



## 2019\_04\_17\_Muslim Scholar's Call for "Honest Discussion" Elicits Global Response

### Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary's Appeal to "Renounce the Practice of Weaponizing Islam for Partisan Advantage" Praised for Offering a "Way Forward" in the Aftermath of Christchurch Terror Attacks

On March 25, 2019, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of the world's largest Islamic organization—Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), with over 90 million followers—responded to the brutal slaughter of 50 Muslims at prayer in Christchurch, New Zealand. Writing in *The Telegraph*, a prestigious newspaper with close links to Britain's governing Conservative Party, Mr. Staquf urged people of all faiths and none to go through the "uncomfortable" process of "resolutely acknowledging the causal factors of the violence that we are seeing in so many parts of the world," and summon the courage to ask "questions that require difficult but honest answers." The [article](#), entitled "To prevent another Christchurch, Islam must confront the attacks in its name that have radicalized the West," was welcomed by policy experts, journalists, opinion leaders and government officials for encouraging discourse about a highly-fraught and complex phenomenon that threatens all humanity.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Associate Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center—a human rights organization that seeks to prevent hatred, discrimination and genocidal violence—noted in the *Times of Israel* that, "we won't defeat burgeoning hate by embracing soothing but dishonest political correctness... Muslims, Jews, and Christians should take their cue from Yahya Cholil Staquf." [Rabbi Cooper's article](#), co-authored with historian Dr. Harold Brackman, examined how many commentators exploited outrage at the Christchurch massacre, and solidarity with its Muslim victims, to shut down discourse and thereby obstruct an honest public discussion of causal factors, while rabid anti-Semites promoted conspiracy theories, some of which claimed that Mossad or other Jews were responsible for the terrorist atrocity.

*Asian Affairs*—a monthly magazine that analyzes regional news and politics from a South Asian perspective—published a piece contrasting the "violent language" and threatening behavior of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with Mr. Staquf's measured response and concern "that the New Zealand attacks will create more hatred and division." In the [article](#), titled "Tears, Anger and Solidarity," former BBC journalist and current *Asian Affairs* Editor Duncan Bartlett observes how President Erdogan "repeatedly described the Christchurch mosque killings as part of a wider conspiracy against Turkey and Islam"; played video footage of the massacre at political rallies; and angrily blamed the West for the killings. "Turkey's president blames the West but," Duncan Bartlett explains, "other Muslims are calling for interfaith cohesion... Yahya Cholil Staquf insists that solidarity across racial, religious, cultural and political lines is the appropriate way to try to prevent [terrorist attacks]... His message to his fellow Muslims is to reject interpretations of the religion which justify hatred and violence."

Sir John Jenkins—former British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, senior fellow at Policy Exchange and co-author of the UK government's review of the Muslim Brotherhood—wrote a [Spectator article](#) titled "The Muslim leader who offers an example on how to tackle Islamism." Sir Jenkins described Mr. Staquf's intervention as "remarkable," arguing "it is time to keep our collective nerve and reject the sort of divisive, reactionary and identity-based language used by Erdogan,

the OIC [Organisation of Islamic Cooperation] and those who think that a blanket ban on what they reserve the right to define as Islamophobia is the answer... Instead, we should reassert the values of liberal democracy, encourage a franker discussion of what the roots are of terrorisms of all types, and find ways to counter murderous ideologies before they lead to bloodshed. That means speaking about the roots of the discontents of some Muslims and some non-Muslims. It also means honestly acknowledging the problems in our own traditions, not seeking to ban or criminalise criticism.”

Support for Mr. Staquf’s invitation to frank discourse was [echoed](#) on New Zealand current affairs website *Noted*, where journalist Graham Adams questioned “[H]ow can we address the accused’s ideology and motivations and engage in an honest discussion without being able to read the manifesto?” In his article, Mr. Staquf wrote that terrorist Brenton Tarrant’s manifesto—which is banned in New Zealand and its possession subject to severe criminal penalties—evidences “a fixation upon nearly 1400 years of armed conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims... a historical framework he [Tarrant] shares with many Muslims.” Adams concludes, “It’s worth remembering that in discussing the ‘ancient cycle of violence,’ this is not a casual racist or bigot talking. Staquf is an eminent Muslim scholar, who heads an influential organisation founded in 1926 which teaches that the primary message of Islam is universal love and compassion.”

Titling his article “Why banning the accused gunman’s manifesto is a bad idea,” Mr. Adams—former chief subeditor of *Metro* and *North & South* magazines—questioned whether it is “a wise move for a bureaucrat to decide the manifesto is of so little value in understanding how to prevent another atrocity that its dissemination is best left to a small, privileged group of New Zealanders who can interpret it on behalf of everyone else?” In the opinion of Mr. Staquf, the banning of Tarrant’s manifesto is symptomatic of a wider failure by Western governments to acknowledge and address the root causes of ethnic and religious supremacism, separatism and violence.

For those familiar with the history of censorship, the action taken by David Shanks—Chief Censor at New Zealand’s Office of Film and Literature Classification—offers a chilling reminder of Europe’s past, and premonition of a dystopian future in which bureaucrats, and politicians, decide what a nation’s citizens may and may not read. Criminal sanctions for possession (10 years imprisonment) or distribution (14 years imprisonment) of Tarrant’s virulently racist manifesto—or of similar propaganda generated by ISIS—undermines the ability of free and democratic societies to understand, identify and address the very real threats posed by a wide range of ethnic and religious supremacists.

Writing in the [Jerusalem Post](#), public intellectual, journalist and commentator Melanie Phillips called Mr. Staquf “extremely courageous,” lamenting that “many Diaspora Jewish leaders do not stand in solidarity with such bravery. Instead... In Britain and elsewhere, Jewish community leaders are not only in the forefront of the attempt to suppress ‘Islamophobia’ as rooted in racism, but they also equate it with antisemitism. This equation is horribly wrong... Our culture has indeed developed the characteristics of the former Soviet Union, a disorienting hall of mirrors in which everything seems to be the reverse of reality. Jews were themselves historic victims of that system (although some were also among its perpetrators). It is beyond disturbing to see that, in its modern manifestation, so many Jews have put themselves on the wrong side of the looking glass.” Days later, Ms. Phillips referred to Mr. Staquf as “a stupendously brave Muslim leader” in an [article](#) published by the world’s oldest Jewish newspaper, *The Jewish Chronicle*.

The spiritual leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama aim to unite the “humanitarian left” and “national security right” in the West to foster the emergence of the societal consensus and political will necessary to support Muslims who wish to address (i.e., reform) those obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that underlie the Islamist worldview, fuelling violence between Muslims and non-Muslims. In a [radio interview](#) with Mr. Staquf on Australian current affairs program *Counterpoint*—broadcast by ABC—presenter and former Liberal Party of Australia Senator Amanda Vanstone voiced her support for these efforts. “You rightly say that you’ve got to get on with this desperate struggle and others have to join you to reform these obsolete and problematic tenets,” said Ms. Vanstone. “You rightly conclude that the alternative is to bequeath a tragic legacy of hatred and violence to future generations, and all I can do is congratulate you and hope that others are joining you in Indonesia and in other parts of the world.”

It is perhaps indicative of the current state of affairs in the West that reaction to Mr. Staquf’s article in the *Telegraph* was markedly different on the political left and right. While many on the center-right applauded Mr. Staquf’s contribution to public debate—and echoed his warning that weaponization of the term Islamophobia short-circuits analysis of the threat posed by Islamist and white supremacist violence alike—there was a notable absence of engagement by left-of-center commentators and politicians. This silence may be attributable to a number of factors: a legitimate desire to prevent the demonization of Muslims living in the West; a reluctance to criticize obsolete and problematic tenets within Islamic orthodoxy; and/or the existence of a de facto political alliance between Muslim supremacists and the far left in much of the West, whereby Islamists and their allies weaponize Islam, and accusations of Islamophobia, to stigmatize opponents and prevent honest discussion of these vital issues.

Mr. Staquf, the Nahdlatul Ulama and its 5-million-member young adults movement, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, are on record stating that this failure to honestly acknowledge and address the obvious links between certain obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy, and terrorism, is a major contributing factor to the West’s bewildering paralysis in the face of Islamism—a supremacist ideology that seeks its destruction—and the United States’ exclusive reliance upon violence, including drone warfare and armed interventions throughout the Muslim world, to address the threat of Islamist terror.

Paul Marshall—the Wilson Distinguished Professor of Religious Freedom at Baylor University—[observes](#), in *Religion Unplugged*, that “Pak Yahya’s statements do not come out of the blue... Indonesia’s massive moderate organizations, especially NU, have been advocating this reform agenda for several years, and it reflects their views over decades.”

Describing Mr. Staquf as “among the Muslim world’s most incisive and outspoken reformers,” Professor Marshall traces the development of this agenda through a series of international summits and historic declarations, including the [ISOMIL Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration](#) (2016); the [Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam](#) (2017); and, most recently, the [Nusantara Statement](#) and [Nusantara Manifesto](#) (2018). “But the *Telegraph* article does more than repeat the themes of these declarations: it applies them to the aftermath of the New Zealand atrocity,” writes Professor Marshall, who argues that this “remarkable article... suggests at least one way forward” in the aftermath of the Christchurch terror attacks.