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Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary’s “Message to Europe” Helped Shape Public Discourse Amid the Heat of Germany’s 2017 National Election Campaign

On May 22nd, 2017 the world’s largest Muslim young adults movement, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, issued an historic declaration calling for the reform of problematic tenets within Islamic orthodoxy “in order to bring about a world in which Islam, and Muslims, are truly beneficent and contribute to the well-being of all humanity.” The [Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam](#) provides a concrete strategy and road map explicitly designed to address “obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law, which are premised upon perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam” (point 42).

The **road map** is divided into five sections, viz., “Identification and Containment of the Threat (points 40 – 66); Conflict Resolution (points 67 – 72); New Theological Discourse to Recontextualize Islamic Teachings for the Modern Era (points 73 – 87); Development and Adoption of New Educational Curricula Throughout the Islamic World (points 88 – 95); and Grassroots Movement to Build Societal Consensus and the Political Will Necessary to Resolve the Crisis” (points 96 – 112).

In June of 2017, several organizations affiliated with the spiritual wing of the Nahdlatul Ulama—including [Gerakan Pemuda Ansor](#), [Bayt ar-Rahmah](#) and [LibForAll Foundation](#)—launched a strategic messaging campaign and began implementation of the road map. In July, this messaging penetrated to the heart of the European Union, via the Rotating Presidency of the European Council. On August 19th one of Germany’s leading newspapers, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) published a hard-hitting interview with NU General Secretary Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, which promptly went viral amidst an historic election campaign in Germany.

Over the next three weeks, strategic messages embedded within the FAZ interview generated waves of policy discourse and viral media coverage throughout much of Europe and North America, as described in this communiqué. Analysis of their impact on public opinion and voting patterns in Germany suggests that Humanitarian Islam may have the potential to help reconcile policy differences and facilitate the emergence of a broad societal consensus in the West regarding Islam and Muslims.

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: “Terrorism and Islam are Intimately Connected”

“The West must stop equating a rational critique of Islamist terrorism with Islamophobia,” warned Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) General Secretary Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf in an [exclusive interview](#) with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ, August 19, 2017). Published in the wake of another [devastating terror attack](#), the NU General Secretary’s advice **resonated with a broad cross-section of German public opinion**. The [official website](#) of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany, which appears to lean to the “humanitarian left,” swiftly published an [op-ed](#) in which Volker Resing, chief editor of *Herder Korrespondenz* (*Orbis Catholicus*), declared that “[t]he present discourse on Islam suffers from an ideological overload” that reflects polarization between the political left and right, and endorsed the NU General Secretary’s conclusion: “A problem that is not acknowledged cannot be solved.”

“The discussion about Islam and terrorism is back!” [declared BILD](#), which hailed the role of “a major Islamic scholar... with 40 million followers” in facilitating discussion of this volatile issue. *BILD* summarized key points of the FAZ interview for its 2.5 million readers following a lede that proclaimed: **“It is an alarm call – from an authoritative source: ‘There is a clear relationship between fundamentalism, terror and the basic assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy.’”**

The NU General Secretary’s message was quickly translated and conveyed via print and internet/social media throughout the EU, eliciting a strong, favorable response across the political spectrum and the continent, in regions as diverse as Spain, [Belgium](#), [Poland](#), Denmark and [Finland](#). A noticeable follow-on effect also occurred, with the publication of complementary thought pieces such as [“Jihadists as the Elite Troops of Islam”](#) (FAZ, August 29, 2017), in which Dr. Suzanne Schröter cited the NU General Secretary as **an authoritative voice calling for “confrontation with ideas that legitimize violence, which circulate so freely among Muslim associations in Europe.”** Significantly, Dr. Schröter highlighted the problematic theological nexus between jihadists, Wahhabis/Salafis, Muslim Brotherhood activists and other Islamist movements, which is rooted in the idea of a “fundamental, irreconcilable conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims.”

[Viral News Chart](#)—a subscription service that publishers and brand managers employ to track the dissemination of news stories—identified the General Secretary’s FAZ interview as **one of the most widely-disseminated media stories published worldwide, in any language, during the month of August 2017.** Viral dissemination of the FAZ interview led to its publication by [TIME magazine](#) on September 7th—with an embedded link to the NU General Secretary’s July 18th [video address](#) to the [EU Council TWP](#)—and **a renewed wave of viral coverage** of *TIME*’s English-language interview.

Well-known public figures shared Yahya Staquf’s interview with millions of followers on social media and numerous websites, often accompanied by favorable remarks, such as [Richard Dawkins](#) (“An Islamic scholar who really lives up to the name. If only his kind of **enlightened Islam** predominated” – 2.4 million followers on Twitter); [Sam Harris](#) (“Well, this is refreshing” – 926,000 followers); [Niall Ferguson](#) (“Essential reading” – 124,000 followers); [Milo Yiannopoulos](#) (2.3 million Facebook followers) and the controversial website [Jihad Watch](#), which described the interview as **“vitaly important”** and **clear proof** that “not all Muslims ascribe to a victimology narrative and the ‘Islamophobia’ canard that generally accompanies it.”

Although published by a center-left news outlet, the *TIME* interview attracted major attention on the political right. A significant percentage of those who posted comments regarding Yahya Staquf’s interview appeared to agree with Volker Resing, editor of *Herder Korrespondenz (Orbis Catholicus)*, that **“The Muslim scholar is not saying [these things] to strengthen anti-Islamic sentiment in the West, but rather, to [facilitate co-existence](#) between those of different faiths. These problems must be clearly identified, in order to permanently improve relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. ‘A problem that is not acknowledged cannot be solved.’ That is very true—even amidst the heat of a national election campaign.”**

The timing and extent of media coverage within Germany—combined with a nuanced analysis of that nation’s September 24th election results—suggest that the Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary’s FAZ interview [legitimized public discourse regarding the relationship between terrorism and Islam, and thereby accelerated European voters’ abandonment of political parties that refuse to acknowledge any causal relationship between Islamist terrorism and certain problematic elements of orthodox Islamic teachings and practice.](#)

This result is in keeping with [GP Ansor’s strategy to develop a peaceful common platform and alternative bloc in support of the principles, strategy and objectives articulated in the \[Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam\]\(#\), including the need to identify and contain the threat posed by Islamist extremism.](#)