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Secretary General of Saudi-based Muslim World League Praises Nahdlatul Ulama Initiatives to Foster Peace and Harmony in the Global Arena

Visit to NU headquarters in Jakarta comes amid intense competition for religious and political authority in the Muslim world

JAKARTA, Indonesia: 27 February 2020. For the first time in the 58-year history of the Saudi-backed Muslim World League (MWL), its Secretary General visited the headquarters of the world's largest Muslim organization, Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). The NU was founded in 1926 in direct response to the Saudi/Wahhabi conquest of Mecca and Medina, in order to preserve the spiritual traditions of Sunni Islam by blocking the spread of Wahhabi extremism in Maritime Southeast Asia (i.e., the Malay Archipelago).

The visit comes at a time of intense rivalry between Middle East powers—including Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Turkey and Iran—for political and religious authority, as reflected in the wars raging in Syria, Libya and Yemen, and [intense maneuvering](#) to influence [governments](#) and civil society throughout the Muslim world and the West.

As reported by Indonesia's national wire service, Antara: "The Secretary General of the Muslim World League, Shaykh Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al Issa"—fresh off a 'groundbreaking' [visit to Auschwitz](#) in the company of prominent Jewish leaders—"praised Nahdlatul Ulama for its ability to foster peace by harmonizing religion and nationalism, both within Indonesia and on the global stage." Al Issa also acknowledged NU's role in defending religious minorities and preserving Indonesia from the turmoil that afflicts so much of the Islamic world.

Given the [problematic history](#) of relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Nahdlatul Ulama—which, as recently as January of 2019, [prompted](#) the [recall](#) of Saudi Ambassador Osamah Suhaibi, less than a month after he tweeted support for a mass rally of Muslim extremists seeking to topple the government of President Joko Widodo, while condemning the NU young adults movement, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, as a "[heretical organization](#)"—perhaps it is not surprising that the Muslim World League website, Twitter and Facebook feeds have not mentioned Shakyh Al Issa's visit to the headquarters of the world's largest Muslim organization.

Those who read the Saudi tea leaves—endeavoring to ascertain whether Riyadh has abandoned its policy of promoting an Islamist agenda in the Muslim world—may be interested to know that throughout his visit to Jakarta (except to the Presidential Palace), Shaykh Al Issa was accompanied by Hidayat Nur Wahid (HNW), Deputy Chairman of Indonesia's Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political party, PKS. [For decades](#), the Muslim World League and its youth affiliate, WAMY, have worked closely with PKS to propagate Islamist ideology in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, and continue to do so as of February 2020.

Since 2012, Hidayat Nur Wahid has served as Indonesia's representative to the Muslim World League, a position formerly held by Muhammad Natsir, a leader of the political party Masyumi, who sought to transform Indonesia from a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state into an Islamic state and who joined the PRRI-Permesta armed rebellion against the Indonesian government when President Sukarno banned Masyumi in 1959. In his later years (1967 – 1993), Muhammad Natsir played a central role in facilitating the spread of Wahhabi/Muslim Brotherhood ideology and movements throughout Indonesia, via the Saudi-funded organization Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII).

In June of 2018, senior PKS leaders reviled and insulted KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, after the NU General Secretary embarked upon a peace-building mission to Jerusalem. The ensuing controversy dominated Indonesian media for weeks amid the heat of the 2018 regional election campaign, and contributed to the defeat of PKS-backed gubernatorial candidates in Central, East and West Java, Indonesia's three most populous provinces.

Vigorous pushback against the PKS smear campaign was led by Nahdlatul Ulama, and especially its 5-million-member young adults movement Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, whose followers refused to tolerate radical Muslims' defamation of a revered NU spiritual leader. The Nahdlatul Ulama strongholds of Central and East Java subsequently provided President Joko Widodo's margin of victory in the 2019 national elections.

KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf told reporters that Shaykh Al Issa's meeting with the NU Central Board reflects "a shifting international constellation, and NU's success in compelling other nations to factor the NU into their geopolitical calculations. The world's [major powers](#) have [begun to realize](#) that Nahdlatul Ulama has the potential to [blaze a trail](#) that will help Muslims escape the crisis that is engulfing the Islamic world," said Mr. Staquf, "and this naturally impacts the calculations of Middle East states as well."

"Our [endeavors](#) to share the NU's vision of *islam rahmatan li al-'alamin* [i.e., a pluralistic, tolerant and compassionate understanding and practice of Islam] have been [heard](#) and [raised hopes](#) throughout the world," said the NU religious scholar, who is popularly known as Gus Yahya. "This opens a vast field for NU engagement, and we must do our very best to accomplish this noble mission. Two things are required, above all, if we are to succeed. First, NU must consistently articulate and strive to promote [humanitarian values](#) and the cause of world peace. We must not be inconsistent or unreliable. NU must truly foster the well-being of all humanity.

"Second, NU must become internally solid and coherent. The entire NU leadership must address this topic in a uniform and consistent manner. If we succeed in fulfilling these twin prerequisites for exerting a positive influence on the world stage, then we will be in a position to realize the [aspirations of our founders](#), who established Nahdlatul Ulama in order to guide humanity in a collective effort to build a more [noble civilization](#)."