

Rearticulating Islamic Signifiers: Counter-Narratives from Pesantren for Peace

Tsabita Afifah Khoirunnisa¹, Yusli Effendi²

Postgraduate Student of Terrorism Studies at the University of Indonesia. Jl. Salemba Raya No. 4, Jakarta Pusat, Indonesia. Email: tsabita.afifah@ui.ac.id.¹, PhD Student in Contemporary Muslim Thought at the Al Mustafa International University Tehran, Iran. Email: y.effendi@ub.ac.id²

Abstract

Pesantren have increasingly become central to debates on religious moderation and the prevention of violent extremism. This study examines how Pesantren for Peace, a program initiated by the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture (CSRC), constructs counter-narratives that challenge extremist interpretations of Islamic signifiers. Using the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) within Critical Discourse Studies, six Friday sermons are analyzed to explore how key terms are rearticulated to promote inclusivity and theological moderation. The analysis identifies seven key Islamic terms frequently co-opted in extremist rhetoric—jihad, ummah, kafir, munafiqin, syahid, sharia, and caliphate. Extremist actors employ these signifiers to build hegemonic discourses that marginalize alternative meanings and legitimize violence. In contrast, Pesantren for Peace strategically redefines them through discursive strategies of nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation. These reinterpretations foreground pluralism, civic responsibility, and peaceful worship, often drawing on Qur'anic topoi, prophetic traditions, and national values such as Pancasila. The findings highlight three insights: (1) extremist signifiers remain contested and open to counter-hegemonic rearticulation, (2) discourse is a key site of power where pesantren must assert theological authority, and (3) the emergence of a "New Pesantren" identity positions Islamic boarding schools as agents of peacebuilding and ideological resilience. By situating pesantren within Indonesia's broader counter-extremism landscape, this study demonstrates their potential to generate counter-hegemonic discourse and advance sustainable religious moderation.

Keywords: religious moderation; extremism discourse; pesantren Indonesia; counter-narratives; discourse analysis

Introduction

Since the 2002 Bali bombing, pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia have been subject to heightened scrutiny, often portrayed in academic and public discourse as breeding grounds for radicalism and threats to socio-political stability (Abubakar & Hemay, 2020). This perception was reinforced by state policy, as Febrityas (2023) observes, the National Counterterrorism Agency's (BNPT) focus on religiously-based terrorist groups risked producing stigma and secondary deviance against specific religious communities. The association was further cemented by the revelation that "several Bali bombing perpetrators were alumni of Pondok Pesantren Al-Islam in Lamongan, leading to the view that some pesantren are considered to produce radicalization processes through doctrinal teaching and dogmatic religious instruction, fostering hostility towards out-groups and thereby amplifying radical tendencies within pesantren communities" (Sobari, 2022, p. 3). Such framing has generated a widespread stigma that casts pesantren as incubators of extremism. Yet this overlooks the broader sociocultural role of pesantren and their capacity to function as sites of resilience against radical influences.

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In contrast, Mukhlis & Mustofa (2020) argue that pesantren, through their traditional culture of Islamic education, possess significant preventive capacity. The emotional closeness between *kiai* (teacher) and *santri* (student) enables effective internalization of values, positioning pesantren as vital agents in countering radicalism (p. 70). This recognition of pesantren as preventive actors has also informed policy efforts. BNPT, for example, has adopted soft approaches by engaging pesantren educators and religious leaders to strengthen the internalization of national narratives (Mukhlis & Mustofa, 2020, p. 57). They further emphasize that radicalism often flourishes in educational spaces devoid of national narratives, underscoring the importance of integrating Islam as rahmatan lil 'alamin with Pancasila and Indonesia's unitary state framework (NKRI) (Mukhlis & Mustofa, 2020, p. 82).

Institutionally, this counter-framing has been crystallized through the government's policy of *Moderasi Beragama* (religious moderation). Developed as a normative response to the twin challenges of stigma and radicalization, religious moderation positions pesantren not as threats but as strategic partners in cultivating tolerance and countering extremism. As Aziz et al. (2021) explain, "religious moderation is essentially a perspective, attitude, and practice in religious life that consistently takes a middle position, acts justly, and avoids extremism in religion" (p. 70). At its core, religious moderation is grounded in the principles of justice, balance, and tolerance. Crucially, it does not entail diluting or merging religious teachings, but situating them proportionally within the broader national context (Aziz et al., 2021, p. 74). This framing underscores the role of religion as a moral resource for strengthening social cohesion. Yet the urgency of institutionalizing religious moderation cannot be understood apart from the broader global and domestic developments that have fueled the rise of extremist discourse.

In Indonesia, the evolution of extremist discourse has been shaped by both international and national dynamics, including the 9/11 attacks, the subsequent Global War on Terror, the democratic transition following the 1998 Reformasi, and a series of domestic terrorist incidents such as the Bali and Sarinah bombings. As Khan (2023) argues, terrorism itself is embedded in a colonial imagination: long before the modern discourse on terrorism was established, various forms of violence, resistance, or protest that challenged the Westphalian state's monopoly on violence were already imagined and treated as "terrorism" (p. 45). This perspective highlights how contemporary extremist narratives in Indonesia reflect both global security dynamics and deeper historical legacies of state power.

Within this context, global and domestic incidents have created fertile ground for extremist narratives that instrumentalize religion for ideological domination and political leverage. These dynamics have had direct implications for the education sector, where schools have become increasingly vulnerable to penetration by ultra-conservative religious groups (Suhadi & Sandyarani, 2022, p. 128). The persistence of such narratives, reinforced by historical and institutional factors, underscores why initiatives of religious moderation have been prioritized as counter-discursive strategies within Indonesia's counterterrorism framework.

Existing scholarship has examined how extremist discourse operates in the Indonesian context, often focusing on the rhetorical strategies of radical groups. For example, Chaqoqo & Ma'mun (2022), drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), identify recurring themes in the narratives of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), including the caliphate (*khilafah*), the comprehensive application of Sharia (*kaffah*), and imagery of the Great Imam. These rhetorical devices highlight power asymmetries and contribute to the marginalization of moderate Islamic voices. Similarly, Saehudin & Ridha (2022) combine sociolinguistic and CDA approaches to analyze ISIS-produced history textbooks, demonstrating how they function as structured propaganda tools for ideological conditioning. In another contribution, Bafadhal et al. (2020) employ corpus linguistics to compare NU Online and Portal Islam, showing how divergent online media ecosystems both construct and contest radical discourses.

Despite these contributions, a gap persists concerning how pesantren actively generate counter-narratives. Much of the literature treats pesantren either as vulnerable spaces requiring protection or as passive objects of anti-radicalization efforts. This study departs from existing literature by shifting the focus from mapping extremist narratives to analyzing pesantren as proactive producers of counter-hegemonic discourse. By examining their sermons, the study foregrounds how pesantren strategically rearticulate contested signifiers to resist extremist monopolies of meaning.

It is within this analytical gap that the Pesantren for Peace program becomes particularly significant. Initiated by the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture (CSRC), the program seeks to cultivate Islamic moderation, promote peaceful conflict resolution, encourage collaboration among pesantren, and disseminate tolerant counter-narratives to violent extremism (Humaidi et al., 2021). Unlike deradicalization, which targets individuals already exposed to radical ideologies, counter-radicalization focuses on prevention through non-coercive strategies that avoid counterproductive effects (Fadal, 2020).

INFID (2021, p. 32) identifies Indonesia’s PVE landscape as comprising five major categories—education, internet and social media, deradicalization, policy, and other sociocultural or economic interventions—with the education sector emerging as the primary locus of activity (Table 1). Of the 49 education-focused programs mapped, 37 were explicitly designed as counter-radicalization initiatives, indicating a strong national emphasis on preventive, community-oriented strategies. These interventions were implemented by 24 civil society organizations, including AMAN Indonesia, CONVEY, DASPR, ELSAM, PPIM UIN Jakarta, the Wahid Foundation, Peace Generation, and others (INFID, 2021 p. 39)—demonstrating that CSOs constitute as a major engine of counter-radicalization in Indonesia. According to Fadal (2020), the central aim of counter-radicalization is to strengthen and empower communities so they become more resilient against extremist appeals. Within this broader framework, counter-narratives serve as a core discursive strategy, directly challenging extremist messaging and providing alternative, peace-oriented interpretations.

Table 1 Number of Programs per Sector (INFID, 2021)

Sector	Number of Programs (N)
<i>Education Sector</i>	49
<i>Social Media</i>	14
<i>Deradicalization</i>	22
<i>Policy</i>	28
<i>Others</i>	31

Wahab et al. (2022) note, “counter-narratives against violent extremism are systematic efforts to challenge the influence of extremist content on the internet and replace it with peaceful content. The objective is both to prevent users from being contaminated and to strengthen their resilience against ‘evil’ narratives (p. 14)”. A core feature of Indonesia’s counter-narrative agenda is the promotion of religious moderation, which the Ministry of Religious Affairs positions as a flagship program under the National Action Plan on PCVE. This emphasis has been accompanied by measurable outcomes, according to the Ministry of Religion (2024), the Interfaith Harmony Index (*Indeks Kerukunan Umat Beragama*) increased from 76.02 in 2023 to 76.47 in 2024, reflecting improvements attributed in part to religious moderation initiatives. The Ministry further supports these gains through extensive dissemination of religious-moderation messaging, an effort aimed at cultivating a tolerant and mutually respectful society (Yusuf & Mutiara, 2022).

Taken together, these developments—alongside findings from INFID and other scholarship—demonstrate that Indonesia’s PVE landscape relies heavily on counter-radicalization and counter-narrative strategies implemented within educational and digital spheres, while comparatively fewer interventions target religious learning environments such as pesantren. This gap underscores the significance of initiatives like Pesantren for Peace, which extend counter-narrative work into spaces where extremist interpretations of Islamic signifiers often take root.

Contrary to coercive approaches, pesantren-based counter-radicalization is most effective when advanced through soft approaches grounded in values, culture, and religious education (Mukhlis & Mustofa, 2020, p. 72). From this perspective, pesantren function not only as centers of Islamic learning but also as forms of social capital with embedded infrastructures for resilience against radicalism (Mukhlis & Mustofa, 2020, p. 74). The pathway to terrorism, as research shows, is a complex journey that often involves an ideological shift among young Muslims toward increasingly conservative, intolerant, militant, or extremist worldviews (Suhadi & Sandyarani, 2022, p. 127). In this regard, *kiai* and *ustadz* occupy strategic roles in filtering transnational ideologies, as their moral authority and scholarly legitimacy are widely recognized within pesantren communities (Mukhlis & Mustofa, 2020, p. 75).

In this context, religious moderation is not merely a state policy but a lived pedagogical and cultural practice within pesantren. As Aziz et al. (2021) emphasize, moderation is internalized through curriculum, culture, and tradition that cultivate the values of *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *i’tidal* (justice) (p. 73).

These values form the normative ground for pesantren to engage in counter-radicalization. Yet the very relevance of these values becomes clearer when placed against the persistence of extremist narratives circulating in both local and global contexts.

Research demonstrates that extremist discourse in Indonesia operates at multiple levels. Effendi & Hamdi (2020), focusing on santri communities, identify six dominant discourses of intolerance, hostility toward non-Muslims (particularly Christians), enmity toward Shi’a, rejection of Islam’s compatibility with Pancasila and democracy, calls for the implementation of Sharia, and the legitimization of violence under *amar ma’ruf nahi munkar*. At a broader transnational scale, Halverson et al. (2011) outline twelve recurring “grand narratives” of Islamist extremism—ranging from the story of Pharaoh and the age of *jahiliyyah* to the Crusades and the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate—which provide a symbolic historical continuum that frames contemporary struggles as part of an eternal civilizational conflict. Complementing these dimensions, Ismail (2022) shows how extremist groups operationalize these narratives through doctrinal frames such as *jihad-qital* (armed struggle as an individual obligation) and *al-wala’ wa al-bara’* (loyalty and disavowal), as well as emotionally charged imagery of suffering in conflict zones to mobilize sympathy and resources. Together, these layers illustrate how extremist discourse blends local grievances, transnational mythologies, doctrinal rigidity, and affective appeals to sustain its ideological resilience.

Within Indonesia’s deradicalization framework, such persistence has made counter-narratives a central strategy. As Febrityas (2023) notes, the BNPT’s Directorate of Prevention has developed initiatives such as the Pusat Media Damai (Peace Media Center), social media campaigns, workshops, and print publications to contest extremist messages (p. 55). These efforts reflect a recognition that radicalism cannot be countered by coercive measures alone, but requires discursive interventions capable of destabilizing extremist signifiers. Yet, as Suhadi & Sandyarani (2022) observe, a major risk factor lies in the absence of religious education that instills a peace-oriented perspective, leaving many young Muslims vulnerable to extremist penetration (p. 127).

The persistence of extremist narratives therefore underscores the importance of counter-hegemonic efforts. Hegemonic discourse is sustained through practices that reinforce dominant meanings while foreclosing alternatives, but it can be disrupted through rearticulation. Counter-hegemonic work entails generating alternative interpretations of privileged signifiers that subvert

extremist frames. Within pesantren, kiai and educators play a pivotal role in this process, producing counter-narratives rooted in traditions of moderation. As Sukhamdani (2023) argues, the challenge is “to articulate alternative religious arguments that oppose extreme narratives—arguments that emphasize respect for life, optimism in building civilization, or other propositions that can foster biophilia (love of life)” (p. 55).

Building on these insights, this study examines six Friday sermons produced under the Pesantren for Peace program: “Jihad Is Not Identical to War” (Niat, 2022), “Implementing Sharia in a Multicultural Nation” (Supriyadi, 2022), “No Compulsion in Religion” (Fa’al, 2022), “Do Not Easily Declare Fellow Muslims as Infidels” (Mukhtar, 2022), “Democracy: A Modern Application of the Principle of Deliberation (Musyawarah)” (Lubbi, 2022), and “Diversity Is the Most Beautiful Blessing from Allah” (Hanif, 2022). Authored by educators actively engaged in Pesantren for Peace program, these sermons explicitly address both local and global extremist narratives. To narrow the scope, this study focuses specifically on these six texts as the primary corpus for discourse-historical analysis.

By distinguishing between the production of extremist discourse and the reproduction of counter-discourse, this research investigates how pesantren strategically redefine signifiers distorted by extremist ideologies. Ultimately, the study explores how Pesantren for Peace operates as a P/CVE mechanism, reframing dominant extremist signifiers to promote moderation, tolerance, and interreligious harmony, and thereby equipping pesantren communities with discursive resilience against extremism. In doing so, the study aligns with scholarship that highlights the need for preventive, soft approaches (Fadal, 2020; Mukhlis & Mustofa, 2020), the integration of national values and moderation (Aziz et al., 2021), and systematic counter-narrative construction (Wahab et al., 2022). Building on these insights, this study argues that the Pesantren for Peace program, through its Friday sermons, actively rearticulates core Islamic signifiers, producing a counter-hegemonic discourse that positions pesantren as central to Indonesia’s ideological resilience.

Research Method

Texts are always embedded within ideology and discourse; they shape and are shaped by social roles, practices, and power relations (Roshan K. & Abdullah Al Tamimi, 2025). Readers, in turn, interpret texts through these ideological lenses, which means that literature and discourse cannot be separated from the social and political contexts in which they circulate. To examine these dynamics, this study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), with particular reliance on the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). CDA views language as a social practice that both mirrors and reproduces belief systems, power dynamics, and inequality (Catalano & Waugh, 2020; Hashmi et al., 2023). In this sense, language is not neutral but purposeful, embodying conscious and unconscious discursive choices that legitimize or contest existing social relations.

Discourse-Historical Approach analyzes discourse across three interconnected levels: textual (vocabulary, syntax, and semiotics), contextual (language-in-use and intertextual references), and sociological (language as a social product) (van Hulst et al., 2025; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). A central tool in DHA is the identification of argumentation *topoi*—implicit or explicit warrants that connect arguments to conclusions—which expose the ideological assumptions underlying discourse (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). Following this procedure, our analysis focused on: (a) identifying key discursive themes or topics; (b) mapping discursive strategies at the macro level; and (c) tracing their linguistic realization at the micro level (Zappettini & Rezazadah, 2024).

This study also draws on insights from discourse theory, particularly the concept of nodal points as theorized by Laclau & Mouffe (1985). Nodal points are privileged signifiers that stabilize discourses by anchoring meaning within otherwise fluid networks of signs (Pujiningsih et al., 2023) In the context of extremism, signifiers such as *jihad*, *khilafah*, and *ummah* operate as nodal

points that give coherence to radical ideologies. Rearticulating these terms is therefore central to counter-discursive work. The identification of the seven nodal points follows directly from Halverson et al.'s (2011) twelve master narratives, which embed a set of recurring Islamic signifiers that extremist groups interpret through highly literalist and exclusionary frames. These signifiers function as the semantic anchors of extremist discourse and are repeatedly mobilized to justify violence and delegitimize pluralistic interpretations.

When examining our corpus, we found that the same signifiers also appeared as central thematic elements in the six Friday sermons. This overlap confirmed their analytical relevance and guided our consolidation of Halverson's broader narrative elements into seven nodal-point categories. This finding aligns with Khoirunnisa (2025), whose study on humanitarian narratives demonstrates that NPOs affiliated with terrorist organizations—such as Syam Organizer—deploy similarly privileged Islamic signifiers to mobilize deeply embedded theological scripts and emotional vocabularies, producing a moral economy in which donating becomes a mode of participation in a collective Islamic identity.

In addition, ideology remains a core analytical lens in this framework. Reisigl & Wodak (2016) conceptualize ideology as a socially shared worldview constituted by beliefs, attitudes, and evaluative judgments. Halverson et al. (2011) further identify how extremist “master narratives” are structured around three imaginaries: representations of current social conditions, aspirational visions of an ideal society, and strategic roadmaps for achieving that vision. These narratives illustrate how discourse functions as both descriptive and prescriptive, shaping collective identity and political mobilization.

At the methodological level, CDA is understood as both socially constitutive and socially conditioned (Macgilchrist, 2021). Analysts inevitably work from situated and complex standpoints, recognizing that discourse can simultaneously reproduce dominant power structures while opening space for contestation. As Zappettini & Rezazadah (2024) observe, even global narratives such as the “war on terror” illustrate how securitization discourses create cognitive and emotional continuity across contexts, legitimizing specific political actions. Discourse analysis, therefore, must examine not only how hegemonic meanings are produced but also how they are resisted by countervailing discourses (van Hulst et al., 2025).

Data for this study were drawn from the publicly accessible website of Pesantren for Peace, with a primary focus on six Friday sermons curated under its programmatic initiatives. These sermons form the principal corpus for analysis and were selected because they explicitly address themes of jihad, democracy, pluralism, tolerance, and interreligious harmony. The DHA framework is applied to trace how these sermons reinterpret key religious signifiers distorted by extremist groups. Particular attention is given to argumentation *topoi*, interdiscursivity, and intertextuality, which reveal how theological meaning is rearticulated to contest extremist frames. To ensure methodological rigor, the coding process was conducted using a closed-coding technique in Atlas.ti, which enabled systematic identification of interdiscursivity, intertextuality, and the discursive strategies used across the sermons. In addition to primary sermon texts, the study incorporates secondary sources including books, reports, and multimedia materials disseminated via Pesantren for Peace's official social media channels.

Results and Discussion

Themes and Signifiers in Extremism Discourse

Terrorism in Indonesia is often rooted in intolerance, where individuals and groups develop radical orientations toward difference, particularly in matters of religious belief (Subagyo, 2021). Extremist discourse consistently reinforces exclusion and legitimizes violence through recurring themes. Rosyida et al. (2024) identify two key elements: dehumanization, which denies the essence of humanity, and discrimination, which normalizes unequal and degrading treatment based on

religion, gender, race, or social class. These elements are not confined to abstract ideology but are embedded in the very structure of texts and discourse. As Wazis et al. (2020) emphasize, the construction of public discourse depends on selective representation, where certain voices are amplified while others are silenced, shaping what is perceived as “reality.”

Although Islamic teachings reject injustice, violence, and terror—and many Muslims embrace peace, moderation, and tolerance—extremist groups persist within the religious fold (Setiyono & Rasyid, 2022). Theologically, these groups rely on literalist interpretations of the Qur’an and Hadith, privileging verses that appear to endorse militancy while ignoring those that stress compassion, justice, and coexistence (Rosyida et al., 2024). Such reductionist readings neglect allegorical, metaphorical, and historical dimensions of exegesis, producing interpretations that are ideologically skewed and politically instrumental. Through this process, extremists elevate privileged signifiers such as *jihad* or *al-wala’ wa al-bara’*, anchoring their discourse around terms that lend an aura of divine legitimacy to violence.

Beyond these localized themes of dehumanization and literalism, Islamist extremist rhetoric also mobilizes grand narratives that frame contemporary struggles within a broader cosmic or historical continuum. Halverson et al. (2011) identify eleven such narratives recurrent in extremist discourse: the Pharaoh, the Jahiliyyah, the Battle of Badr, the Hypocrites, the Battle of Khaybar, the Battle of Karbala, the Mahdi, the Crusader and Tatar, Satan’s Handiwork, the Nakba, and the promise of seventy-two angels. These tropes perform three strategic functions—resistance, rebuke, and renewal—by positioning the West, modernity, and internal dissenters as antagonists while simultaneously offering a vision of restoration. As Setiyono & Rasyid (2022) observe, radical groups claiming to fight in the name of religion often discredit or excommunicate fellow Muslims simply for holding divergent views, demonstrating how these narratives perpetuate both exclusion and intra-religious fragmentation.

In practice, extremist groups mobilize their narratives not only through sermons and online propaganda but also through concrete social actions that resonate with everyday communities (Ismail, 2022, pp. 201–202). By presenting themselves as providers of social solutions—deploying search-and-rescue teams, visiting disaster sites, offering affordable schools and health services—these groups embed their ideology within acts of service (Ismail, 2022, p. 202). Such practices demonstrate that extremist discourse is not confined to rhetoric, but becomes lived and embodied in ways that reinforce calls for restoring the caliphate and legitimizing violent jihad.

Yet these actions stand in tension with Islamic doctrine, which explicitly rejects violence against others or against other religions (Fadal, 2020). Despite this doctrinal baseline, research highlights the persistence of extremist discourses in Indonesia, especially in pesantren-dense urban areas. Effendi & Hamdi (2020) identify six dominant themes: intolerance, antagonism toward non-Muslims, hostility toward Shi’a, perceptions of Islam’s incompatibility with Pancasila and democracy, advocacy of Sharia enforcement, and the legitimization of jihadist violence. What emerges is a picture of institutions—educational centers and mosques—that should nurture tolerance but instead become spaces of radical indoctrination (Fadal, 2020). This illustrates how extremist discourse migrates from abstract ideology to institutional practice, normalizing exclusionary worldviews in daily religious life.

The education sector further demonstrates how extremist discourse adapts and persists. While Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia formally includes exclusive, inclusive, pluralistic, and multicultural approaches, in practice the exclusive orientation—emphasizing rejection of other religions and resistance to local culture—remains dominant (Mustapa et al., 2025). This prevalence shows how educational content can align with broader extremist discourses, reinforcing anti-non-Muslim sentiment, apocalyptic themes, and advocacy for strict Sharia law. Here, the overlap between local and global narratives becomes visible: international discourses draw heavily on historical and civilizational conflict (e.g., Crusades, Caliphate), while national discourses target

domestic governance, religious pluralism, and political legitimacy. Both, however, share a common logic of framing alternative authorities—whether Western or local—as illegitimate and corrupt.

Drawing these strands together, this study identifies four defining elements of extremist discourse that cut across social practices, institutions, and narratives: (1) intertextual appropriation of Qur’anic verses through literalist hermeneutics, (2) argumentation grounded in eschatology and moral urgency, (3) labeling dissenters or outsiders as kafir to police social boundaries, and (4) linking contemporary grievances to historical Islamic events to elevate local issues into civilizational struggles. For example, in Supriyadi (2022) he wrote that “...in their view (extremists), a government that fails to implement Sharia as they perceive and interpret it is deemed an infidel government,” illustrating how extremist narratives weaponize takfir to delegitimize political authority. These strategies align with Forchtner’s (2021) conceptualization of discourse as a context-dependent semiotic practice, constituted by argumentation, narrative, and intertextuality.

Extremist narratives are further reinforced through distinct rhetorical strategies that render them persuasive and emotionally compelling. These include: (1) the use of historical exempla to underscore themes of injustice, persecution, and resistance; (2) cause–effect reasoning that links moral decay to divine punishment or societal collapse; (3) emotive language designed to evoke piety, sincerity, and sacrificial heroism; (4) repetition and binary oppositions (e.g., believer vs. infidel) that establish ideological clarity; and (5) satirical or polemical attacks that delegitimize alternative voices. Collectively, these rhetorical devices construct a self-contained worldview in which violence is framed as both inevitable and divinely mandated.

From this interplay of discursive and rhetorical strategies emerge three central themes in extremist rhetoric.

Table 2 Overlapping Hegemonic Extremism Discourse

Discourse	Description
<i>State and Islam Relations</i>	Extremist discourse reject secular democratic governance in favor of a theocratic Islamic State governed by strict Sharia, framing democracy as a man-made system opposed to divine law
<i>Attitudes Toward Multiculturalism</i>	Extremist discourse elevates the supremacy of its interpretation of Islam, denigrating pluralism, interfaith cooperation, and intra-Muslim diversity, thereby legitimizing intolerance toward both non-Muslims and dissenting Muslims
<i>Use of Illegal Violence</i>	Violence is rationalized as a legitimate expression of jihad, depicted as an act of devotion and moral courage, with selective Qur’anic references invoked to sanction terrorism

Taken together, these themes and strategies converge to generate a coherent but exclusionary ideology. They serve to justify violence, delegitimize alternative Islamic discourses, and advance a totalizing vision of society.

Privileged Signifiers in Extremism Discourse

Central to the coherence of extremist discourse is the manipulation of privileged signifiers—key religious and ideological terms that function as anchors for broader master narratives. As Ismail (2022) observes, master narratives are frequently employed as framing schemes to mobilize support and to justify violent action (p. xxv). By monopolizing the meaning of these signifiers, extremist actors normalize a particular articulation of identity while rendering alternative interpretations undesirable, threatening, or even unimaginable (Kopřivová & Carpentier, 2025).

In discourse theory, these signifiers correspond to nodal points—discursive signs around which other concepts, or “moments,” are arranged into a meaningful whole (Vandeskog et al.,

2022). The fundamental premise of discourse theory is that social reality is discursively constructed; thus, competing discourses struggle to impose their particular vision of the world as valid (Drousioti, 2024). According to Laclau & Mouffe (1985), social formations are structured around hegemonic nodal points, which condense multiple social relations and stabilize meaning within a given discourse. These nodal points, however, can only partially fix meaning, as discourses remain open to contestation and rearticulation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 113).

The dynamics of how signifiers are stabilized and contested can be further understood through the processes of chains of equivalence and chains of difference (Pujiningsih et al., 2023). Chains of equivalence link diverse identities and signifiers into a common front by emphasizing shared similarities, thereby creating solidarity within the discourse. Conversely, chains of difference construct meaning by emphasizing opposition and separation, distinguishing insiders from outsiders.

In the context of this research, chains of equivalence are central to the operation of extremist discourse. By linking disparate grievances—political corruption, Western hegemony, moral decay, sectarian tension—under a limited set of privileged signifiers such as *jihad*, *khilafah*, and *ummah*, extremist actors create a sense of unity that transcends otherwise fragmented concerns. This discursive chain transforms varied frustrations into a coherent ideological front, constructing “the true believers” as a collective identity set against perceived enemies. Meanwhile, chains of difference provide the strategic entry point for Pesantren for Peace’s counter-narratives. Rather than accepting the closure imposed by extremist equivalence, pesantren rearticulate the same signifiers to differentiate inclusive, pluralist interpretations from exclusionary ones.

Building on these insights, this study identifies seven nodal points that extremist groups frequently exploit—each operating across the three dominant discursive themes of state–Islam relations, attitudes toward multiculturalism, and the justification of violence. These signifiers are: (1) *Jihadism*, (2) *Ummah*, (3) *Kafir*, (4) *Munafiqin*, (5) *Martyrdom*, (6) *Sharia*, and (7) *Khilafah*. The rearticulation of these terms is central to countering extremist narratives, as it opens space for more inclusive, contextually grounded Islamic discourses that emphasize tolerance, pluralism, and peace. The articulation is necessary to maintain and stabilize hegemony precisely because it is never fully achieved (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Moreover, articulation is crucial in mobilizing subjects and interests, shaping collective identities, and configuring social relationships that contest, organize, and give meaning to social issues (Pujiningsih et al., 2023).

The meanings of *jihad* and *ummah* illustrate how extremist discourse mobilizes privileged signifiers as nodal points to stabilize its ideological appeal. As Drousioti (2024) notes, “nodal points, articulation, moment, element, floating signifier and empty signifier constitute [the] conceptual toolbox for investigating how meaning is established.” In this sense, *jihad* and *ummah* serve as nodal points that “arrest the flow of differences” by constructing a center of meaning and avoiding free-floating interpretation (Drousioti, 2024). In extremist narratives, *jihad* is narrowly interpreted as armed struggle or holy war, functioning as a theological justification for violence. Through chains of equivalence, this signifier links diverse grievances—political corruption, Western hegemony, or sectarian tension—into a single call for militant action. Similarly, *ummah* is framed as an exclusive entity, with extremist actors positioning themselves as its sole legitimate representatives. This articulation normalizes one particular construction of Muslim identity while rendering other articulations undesirable, threatening, or unimaginable (Kopøivová & Carpentier, 2025)

Other signifiers, including *kafir* (unbeliever) and *munafiqin* (hypocrite), reveal how extremist discourse constructs boundaries through antagonism. As Kopøivová & Carpentier (2025) emphasize, identity discourses are always relational, produced through dichotomies of The Self and The Other. In this context, *kafir* is deployed to designate non-Muslims as outside the legitimate community, while *munafiqin* stigmatizes Muslims who resist extremist agendas as traitors to the

faith. For example, in Mukhtar (2022) he wrote, “merely mocking adherents of other religions is prohibited, let alone the act of mocking and readily labeling fellow Muslims as infidels,” drawing on an authoritative hadith to condemn the normalization of takfir and emphasize that judgment over a person’s faith lies with God alone. These signifiers create rigid in-group/out-group boundaries, cultivating a binary worldview that intensifies polarization and fosters suspicion within and beyond the Muslim community.

Table 3 Nodal Points in Extremist Discourse

Nodal Point	Distorted Meanings by Extremist Group
<i>Jihadism</i>	Narrowly interpreted as armed struggle or holy war, functioning as a theological justification for violence; links diverse grievances (political corruption, Western hegemony, sectarian tension) into a single call for militant action.
<i>Ummah</i>	Framed as an exclusive religious community, with extremist actors positioning themselves as its sole legitimate representatives; alternative articulations of Muslim identity are rendered undesirable or even unimaginable.
<i>Kafir</i>	Used to designate non-Muslims as outside the legitimate community, portrayed as illegitimate or expendable; cultivates a binary “us vs. them” worldview.
<i>Munafiqin</i>	Applied to Muslims who reject or resist extremist agendas, branding them as traitors to the faith; sustains antagonism within the Muslim community.
<i>Syahid</i>	Glorified as martyrdom through violent acts, with promises of divine reward mobilized to normalize death in service of extremist ideology.
<i>Sharia</i>	Stripped of its ethical and adaptive dimensions, presented instead as an uncompromising and coercive legal system to be imposed rigidly.
<i>Caliphate</i>	Elevated as the ultimate political aspiration for Muslims, portrayed as the only legitimate alternative to democracy, necessitating militant struggle for its realization.

Additional nodal points such as *khilafah* (caliphate), *sharia*, and *syahid* (martyrdom) anchor extremist utopian narratives of establishing an Islamic state under rigid interpretations of law. *Khilafah* is elevated as the ultimate political aspiration for Muslims, framed as the only legitimate alternative to democracy. *Sharia* is stripped of its moral and adaptive dimensions and depicted instead as an uncompromising legal system to be imposed coercively. *Syahid* is glorified as the pinnacle of devotion, with promises of divine reward mobilized to legitimize violent acts. These signifiers structurally sustain extremist discourse in the same way that liberty often serves as the nodal point for discourses on democracy (Filimonov & Carpentier, 2023). Yet, Filimonov & Carpentier (2023) stress, discourse theory maintains that there is no necessary connection between elements of a discourse—they can always be rearticulated or disarticulated by competing narratives.

Taken together, these nodal points demonstrate how extremist discourse seeks to fix meaning by monopolizing contested religious signifiers. Through chains of equivalence, they unify disparate grievances into a coherent ideological front; through chains of difference, they delegitimize alternatives and enforce binary divisions. Yet because hegemony is never fully secured, these signifiers remain open to contestation and thus vulnerable to rearticulation by counter-discourses—

such as those advanced in the *Pesantren for Peace* program – which seek to reopen their meanings toward pluralism, tolerance, and peace.

As Vandeskog et al. (2022) explain, discourses are formed around nodal points, privileged signs around which related concepts, or “moments,” are organized into a meaningful whole. The potency of these nodal points lies in their ability to resonate with historical memory and socio-political grievances, enabling extremists to frame opposition to their ideology as tantamount to opposition to Islam itself. In this way, signifiers such as *jihad*, *ummah*, and *sharia* are partially fixed to narrow interpretive possibilities, consolidating hegemony around exclusionary and violent readings while foreclosing more inclusive alternatives.

In response, *Pesantren for Peace* engages in a deliberate process of rearticulation, strategically contesting extremist closures. In discourse theory, articulation refers to “any practice of determining relationships between elements and functioning as a group’s identity” (Pujiningsih et al., 2023). It is crucial because it mobilizes subjects and interests, and demonstrates how collective identity is shaped within social relationships that contest, organize, and configure meaning in the public sphere (Pujiningsih et al., 2023). By applying this logic, pesantren seek to dislodge the fixed equivalences produced by extremist discourse and reconfigure them toward inclusive meanings.

Through Friday sermons and educational initiatives, the program reconstructs the meanings of contested signifiers by situating them within the broader Islamic intellectual tradition and Indonesia’s pluralist national values. This process is not merely corrective but inherently counter-hegemonic: it seeks to weaken the semantic hold of extremist discourse, disrupt its chains of equivalence, and prevent the reproduction of its ideological logic. Rearticulation, in this sense, is a creative act of resignification—where terms like *jihad*, *ummah*, and *sharia* are detached from violent and exclusionary frames and reanchored in values of moderation, coexistence, and harmony. For example, *jihad* is reframed as spiritual striving rather than armed combat, *ummah* as a moral community rooted in solidarity rather than an exclusive bloc, and *sharia* as ethical guidance compatible with democracy rather than a rigid legal system.

As Filimonov & Carpentier (2023) observe, civil society actors—including alternative media—have historically played key roles in producing counter-hegemonic positions against dominant discourses and state institutions. In this study, pesantren represent precisely such social actors: deploying their authority and legitimacy to challenge extremist dominance within religious education and community spaces. Counter-narratives, therefore, become essential not only for disrupting extremist interpretations but also for reclaiming and re-grounding these signifiers in ways that affirm Islam’s teachings on harmony, justice, and compassion. As Rosyida et al. (2024) stress, “not only is the purpose of the counter to stop such extreme narratives, but also the counter shows the nature of Islamic teachings emphasizing harmony and peace as the main goal.” In this sense, counter-discursive strategies serve both a defensive role—resisting the monopolization of meaning by extremist actors—and a constructive role—advancing an alternative vision of Islam rooted in moderation, coexistence, and pluralism.

Rearticulation Strategy of Pesantren for Peace

After identifying the nodal points exploited in extremist discourse, this section turns to the micro-level textual analysis of *Pesantren for Peace* Friday sermons as part of its rearticulation strategy. Applying the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), the analysis draws on five discursive strategies—nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation—as theorized by Reisigl & Wodak (2016). Through these strategies, pesantren actors engage in rearticulation (Filimonov & Carpentier, 2023) by contesting extremist signifiers and advancing counter-hegemonic positions rooted in moderation, pluralism, and Indonesian nationalism.

Nomination involves the construction of social actors and phenomena. Analysis of sermon

texts reveals the high frequency of references to “Allah” (108 occurrences), “Islam” (71 occurrences), and repeated invocation of the Prophet Muhammad. These nominations anchor discourse in divine authority and prophetic example, stabilizing pesantren identity around widely accepted religious signifiers. Collective pronouns such as *we* foster communal solidarity, while geopolitical markers—“Indonesia,” “NKRI,” and “Nusantara”—nominate pesantren as part of the national project, not as an isolated religious enclave. Aziz et al. (2021) emphasize that pesantren have historically positioned national commitment as an extension of religious devotion, framing Islam as fully compatible with Pancasila and pluralism.

Importantly, nomination also functions negatively, distinguishing pesantren from radical actors. Sermons explicitly mention “those who want to enforce Sharia as a whole” or “some Muslims who disagree,” signaling the differentiation of pesantren discourse from exclusivist or literalist groups. This reflects Rosyida et al.’s (2024) insight that extremist discourse thrives on dehumanization and discrimination, while counter-narratives nominate inclusive subjects that expand, rather than restrict, religious belonging.

Predication assigns attributes to nominated actors. The Prophet Muhammad is consistently predicated with traits such as sincerity, steadfastness, and nobility, positioning him as the moral exemplar for Muslims. References to *Asmaul Husna* reinforce this positive predication of Islam as merciful and just. In addition, national values are predicated as part of Islamic identity: sermons describe Pancasila as a protective framework and nationalism as a religious obligation, reflecting Aziz et al.’s principle of *tawazun* (balance) between text and context, religion and state.

Predication also engages in boundary work by rejecting exclusivist and intolerant attitudes. Sermons predicate extremists as divisive and misguided, often described as those who “confuse” or “mislead” Muslims. This echoes Mudhofi et al. (2025), who show how Salafi groups predicate Aswaja practices like *tahlilan*, *Maulid Nabi*, and *do’a bid’ah* as heretical. Pesantren counter this by predicating Aswaja traditions as adaptive, context-sensitive, and legitimate within Islam’s plural interpretive framework. In this way, predication works as a site of discursive struggle over what counts as authentic Islam.

Argumentation provides the warrants that link claims to conclusions through topoi (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). Sermons repeatedly employ the topos of authority (appeals to Qur’an, Hadith, and Prophet stories) and the topos of justice (emphasizing fairness and balance) to legitimate moderation. For example, verses about *rahmatan lil-’alamin* are used to argue that peace and harmony, not violence, are the true objectives of Islam. These arguments exemplify what Rosyida et al. (2024) call the reframing of Qur’anic verses: where extremists emphasize exclusivity, pesantren emphasize harmony and peace. The argumentative structure aligns with Filimonov & Carpentier’s (2023) notion of rearticulation, or the “war of position,” in which rival actors appropriate the same signifiers to dislocate hegemonic meanings. By grounding arguments in shared Islamic sources, pesantren weaken the ideological monopoly extremists attempt to establish.

Perspectivization relates to positioning and point of view. In these sermons, the khatib situates himself within the pesantren identity (*we, our community*) while consistently distancing from extremist actors (*they, those groups*). This produces an in-group/out-group distinction, but one that emphasizes inclusivity, pluralism, and moderation as defining features of the pesantren in-group.

The credibility of the preacher is crucial here. Dewi (2023) stresses that counter-narratives are most persuasive when delivered by credible actors who can engage younger audiences. Pesantren ustaz, as Sobari (2022) highlights, are central to this process: they act as daily supervisors and mentors, embodying moral authority and building long-term trust with students. This credibility ensures that perspectivization is not merely rhetorical but grounded in lived relationships. At the same time, perspectivization engages broader identity work: as Kopøivová & Carpentier (2025) argue, identity discourses normalize certain articulations while rendering others undesirable or unimaginable, thereby reinforcing pesantren’s role as the legitimate Islamic community.

The final strategy concerns the strengthening or softening of discursive claims. Epistemic illocutionary acts intensify truth claims by repeating Qur'anic verses, employing metaphors, and invoking divine authority. For example, *jihad* is consistently reframed as spiritual striving, with repetition used to stabilize this peaceful meaning in opposition to militant interpretations. However, mitigation is often applied to sensitive topics. When addressing violence, khatib use generalized, non-confrontational language to educate without alienating audiences. This rhetorical balance reflects what Pujiningsih et al. (2023) describe as chains of difference, where contested signifiers are not rejected but redefined by emphasizing distinctions—for instance, opposing *jihad-as-violence* with *jihad-as-moral-discipline*. In doing so, sermons enact a process of counter-hegemonic rearticulation (Filimonov & Carpentier, 2023), weakening extremist monopolies over these terms and opening discursive space for moderation, coexistence, and pluralism. As (Costazolanitova, 2024, pp. 138–139) reminds us, “understanding the methods and strategies these figures employ to influence society provides the foundation for designing prevention programs that focus on counter-narratives and a more moderate understanding of religion.”

Deontic illocutionary acts establish obligations through modal verbs (*must, should, ought to*) and appeals to civic duty, often linking Islamic practice with national responsibility under Pancasila. This fusion of religious and civic obligation mirrors Aziz et al.'s (2021) point that pesantren stress national commitment as integral to religious devotion. Mitigated deontic acts, using prohibitions or rhetorical questions, soften admonitions and avoid polarizing confrontation. This again embodies what Pujiningsih et al. (2023) describe as the chain of difference, where extremist signifiers are rearticulated into pluralist alternatives—for example, reframing *jihad* as ethical striving instead of warfare, or *ummah* as inclusive solidarity rather than exclusive brotherhood. Dewi (2023, p. 10) reinforces the importance of embedding such counter-narratives in cultural and national frameworks: “Therefore, a cultural approach is needed, encouraging the public to embrace Pancasila values and sound religious literacy. The state also plays a role in counter-radicalism efforts so that systematic, measurable, and massive plans can be implemented.”

Taken together, these strategies illustrate how Pesantren for Peace operationalizes articulation—defined as the practice of organizing signifiers into coherent identities and interests (Pujiningsih et al., 2023). Extremist groups monopolize signifiers through chains of equivalence, linking diverse grievances—political exclusion, moral decay, foreign domination—into a unified front that legitimizes violence. Pesantren, by contrast, rely on chains of difference, which re-signify contested terms by highlighting distinctions between pluralist and exclusionary interpretations. This process exemplifies what Laclau & Mouffe (1985) describe as the unstable nature of hegemony: no discourse achieves permanent closure, and meaning remains open to contestation. Rearticulation becomes the central counter-hegemonic strategy, dislocating extremist equivalences and re-stabilizing signifiers within pesantren traditions of moderation, civic nationalism, and cultural accommodation (Aziz et al., 2021; Mudhofi et al., 2025). As Filimonov & Carpentier (2023) argue, rearticulation and disarticulation form the “war of position,” where ideological terrains are reconfigured rather than destroyed. By appropriating the same privileged signifiers extremists exploit and re-embedding them in Aswaja, nationalist, and pluralist frames, pesantren weaken extremist monopolies of meaning and open discursive space for alternative Islamic visions.

Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity

After examining the micro-level strategies of nomination, predication, and argumentation, this section turns to the discursive level of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), focusing on intertextuality and interdiscursivity. These concepts illuminate how *Pesantren for Peace* constructs counter-narratives by borrowing, reframing, and hybridizing discourses to undermine extremist frames and advance moderation.

In the Indonesian context, religious moderation is often articulated through three interrelated

pillars: moderation of thought, moderation of movement, and moderation of action (Fajariyah & Halim, 2023). These pillars emphasize balancing text with context, promoting da'wah through respectful and constructive practices, and situating religion in dialogue with local cultural traditions rather than in opposition to them. Such a framework underscores the importance of intertextuality—where religious texts are not only interpreted in their scriptural form but recontextualized within cultural and national narratives to promote peace.

Civil society interventions likewise stress the importance of embedding counter-narratives in community life. As Kelly et al. (2024) argue, community-based CSOs prevent the adoption of hateful ideologies by addressing underlying push factors and building resilience. Becker et al. (2025) remind us, however, that interventions require a strong theoretical foundation if they are to succeed. This is why counter-narratives cannot rely merely on slogans but must be rooted in discursive strategies that reshape meaning. Febrityas (2023, p. 55) outlines this as a staged process: identifying problems, locating the master narrative, framing it, and then constructing alternatives through reframing, counter-analogy, and strategic opposition.

Figure 1: Interdiscursivity of Pesantren for Peace's Counternarratives in Extremism Discourse

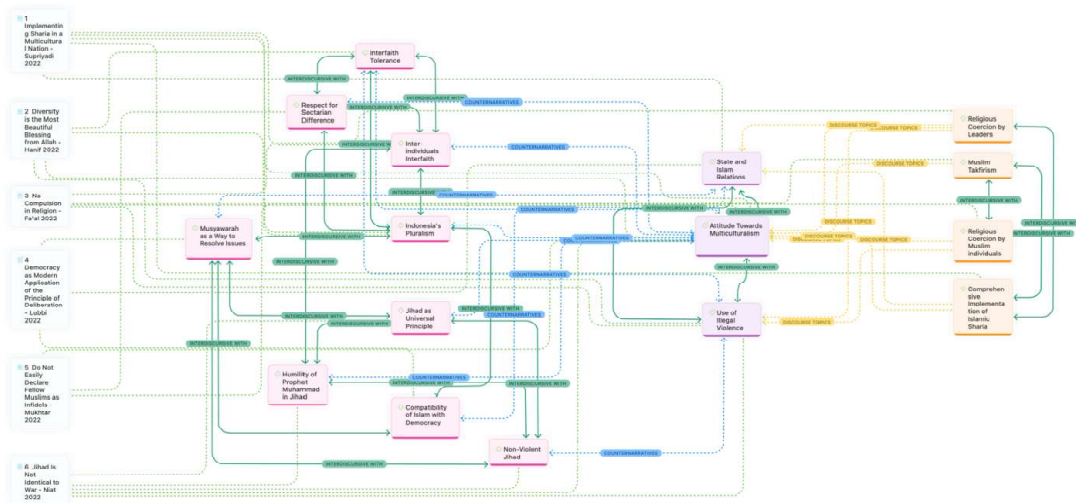


Figure 1 visualizes how Pesantren for Peace's sermons engage and respond to the three hegemonic extremist discourse clusters identified earlier in Table 2—State and Islam Relations, Attitudes Toward Multiculturalism, and Use of Illegal Violence. These clusters are represented in the purple boxes and function as overarching frames that shape the ideological terrain of extremist narratives. Each purple box then generates a set of derivative discourse topics (orange boxes), which operationalize the broader extremist frame into more specific arguments, such as religious coercion, Muslim takfirism, and comprehensive Sharia enforcement. The purple and orange boxes together illustrate the internal interdiscursivity of extremist discourse, where macro-level frames and micro-level topics reinforce one another.

On the other side of the figure, the pink boxes represent discourse topics emerging from the Pesantren for Peace sermons. These topics—such as non-violent jihad, Indonesia's pluralism, humility in jihad, and compatibility of Islam with democracy—are generated in direct response to the hegemonic extremist frames. The connections between the pink boxes and the purple/orange boxes demonstrate interdiscursivity: the sermons enter the same discursive field as extremist narratives but rearticulate contested signifiers through themes grounded in moderation, constitutional ethics, and interfaith coexistence. In this way, the figure illustrates how pesantren counter-topics intervene in, challenge, and refract the dominant extremist discourse landscape.

Table 4 Intertextuality of Pesantren for Peace's Counternarratives in Extremism Discourse

Nodal Point	Rearticulation	Discursive and Intertextual Basis
<i>Jihadism</i>	<i>Moral discipline (jihad al-nafs), da'wah, social responsibility</i>	Qur'anic Makkiyah verses, classical tafsir, Hadith
<i>Ummah</i>	<i>Inclusive solidarity across differences</i>	Pluralism, civic nationalism, interfaith ethics
<i>Kafir</i>	<i>Restraint in judgment; faith accountability belongs to God</i>	Hadith prohibiting takfir
<i>Munafiqin</i>	<i>Ethical disagreement, not betrayal of faith</i>	Islamic moral reasoning, humility in judgment
<i>Syahid</i>	<i>Moral witness and ethical struggle, not armed martyrdom</i>	Prophetic ethics, moral exempla
<i>Sharia</i>	<i>Ethical framework compatible with democracy and Pancasila</i>	Constitutional ethics, contextual fiqh, national ideology
<i>Caliphate</i>	<i>Historical reference, not a binding political obligation</i>	Historical contextualization, non-literalist jurisprudence

Intertextuality refers to the presence of other texts within a given text, which may appear as explicit quotations or implicit references (Deng et al., 2021). Both extremism narratives and Pesantren for Peace sermons draw from the Qur'an and Hadith, but with divergent methods of interpretation. Whereas extremists employ literalist and decontextualized readings to legitimize violence, pesantren preachers integrate scriptural citations with modern Islamic scholarship, Indonesian nationalism, and inclusive hermeneutics to advance tolerance. For example, Lubbi (2022) cites Qur'an 42:38 (*Asy-Syura*) to argue that democratic governance through *musyawarah* (deliberation) is compatible with Islam—an interpretation sharply opposed to extremist rejections of democracy. This reflects what Fairclough (1992) describes as recontextualization: appropriating familiar conventions but reorganizing them to yield new meanings.

Table 4 illustrates how Pesantren for Peace sermons rearticulate key extremist nodal points by reopening their meanings through ethical, contextual, and civic discourses. Rather than avoiding contested signifiers, pesantren engage them directly and reposition their meanings within inclusive, non-violent, and nationally grounded interpretive frameworks.

This recontextualization also underscores the pesantren's broader commitment to embedding Islamic discourse within Indonesia's national framework. As Aziz et al. (2021, p. 94) emphasize, "Pesantren emphasize the importance of the principle of national commitment as a form of love for the homeland, maintaining national unity, and rejecting all forms of transnational ideology that contradict Pancasila." Similarly, Mukhlis & Mustofa (2020, p. 82) note that "radicalism often thrives in educational spaces devoid of national narratives; therefore, Islamic boarding schools need to integrate the narrative of Islam as a mercy to all the worlds with Pancasila and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia." These insights show how Pesantren for Peace leverages intertextual references not only to affirm Islamic teachings but also to weave them into the civic ethos of the Indonesian nation-state, thereby positioning pesantren as guardians of both faith and national identity.

Interdiscursivity further amplifies this counter-hegemonic strategy. Sermons weave together discourses from religion, nationalism, multiculturalism, and civic duty into hybrid texts. Fa'al (2022) connects illegal violence to themes of coercion, while Supriyadi (2022) links Islam-state relations with multicultural coexistence, arguing that the legitimacy of Sharia lies not in rigid

enforcement but in upholding justice within Indonesia's constitutional framework. These hybrid constructions destabilize the closure of extremist discourse and exemplify chains of difference (Pujiningsih et al., 2023), where contested signifiers are redefined to highlight mutual distinctions—for instance, reframing *jihad* as moral discipline rather than warfare, or *ummah* as inclusive solidarity rather than exclusive brotherhood.

At a more discursive level, this practice can be understood as part of a broader counter-hegemonic project. As Kopøivová & Carpentier (2025) note, resistance can operate modestly as critique or rearticulation of hegemonic discourse, but in more intense forms it mobilizes subject positions into a common project to challenge hegemony and construct alternatives. In this sense, *Pesantren for Peace* does more than critique extremist discourse; it mobilizes pesantren identity, Islamic scholarship, and national ideology into a collective discourse that contests the hegemony of extremism.

Similarly, Filimonov & Carpentier (2023) emphasize that counter-hegemonic discourse involves rearticulating political institutions so they no longer monopolize meaning but serve pluralist democratic ideals. In the sermons, we see this rearticulation at work: the state and its institutions are not rejected as illegitimate—as in extremist frames—but positioned as partners in realizing Islamic ethics through justice, democracy, and pluralism. This reframing transforms the state from an object of suspicion into a vehicle for shared moral purpose.

Critical Insights and Implications

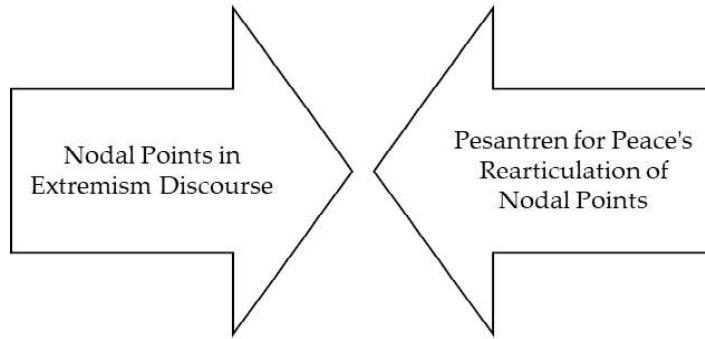
The final stage of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) involves generating critiques across three dimensions: discourse critique, social critique, and prospects. In this study, the authors organize these critiques around three major insights: contested meanings, power dynamics, and the emerging identity of the “New Pesantren.”

The presence of contested meanings within discourse illustrates how meaning is never fixed but emerges through power relations that privilege certain interpretations over others. As Laclau & Mouffe (1985) argue, hegemonic discourses attempt to “arrest the flow of differences” by stabilizing nodal points, yet such fixations are always partial and open to rearticulation. Extremist actors exploit this contingency by monopolizing religious signifiers such as *jihad*, *sharia*, and *ummah*, distorting their meanings to legitimize violence and exclusion. These distortions constitute what Drousioti (2024) describes as the creation of “false realities,” in which selective interpretations are normalized as the only legitimate truth.

Pesantren thus become arenas where these nodal points are contested and re-signified. Through sermons, teaching, and lived practices, pesantren actors engage in what Filimonov & Carpentier (2023) describe as processes of disarticulation and rearticulation: dislodging extremist monopolies over signifiers and re-inscribing them with meanings that align with moderation, tolerance, and Indonesia's pluralist national values. Chains of difference provide the strategic entry point for this work, as pesantren reinterpret the same signifiers not by rejecting them outright but by differentiating peaceful meanings from violent appropriations (Pujiningsih et al., 2023).

Figure 3 presents a comparative overview of how key Islamic nodal points are defined within extremist discourse and rearticulated through the Pesantren for Peace sermons. The left column outlines the dominant meanings fixed by extremist interpretations, which frame these signifiers in rigid, exclusionary, and often coercive terms. The right column shows how Pesantren for Peace reopens and redefines the same nodal points through ethical, contextual, and pluralist interpretations grounded in Islamic scholarship and Indonesia's socio-political framework. By placing these meanings side by side, the figure highlights nodal points as sites of discursive contestation, where extremist attempts to close meaning are challenged by alternative theological articulations that emphasize moral discipline, civic responsibility, and peaceful coexistence.

Figure 2: Contested Meanings of Nodal Points



<i>Nodal Point</i>	<i>Extremist Discourse Definition</i>	<i>Pesantren for Peace Rearticulation</i>
Jihad	Armed struggle framed as a religious obligation to defend Islam and establish ideological dominance	Moral and spiritual striving (<i>jihad al-nafs</i>), da'wah through ethical conduct, social responsibility, and self-discipline
Sharia	Rigid, coercive legal system that must be formally enforced to create an Islamic state	Ethical and moral framework compatible with democracy, Pancasila, and contextual governance
Ummah	Exclusive in-group identity that delegitimizes religious and social difference	Inclusive solidarity that embraces pluralism, citizenship, and interfaith coexistence
Syahid	Martyrdom through violent action, glorified as the highest religious achievement	Moral witness and ethical struggle rooted in devotion, patience, and social contribution
Kafir	Label for delegitimizing non-Muslims or dissenters to justify exclusion and hostility	Moral restraint in judgment; faith accountability belongs to God alone, prohibition of takfir
Munafiqin	Stigmatization of Muslims who reject extremist agendas as traitors to Islam	Legitimate ethical disagreement within Islam; humility in assessing others' faith
Khilafah	Mandatory political system required to realize Islamic governance	Historical and contextual reference, not a binding obligation in modern nation-states

First, *jihad*—appropriated by extremist groups as theological justification for militant struggle—is reframed in the sermons of *Pesantren for Peace* as spiritual striving (*jihad al-nafs*) and social responsibility. Dedication to prayer, pursuit of knowledge, and respect for parents are emphasized as the true essence of jihad. This rearticulation is supported through intertextual engagement with Qur'anic exegesis. As Niat (2022) explains:

“The term ‘jihad’ in this verse certainly does not refer to warfare, as there was no war in Mecca... the exegetes (mufassirun) explain that the jihad in this verse is not one waged with the sword, but rather with the Quran.”

Such argument further illustrating that classical tafsir interprets jihad in Makkan verses as non-violent and argumentatively grounded. By invoking normative topoi drawn from Hadith, khatib reposition jihad as a moral discipline rooted in devotion rather than a mandate for violence. This represents a clear counter-hegemonic move: rearticulating jihad within a chain of difference that opposes jihad-as-violence with jihad-as-ethical striving.

Second, *sharia*, often portrayed by extremists as a rigid and exclusionary legal system indispensable for establishing a theocratic Islamic State, is reframed by pesantren as a moral-ethical foundation already embedded in Indonesia's legal and cultural framework. Sermons emphasize the compatibility of sharia with democracy and Pancasila, arguing that its spirit of

justice can thrive without coercive enforcement. For example, in Lubbi (2022) he wrote that, “every Muslim community residing in each respective nation will inevitably establish its system of governance by considering the specific circumstances, contextual conditions, and unique historical background of its own people and state,” underscoring that Islamic governance is inherently contextual and cannot be forced into a single transhistorical model. This point is reinforced through a deontic-mitigating reminder “...it is not fitting for us to diminish the contributions of our predecessors, who established and laid the very foundations of our nation,” which appeals to civic duty and national continuity as ethical grounds for rejecting extremist delegitimization of the Indonesian state. This redefinition destabilizes the extremist articulation of democracy as tyrannical, instead positioning sharia as a flexible framework aligned with pluralism and civic responsibility.

Third, *ummah*, which extremists exploit to impose a binary confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims, is rearticulated by *Pesantren for Peace* as an inclusive moral community characterized by wisdom and tolerance. Drawing on the Prophet’s example and Qur’anic verses such as Al-Baqarah (2:256), the sermons highlight religious freedom, condemn takfiri ideologies, and frame diversity as a manifestation of divine will. In doing so, pesantren contest the hegemonic chain of equivalence constructed by extremists—which equates *ummah* with exclusion and hostility—by producing a counter-chain of difference that links *ummah* with coexistence and pluralism.

Other signifiers, including *khilafah*, *syahid*, *kafir*, and *takfiri*, are also strategically reinterpreted. Rather than accepting their extremist fixations, khatib re-signify them in ways that delegitimize violence and affirm moderation. For example, martyrdom (*syahid*) is framed as a matter of spiritual sincerity rather than militant sacrifice, while *kafir* is contextualized historically rather than applied as a blanket label to justify exclusion. These rearticulations illustrate how counter-hegemonic discourse operates within pesantren to weaken extremist monopolies of meaning and open discursive space for moderation, coexistence, and peace. They also demonstrate how pesantren, long stigmatized as potential breeding grounds of radicalism, can function instead as sites of discursive struggle—arenas where contested signifiers are reclaimed, rearticulated, and mobilized to foster theological resilience against extremist ideology.

The second dimension of critique centers on the power dynamics embedded in discourse. Dominant extremist narratives monopolize privileged signifiers, marginalizing alternative meanings advanced by initiatives such as *Pesantren for Peace*. Laclau & Mouffe (1985) argue that discourse functions to “arrest the flow of meanings” by constructing ideological centers through nodal points, thereby fixing interpretations that privilege certain worldviews over others. At a deeper level, nodal points, as Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize them, “constitute points of condensation of a number of social relations and, thus, become the focal point of a multiplicity of totalizing effects.” Their potency lies in their capacity to define the meaning of other signs, shaping interpretive possibilities and establishing realities that appear unquestionable (Kopøivová & Carpentier, 2025). Extremist discourse draws upon this dynamic by appropriating contested signifiers such as jihad, sharia, and ummah, narrowing their meanings to violent struggle, rigid legalism, and exclusive communal identity. Through this reductionist framing, extremists limit the horizons of intelligibility, presenting these terms as the only authentic expressions of Islam while delegitimizing pluralist or non-violent alternatives.

Against this hegemony, the *Pesantren for Peace* program represents a counter-hegemonic initiative that works through *chains of difference* to rearticulate signifiers with inclusive meanings (Pujiningsih et al., 2023). For example, *jihad* is redefined as spiritual striving rather than militant violence, while *ummah* is rearticulated as a community of solidarity rather than an exclusive bloc. These strategies highlight that extremist monopolies of meaning are never fully secure; they can be disarticulated and reconfigured through alternative discourses (Filimonov & Carpentier, 2023).

The credibility of such counter-narratives is central to their effectiveness. Febrityas (2023) emphasizes that counter-narratives must follow deliberate steps of identifying problems, locating the master narrative, reframing it, and producing alternatives. Dewi (2023) further argues that “the effectiveness of a counter-narrative is largely determined by the credibility of the actor delivering it and the ability of the message to reach a young audience” (p. 91). In this regard, pesantren hold unique authority: their *kiai* and *ustaz* act as daily supervisors and moral guides for santri, positioning them as credible voices of moderation (Sobari, 2022). Mukhlis & Mustofa (2020) add that radicalism often thrives in educational spaces devoid of national narratives, underscoring the importance of pesantren as sites that integrate Islam *rahmatan lil-‘alamin* with Pancasila and Indonesia’s unitary state framework (p. 82).

Despite being marginalized in the broader discourse landscape, pesantren-based counter-narratives leverage this credibility to carve discursive space for pluralism and moderation. By grounding their authority in lived religious traditions and national values, pesantren actors disrupt extremist monopolies of meaning. This illustrates how counter-hegemonic discourse, when articulated through credible voices and embedded in trusted institutions, can reframe privileged signifiers and weaken the hold of extremist ideology.

The third dimension of critique concerns the sociocultural context of pesantren. Stereotypes of pesantren as breeding grounds for radicalism persist in both public and policy discourse, shaping pedagogical practices, curricular materials, and institutional narratives, thereby heightening the risk of ideological exposure among students. Cultivating resilience through religious moderation is therefore imperative. Yet, as Fajariyah & Halim (2023) caution, moderation is often reduced to simplified definitions; a closer engagement with the *Islam Wasatiyah* paradigm—moderation of thought, movement, and action—is needed to ensure its transformative potential.

At the heart of this transformation lies the emergence of a “New Pesantren” identity, where *kiai* and *ustadz* serve as central agents of counter-hegemonic discourse. Their authority is not only theological but also social, enabling them to model and transmit moderation through dialogical methods such as *da’wah bil hikmah*, which emphasizes tolerance, dialogue, and role modeling as antidotes to extremist ideologies (Mukhlis & Mustofa, 2020, p. 118). By reframing core narratives, these educators rearticulate signifiers such as *jihād*, and *ummah* to emphasize peace, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility, aligning with Rosyida et al.’s (2024) insistence that reinterpretation is necessary to redirect Islamic teachings toward harmony rather than conflict.

This counter-hegemonic effort is further strengthened through cultural rootedness. As Aziz et al. (2021, p. 111) note, pesantren accommodate local traditions and wisdom as long as they do not conflict with Islamic teachings, reinforcing moderation through cultural dialogue. Practical initiatives, such as those pioneered by Pusat Al-Quran’s (PSQ) mosque assistance programs, show how *da’wah* and sermons can be reshaped into vehicles of counter-radicalization (Fadal, 2020). Similarly, Sobari (2022) highlights the preventive role of monitoring religious mentoring and embedding multicultural education into pesantren, while Mustapa et al. (2025) demonstrate the psychological benefits of multicultural perspectives, including fairness, cooperation, and tolerance.

Crucially, credibility is a decisive factor. Febrityas (2023, p. 81) stresses that the involvement of credible voices enhance counter-narrative efficacy through life-history methods that resonate deeply with audiences. Dewi (2023) similarly argues that counter-narratives must emphasize national values, tolerance, and moderation, while being communicated in ways accessible to younger generations.

In sum, the vitality of the “New Pesantren” identity lies not merely in institutional reform but in the active rearticulation of discourse by *kiai* and *ustadz* as credible, culturally embedded voices. Positioned as both custodians of tradition and agents of counter-hegemony, they are uniquely capable of transforming pesantren into spaces where moderation, pluralism, and national commitment are not aspirational ideals but lived practices.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how the *Pesantren for Peace* initiative employs critical discourse strategies to construct counter-narratives that challenge and rearticulate extremist interpretations of key Islamic signifiers. Through a discourse-historical analysis of six Friday sermons, it shows that seven contested terms—*jihad*, *ummah*, *kafir*, *munafiqin*, *syahid*, *sharia*, and *khilafah*—are systematically redefined using nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and mitigation. These rearticulations foreground pluralism, civic responsibility, and religious moderation, thereby weakening the discursive power of extremist ideology. The findings offer three core implications. First, the study affirms that meaning is ideologically contingent and can be contested through systematic pedagogical discourse. Second, *pesantren*, often marginalized within national counter-extremism strategies, possess inherent discursive resources to reassert interpretive authority over religious texts. Third, the construction of a “new *pesantren*” identity—rooted in inclusivity and national values—demonstrates the potential for religious institutions to serve as resilient platforms of peacebuilding and ideological resistance.

The analysis also affirms that counter-extremism cannot rely solely on state-driven messaging or centralized bureaucratic campaigns. Effective counter-narratives requires discursive ecosystems grounded in the cultural, pedagogical, and theological legitimacy of local religious authorities. State agencies such as BNPT cannot operationalize meaningful counter-narratives without sustained collaboration with local religious CSOs and *pesantren*, whose embedded authority enables them to shift theological meanings from within. Equally important is the moderation of opinion-builders—particularly preachers and Friday khatib—whose pedagogical authority enables them to shape public religious reasoning and shield communities against extremist persuasion. Leveraging this interpretive authority aligns with broader efforts to embed religious moderation across civic and educational ecosystems. Future inquiries may examine how these rearticulations are received within *pesantren* communities and wider Muslim publics, providing a clearer assessment of their transformative impact.

Situated within Indonesia’s socio-political context, this study demonstrates how theological discourse can function as a frontline defense against extremism and repositions *pesantren* not merely as institutions of religious learning, but as vital infrastructure of national peace and ideological resilience.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to enhance the clarity of the writing. After using ChatGPT, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the publication’s content.

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