



2017_11_17_Saudi Mosque in Brussels

Scholar Cites Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary's Role in Debate Over Saudi Mosque in Brussels

Dr. James M. Dorsey—a widely-recognized expert on the Middle East and senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore—recently published an in-depth analysis of the controversy raging over an attempt by “Belgium’s Parliament... to wrest control from Saudi Arabia of Brussels’ downtown Grand Mosque after three years in which Belgians played a prominent role in Islamic State attacks in the Belgian capital as well as Paris.”

As Dr. Dorsey notes in [his article](#): “A prominent Indonesian scholar, wittingly or unwittingly, lent justification to the Belgian move rooted in calls for the furthering of a more tolerant, pluralistic, European version of Islam by unequivocally linking ultra-conservatism to extremism.

“There is a clear relationship between fundamentalism, terrorism, and the basic assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy. So long as we lack consensus regarding this matter, we cannot gain victory over fundamentalist violence within Islam,” said [Yahya Cholil Staquf](#), the 51-year old general secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).”

Dr. Dorsey was quoting an interview of the NU General Secretary published by the [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#) on August 19, 2017, which generated waves of policy discourse and [viral media coverage](#) throughout much of Europe and North America. The complete interview was translated into Flemish (Dutch) and published by the leading Belgian news magazine, [Knack](#), on August 23rd.

In that interview, Yahya Staquf said:

Over the past fifty years, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have spent massively to promote their ultraconservative version of Islam worldwide. After allowing this to go unchallenged for so many decades [to our common detriment], the West must finally exert decisive pressure upon the Saudis to cease this problematic behavior.

From your perspective, what do the Saudis hope to achieve through their actions?

They’re pursuing their own political interests and agenda. Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in competition, each seeking to acquire geopolitical and religious supremacy. Iran is Shi’ite. Thus, it is politically advantageous for the Saudis to portray Shi’ites as infidels. However, when you denounce non-believers as enemies whose lives are legitimately forfeit [under the tenets of classical Islamic law], the deadly impact of such propaganda will not be felt by Shi’ites alone. Iran is engaged in similar activities among Shi’ite communities around the world. However, it is the Saudi strategy of propagating Wahhabism and Salafism that has turned the world into a powder keg [due to the fact that the vast majority of Muslims are Sunni, not Shi’ite].

Key NU figures, including KH. Yahya Cholil Staqf and [KH. A. Mustofa Bisri](#), have long been familiar with the Grand Mosque in Brussels and the extremist orientation of its leadership, which sought and failed to undermine cooperation between the NU and Western colleagues during the May 2011 launch of [The Illusion of an Islamic State](#) at the EU Parliament.

The NU and its youth movement, GP Ansor, have repeatedly urged Middle East governments to stop weaponizing sectarian differences, nurturing religious extremism and stimulating the spread of terrorism throughout the world (cf. [ISOMIL Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration](#) and the [Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam](#)).

“I view this as a positive sign,” said KH. Yahya Cholil Staqf when asked about the controversy raging over control of Brussels’ Grand Mosque. “Both the Saudis and Europeans are having to confront the real world consequences of their respective policies related to Islam. Rather than deny that there’s any causal relationship between terrorism and certain problematic tenets within orthodox Islam—such as enmity between Muslims and non-Muslims, which the Saudi religious establishment has deliberately fostered for decades—both sides need to acknowledge this problem and address it.”

The NU General Secretary went on to add, “The Saudi government should immediately cease and desist funding extremist networks and ideology worldwide. We hope that Muhammad bin Salman is serious about ‘returning Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam.’ However, we also need to keep in mind that religious extremism has already metastasized into a global threat, and that it will require a highly coordinated worldwide effort to address and ultimately eradicate this threat. The Nahdlatul Ulama is prepared to cooperate with Belgium, Saudi Arabia and other governments and non-government institutions worldwide, to contain the threat of Islamist terrorism and foster harmonious relations between the world’s diverse peoples, religions and cultures.”