that are more preoccupied with condemning the Shia or defending specific figures rather than organizing productive solidarity. Third, the domestic public sphere becomes highly vulnerable to foreign propaganda from both pro-Iran and anti-Iran networks, each bearing its own political agenda and vocabulary. Fourth, the Shia minority in Indonesia faces a heightened potential for

increased social pressure, as the external conflict fuels domestic suspicion and stigma. In the lexicon of conflict theory, external tensions frequently trigger local-level “boundary making”, a hardening of the demarcation between “us” and “them.”

Yet, Coser reminds us that conflict is not inherently destructive. Under certain conditions, conflict can serve as a vehicle for clarifying positions, reinforcing group identity, and fostering a more conscious social consolidation. The challenge, therefore, is not to eradicate conflict entirely, but to manage it so that it does not devolve into symbolic violence and social persecution.³⁷

This phenomenon demonstrates that religious identity does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it is continuously intertwined with power structures and discursive networks. Realism helps elucidate state interests; constructivism explains how identity and meaning are constructed; sectarianization demonstrates how schools of thought (*mazhab*) are instrumentalized for political ends; and conflict theory unpacks how these tensions reshape social relations at the grassroots level.

Ultimately, the war between the US-Israel alliance and Iran is not merely a military confrontation, but also a war of interpretations. What is being contested is not simply territory, infrastructure, and missile capabilities, but the battle over meaning: who is the victim, who is the aggressor, who is the defender of the *Ummah*, and who is deemed a traitor. Within the Indonesian context, this struggle over meaning constitutes the primary engine of theological polarization.

CONCLUSION

The open war waged by the US-Israel alliance against Iran in 2026 represents the most volatile phase of a geopolitical confrontation whose roots of hostility have been deeply embedded since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. While this conflict is fundamentally a clash of geopolitical and security interests, the response emerging among Indonesian Muslims has conversely triggered a sharp theological division.

Indonesian Muslim society has become fragmented into two primary poles: mainstream mass organizations that view the conflict through the lens of international law, and puritan preachers who read it exclusively through the prism of anti-Shia doctrine. This divergence highlights the deep penetration of transnational ideological rivalries in shaping domestic religious perspectives. If left unmitigated, this polarization will continue to erode social cohesion, weaken Indonesia’s humanitarian diplomacy, and leave the nation trapped in the vortex of a conflict that is not its own.

Most crucially, the nation must maintain two commitments simultaneously: solidarity with Palestine and vigilance against sectarian manipulation. These are

³⁷ Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*.

not mutually exclusive paths, but rather twin moral imperatives that must be pursued in tandem if Indonesia is to remain a peaceful, just, and politically mature Muslim public sphere.

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