

# THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

## Netanyahu unexpectedly meets with Indonesian Muslim leader

Yahya Staquf, who heads world's largest Muslim organization, says he wants to promote ties with Jerusalem, but stresses he came to affirm 'Palestine's sovereignty'

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets Sheikh Yahya Cholil Staquf, leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, at his Jerusalem office, June 14, 2018 (Haim Zach, GPO)

The leader of the world's largest Muslim organization, an Indonesian cleric and government official, held a surprise meeting Thursday with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Yahya Staquf, secretary-general of the 60 million-member Nahdlatul Ulama, is visiting Israel at the invitation of the American Jewish Committee, a US advocacy group.

Israel and Indonesia do not have diplomatic relations, and the visit has prompted protests in Indonesia.

Staquf, an advocate of interfaith coexistence, met with several religious leaders this week. However, the meeting with Netanyahu was not listed on his schedule.

Netanyahu boasted of Israel's warming ties with Muslim countries, saying "I hope that we have some movement with Indonesia."

Indonesia recently revoked tourist visas for Israeli visitors to protest Israeli actions in Gaza. In response, Israel has threatened to ban tourist visas for Indonesians.

Speaking to The Times of Israel on Wednesday, Staquf appealed for "compassion" between Jews and his coreligionists, which he said could help the Jewish state build ties with Muslim countries around the world.

Staquf was heavily criticized in his home country for visiting Israel, a country many Indonesians consider an enemy state.

Responding to the criticism, he reiterated his support for the Palestinian cause, saying his visit to Israel was aimed at promoting Palestinian independence.

"I stand here for Palestine. I stand here on the basis that we all have to honor Palestine's sovereignty as a free country," he said in a [statement](#) posted on his organization's website.

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