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### NU General Secretary's Historic Visit to Jerusalem Helped Shape Public Discourse Amid the Heat of Indonesia's 2018 Regional Election Campaign

JAKARTA, Indonesia: A firestorm of controversy over how the world's largest Muslim-majority nation and democracy should respond to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unexpectedly dominated Indonesia's print, broadcast and social media during the decisive final weeks of that nation's 2018 regional election campaign, which many experts view as a bellwether for national legislative and presidential elections to follow in 2019.

A long-planned [visit to Jerusalem](#) by Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf—General Secretary of the world's largest Muslim organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—triggered the controversy, when the Palestinian ambassador to Jakarta sought (and failed) to block the visit, and leading politicians from the Muslim Brotherhood political party PKS and Gerindra—both staunchly opposed to incumbent President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”)—seized upon the visit as a de facto campaign issue.

Gerindra's Fadli Zon, Deputy Speaker of Indonesia's National Legislature (DPR), [condemned Staquf's visit](#) to Jerusalem as “a national embarrassment” whose “moral depravity” constituted a betrayal of “the Palestinian people's struggle,” and demanded that the government “firmly discipline” Staquf who, just prior to his departure for Jerusalem, had been appointed to a 9-member [Presidential Advisory Council](#) with a protocol rank equivalent to cabinet minister.

Within hours the Deputy Secretary General of Gerindra—Nuruzzaman, a prominent NU figure and member of GP Ansor's Central Board—[resigned from Gerindra](#) and publicly [lambasted the party](#) for insulting his spiritual leader (Yahya Staquf) and for inciting hatred towards religious minorities through its alliance with Muslim extremists and its behavior during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election.

The controversy quickly turned into a de facto struggle between competing visions of Islam, which constitute a socio-cultural and political fault line within Indonesian society at large. Adherents of a pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual understanding of Islam tended to agree with Dr. Nadirsyah Hosen, who hailed Mr. Staquf's wisdom and courage in [an article](#) posted on the Nahdlatul Ulama's official website:

You may disagree with what Kyai Yahya did [in visiting Jerusalem]. But do not underestimate the Message of Compassion that he delivered, in order to foster world peace. This is the true Heavenly Message. You may not realize it, but the Noble Prophet was present, in Jerusalem, when Kyai Yahya delivered his Message of Compassion... Every Muslim who echoes the Message of Compassion that the Prophet taught, will be accompanied and defended by the Prophet Muhammad himself.

Public interest in Mr. Staquf's message, and the controversy surrounding his visit, dominated Indonesian news coverage for the entire week he was in Jerusalem and [remained strong](#) following his return home. [Media outlets](#) translated and published the complete text of Mr. Staquf's [14-minute address](#) to the American Jewish Committee in Jerusalem for readers to contemplate, while

an expert in linguistic analysis [evaluated the speech](#) employing computer assisted qualitative data analysis, accompanied by extensive graphics and key-word analysis, which revealed Mr. Staquf’s “courage and expertise, penetrating to the heart of Israel to strike without an army, and accomplish one’s goals without humiliating others—as taught by the saints who spread Islam in Nusantara (the East Indies).”

Employing a non-confrontational approach rooted in the Islamic tradition of *islah*, designed to reconcile opposing parties and facilitate peace between them, Mr. Staquf was widely viewed as following the example of his spiritual mentor, [Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid](#)—former Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama and Indonesia’s first democratically-elected president—who visited Israel three times and addressed the AJC Annual Forum in 2002.

Yet opposition to Mr. Staquf’s visit was also strong and highly vocal, particularly among those who embrace a supremacist interpretation of Islam and routinely weaponize problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy to serve their political agenda. When [Hamis](#) and [Fatah](#) condemned Mr. Staquf’s visit to Jerusalem, Muslim Brotherhood (PKS) politicians and cadres joined the fray, seeking to leverage the controversy for partisan advantage. This, in turn, elicited a [visceral reaction from Gerakan Pemuda Anshor](#), the 5-million-member NU young adults movement, which constitutes the primary vehicle for the grassroots mobilization of NU followers.

During the months prior to the controversy, PKS- and Gerindra-backed candidates were deemed competitive in gubernatorial elections across the heavily-populated island of Java, which dominates Indonesian politics. Islamist political aspirations were derailed, however, when GP Anshor launched a massive “[#shrinkpks](#)”/“[#sinkpks](#)”/“[#disbandpks](#)” campaign—coordinated both online and [on the ground](#)—that spread among NU followers throughout the Javanese cultural heartland and deep into West Java as well.

“PKS attacking NU *kyais*,” read [one meme](#), accompanied by illustrative news reports. “The party that betrays our people and nation,” [read another](#). “Do you think that [the best way] to defend Palestine is to curse others; demonstrate and block traffic on public streets; open bank accounts and beg for contributions, without anyone knowing the ultimate beneficiaries; shout ‘Allahu Akbar!’; and [scream](#) that the solution is to establish a caliphate?” “What have PKS leaders done for Palestine, [besides tweet](#)?” asked H. Yaqut Qoumas, the Chairman of Anshor.

“Those who attack our *kyais* and insult the NU are leaders and cadres of a party whose acronym differs in only one letter from PKI (the Indonesian Communist Party, which sought to annihilate the NU in 1950s and 60s Indonesia). Come, NU followers! [Don’t vote for PKS](#). Shrink them (beneath the 5% threshold required for parliamentary representation)!” [Another](#) meme displayed the PKS symbol alongside those of its political allies, including Gerindra, and urged: “Sink them!” Yet another showed a [young tough](#) wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the words, “Thank God I’m not PKS” as he tells a young woman, “Accuse me of anything you want, as long as you don’t accuse me of being PKS!”

The morning after regional elections, [headlines](#) across Indonesia proclaimed: “All the PKS/Gerindra ‘Roosters’ Quacked Like Ducks in Java’s Gubernatorial Elections.” As [another internet meme explained](#), “PKS elites and cadres brought about their own [electoral disaster](#) by attacking leaders of the NU Central Board, including the General Secretary of the NU Supreme Council. If anyone asks you why the NU just beat the living daylights out of PKS, answer them: ‘Don’t insult NU *kyais* and *ulama*. Obey them.’”

Islamists and their allies were not the only political actors seeking to discredit Mr. Staquf’s visit to Jerusalem. As the 2019 national elections approach, various individuals allied with the current administration have come to view Mr. Staquf as a threat to their personal aspirations, particularly

in regard to who may be chosen as President Jokowi's running mate. Two events may serve to illustrate these dynamics.

A group backed by prominent political figures obtained a police permit to demonstrate in front of Nahdlatul Ulama headquarters in Central Jakarta on June 25<sup>th</sup>, hoping to [create an illusion](#) of public unrest and a "popular demand" that the Central Board dismiss Mr. Staquf from his position as General Secretary. On the morning of the planned demo, several hundred uniformed members of Banser—Ansor's militia—[waited patiently](#) outside NU headquarters for the paid demonstrators, who [never showed up](#).

Political opponents of Mr. Staquf, operating from the shadows, attempted a similar maneuver in conjunction with a July 2<sup>nd</sup> event in Lampung, Sumatra, where the heads of regional NU chapters throughout Indonesia gathered for a national conference. External figures manipulated the agenda to include a discussion, and possible censure, of Mr. Staquf's visit to Israel. Yet once again the political elites miscalculated. When Mr. Staquf addressed the NU regional heads in Lampung, no one challenged his actions in visiting Israel. In a [well-received speech](#) to the assembled leaders, Mr. Staquf explained the "diplomacy of compassion" and stressed the importance of consolidating the Nahdlatul Ulama, to prevent external forces from manipulating the organization and weaponizing religion for partisan advantage, to the detriment of humanity as a whole.

On July 16<sup>th</sup> Prabowo Subianto—the former son-in-law of President Suharto, head of Gerindra and losing candidate in the 2014 presidential election—visited NU headquarters and publicly [apologized](#) for his subordinate Fadli Zon having insulted Mr. Staquf. "One should never insult NU *kyais*," Prabowo told the NU leadership and journalists, adding that he agreed with "Kyai Yahya's strategic maneuver, to advance Palestinian interests by visiting Israel and conducting diplomacy from within." KH. Said Aqil Siradj, Chairman of the NU Executive Board, told Prabowo: "The NU staunchly rejects the political weaponization of religion. Whatever the ostensible cause, religion may not be used as a political tool."

These developments—widely covered by Indonesia's domestic media, but [largely](#) unreported by foreign journalists stationed in Jakarta—evidence the strength of [Islam Nusantara](#) as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Mr. Staquf's visit to Jerusalem and the swift electoral "punishment" NU followers inflicted upon PKS and Gerindra suggest that Indonesia can play [a significant role on the world stage](#), if its leadership chooses to follow in the footsteps of President Soekarno—co-founder of the Non-Aligned Movement—and update its independent/active foreign policy to acknowledge and address [problematic tenets](#) of Islamic orthodoxy that serve as a "common thread" underlying numerous threats to international peace and security, including [Sunni and Shiite terrorism](#).

[These problematic tenets](#) enjoin Islamic supremacy; encourage enmity towards non-Muslims; require the establishment of a universal Islamic state, or caliphate; exhort Muslims to engage in offensive war against non-Muslims until they convert or submit to Islamic rule; reject the existence of the nation-state; prohibit religious freedom; and delegitimize laws derived through modern political processes.

Honestly and responsibly addressing (i.e., *reforming*) these problematic elements of Islamic orthodoxy is a [prerequisite to neutralizing](#) the threat posed by a wide range of state and non-state actors who weaponize these problematic tenets to advance their geopolitical agendas and threaten the very existence of Indonesia as a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state.

[Click here to read the ISOMIL Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration.](#)

[Click here to read the Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam.](#)