Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary
at the 75th United Nations General Assembly

Hailed as key partner in an emerging values-driven alliance to
“foster respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being”

U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo:

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UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK CITY, 23 and 25 September 2020: There are growing indications that the U.S. Department of State has begun to mobilize its extensive diplomatic capacity to foster awareness of Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf and the Humanitarian Islam movement he co-founded. The Indonesian religious leader is increasingly viewed in Western political circles as a potential lynchpin in an effort to forge a global, values-driven alliance dedicated to strengthening the rules-based international order and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) at a time of increased geopolitical uncertainty and rising human rights abuse.

Over the past year, the State Department has increased both the level and intensity of its diplomatic outreach to Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), coordinating closely with Mr. Staquf on matters related to fundamental human rights, including religious freedom. These efforts are set to continue with a planned visit to Indonesia in October of 2020 by U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, his Director of Policy Planning, Peter Berkowitz, and Ambassador Mary Ann Glendon, Chair of the State Department’s Commission on Unalienable Rights. The U.S. delegation will be hosted by Mr. Staquf and Nahdlatul Ulama’s 5-million-member young adults organization, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, which co-founded the Humanitarian Islam movement.

This high-level engagement with NU leaders suggests a possible shift in U.S. policy on Islam towards Indonesia, home to the world’s largest Muslim-majority democracy and its largest Islamic organization: the 90-million-member Nahdlatul Ulama. For decades—under both Democrat and Republican administrations—the U.S. has primarily engaged with Muslim leaders from the Middle East, who are often subordinate to authoritarian governments that do not share American values or embrace UDHR.

In recent years, a rising tide of international recognition and support has begun to coalesce around NU spiritual leaders as they strive to bring orthodox Islamic teachings into alignment
with the modern world of freedom, democracy and human rights envisaged by UDHR. These Indonesian leaders are positioning their effort within a much broader initiative to reject any and all forms of tyranny, and foster the emergence of a global civilization endowed with noble character: the Movement for Shared Civilizational Values.

On Wednesday, 23 September, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo delivered remarks preceding a UN panel that featured Mr. Staquf; Ambassador Mary Ann Glendon; and Hu Ping, a distinguished philosopher within the Confucian tradition and survivor of China’s cultural revolution. Titled “Promoting and Protecting Human Rights: A Re-Dedication to the Universal Declaration,” the panel was moderated by Robert A. Destro, Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.

On Friday, 25 September, Mr. Staquf joined U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel Brownback on a second UN panel, titled “Answering the Call to Protect Religious Freedom – A Year in Review.” During his appearance, Mr. Staquf discussed the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative, which he helped launch in January of 2020 at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

The following text highlights significant contributions made by various speakers during the two UN panels.

**September 23, 2020**

**Promoting and Protecting Human Rights: A Re-Dedication to the Universal Declaration**

“As we all know,” said Ambassador Craft when introducing the hour-long session, “the UN is a reflection of its membership, and on human rights matters, far too many member states fall short of their commitments to the Universal Declaration. And so, it has never been more important for the responsible nations of the world to return to their commitments made through the Universal Declaration, and give renewed emphasis to human rights in everything the UN does.”

Secretary Pompeo observed that “[t]he UDHR’s first line reads as follows: ‘Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.’ Those words echo America’s Declaration of Independence, which states that the purpose of our government is to secure unalienable rights, the rights inherent in all persons. The UDHR also drew on the wisdom of the Abrahamic faiths, Confucianism, Hinduism and other religious, philosophical and political traditions.

“We must defend human rights today because the international human rights project is in crisis. Authoritarian governments from China, to Iran, to Venezuela are depriving our fellow human beings of their basic rights. Meanwhile, many multinational organizations have lost their way, focusing on partisan policy preferences while failing to defend fundamental rights. And even many well-intentioned people assert novel rights that often conflict. To uphold universal human rights we should look to the framers of UDHR, who identified a clear set of principles that apply to all people, everywhere and at all times. They stood unwaveringly in defense of the dignity of every human being and so, too, should we.”
“To help us do that I convened the U.S. State Department’s Commission on Unalienable Rights. The Commission found in the American constitutional tradition, wide and deep support for unalienable rights. We hope that the Commission’s recently published report will serve as an inspiration to other nations and to peoples all across the world. They should turn to their traditions and re-dedicate themselves to their moral, philosophical and religious [principles], to affirm the rights inherent in all persons: the rights at the core of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This work is vital. We must rediscover the nature of human rights and we must have the courage to defend them. Your presence here today gives me great confidence that we are up to that task.”

Assistant Secretary Destro introduced Mr. Staquf as “a distinguished Muslim scholar and the co-founder of a global movement, Humanitarian Islam, that seeks to reform obsolete tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that enjoin religious hatred, supremacy and violence, by restoring universal love and compassion (rahmah) to its rightful place as the primary message of Islam. As General Secretary of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama—the world’s largest Muslim organization, with over [90] million members and 14,000 madrasahs—Mr. Staquf is bringing the civilizational wisdom and spiritual authority of Islam Nusantara (East Indies Islam) to the world stage, where a harsh, repressive and all-too-often violent understanding of Islam has predominated for decades.”

In response to Mr. Destro’s opening question—“Do you believe that the aspirations of UDHR are in alignment with the aspirations of Islam?”—Mr. Staquf replied that “the message of Islam was delivered by the Prophet Muhammed (saw.) for the sole purpose of inculcating noble character, and thereby perfecting the moral framework of humanity. The primary message of Islam is rahmah, or universal love and compassion [as stated in Qur’an 21:107]. As we can see from this message, the fundamental aspiration of Islam is in full alignment with that of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

“During the course of history, there naturally occurred a struggle between Islam’s universal civilizational aspiration, which transcends time and place, and its actual manifestation in the world, which was conditioned by time and place. This process has resulted in institutions and expressions of Islam that are not perfect, but which were nevertheless motivated by noble aspirations.

“We are entering an era in which all human beings are collectively participating in the creation of a single, interfused, global civilization without the clear-cut divisions between peoples that existed in the past. If the outcome of this process is to be positive for humanity at large, we must address the pressing needs of the moment and embrace UDHR, acknowledging its aspirations and building upon its achievement to develop consensus regarding shared values that should characterize our future global civilization.”

Assistant Secretary Destro asked Confucianist scholar Hu Ping, “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts human rights into two categories: civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights on the other. How do you see these two categories?”

Mr. Ping replied, “Personally and technically speaking, only rights in the first category are human rights in the fundamental sense. Rights in the second category are actually human welfare, or benefits. The former are inherent to human beings. They can be attained naturally
so long as a government does not bar or suppress them, whereas the fulfillment of the latter requires active government intervention and action.

“I, of course, am not opposed to government providing necessary welfare, but I disagree on confusing rights with welfare. Since no one country can achieve perfection in welfare provision, if we confuse the two categories we will be led to imagine that the difference between various countries’ human rights record is just a matter of degree, not a matter of nature.

“Take, for example, social programs such as education and healthcare: the United States cannot be said to be free of flaws, and China cannot be said to lack achievements. Hence, the difference in this regard is only a matter of degree. However, the U.S. has freedom of speech, China does not. This is a difference in nature. It’s exactly because of this difference that we say the U.S. is a country that respects and protects human rights, whereas China is a country that disregards and tramples on human rights.

“I view fundamental human rights—rights that are innate and unalienable to a person—as especially important. Freedom of speech is an unalienable right. I have many friends from Mainland China who have been granted political asylum but are not U.S. citizens. Therefore, they do not have the full-fledged rights of a U.S. citizen, which includes the right to vote in a Presidential election. But they all enjoy the right to free speech. They are truly free people living in a free country. In contrast, they are deprived of the right to free speech in authoritarian China, living under Communist rule.”

“I’d like to end,” said Ambassador Glendon, “by recalling the hopes of the framers of the UDHR that the common standard—the very abstract common standard set by that document—would inspire a kind of ‘competition in excellence’ among the member nations, and that [this, in turn,] would provide us with a collection of examples of different ways in which that common standard and those very abstract principles could be brought to life within different cultures and traditions. Examples of how well each country, if it was giving itself a report card, was progressing in the aim of providing better standards of life and larger freedom for its citizens. It’s good to remember that human rights, after all, are just words on paper unless they are brought to life within rights-respecting cultures protected by laws and institutions.”

“I’d like to emphasize what Professor Glendon has said,” concurred Mr. Staquf. “UDHR identifies fundamental values that we must struggle to realize, if we are to have a just and prosperous future. There is no country on earth that has yet succeeded in perfectly applying the principles of UDHR. Take the basic aspirations of Islam, for example. Even today, 1,400 years after the revelation, Muslim communities struggle to understand and manifest Islam’s noble aspirations for humanity…

“Nevertheless, these foundational ideals should not be forgotten, even though we still have far to go before they become reality. Similarly, in America—while the U.S. Constitution embodies universal aspirations—its adoption did not abolish slavery. The U.S. had to await Abraham Lincoln and endure a bloody civil war before slavery came to an end. In Indonesia, too, we have yet to fully attain the ideals that our founders expressed and embodied within our Constitution at the time of Indonesian independence…

“In truth, people everywhere wish to live free and dignified lives, and have their rights respected by others. If we are to bring this about, people of goodwill of every faith and nation
must establish a consensus regarding shared civilizational values and strive together to make this a reality. We face many obstacles. First, we must renounce the political weaponization of religion and other group identities… Second, we must end the weaponization of history, which is so long and tragic that every identity group and every individual can find a reason to hate others and desire revenge for past events… Instead of indulging these resentments, we need to honestly evaluate the collective problems we face today and identify solutions. If we do not take this essential first step—that is, honestly acknowledging the problems we face—we will not find solutions.”

**September 25, 2020**

**Answering the Call to Protect Religious Freedom: A Year in Review**

In his prefatory remarks introducing a 2-hour panel discussion on the state of international religious freedom, Ambassador Brownback hailed Nahdlatul Ulama’s “important work,” saying “I would like to note in particular my friend Pak Yahya from Indonesia—who is the General Secretary of the largest independent Islamic organization in the world. He will provide an overview of the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative… [and] tell us what’s in store for the future.”

Excerpts of Mr. Staquf’s remarks, as revised and edited for publication, may be read below.

“Humanity is witnessing the gradual emergence of a single, interfused, global civilization whose constituent elements retain their distinctive characteristics. In this new reality—where people of diverse ethnicities and creeds live side by side in unprecedented numbers—we can simply no longer afford to repeat the devastating, identity-based conflicts of the past. We live in an age of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction. In such conditions, religious conflict could easily spiral out of control and cause a global cataclysm.

“To avoid such a tragic outcome, we must foster a truly global consensus regarding shared civilizational values that all of humanity can collectively embrace. It is this noble objective that the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative should pursue in the future, and I am pleased to report that we have formed a core working group of Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith leaders to begin this endeavor.

“Our first act will be to produce a charter that identifies the fundamental principles upon which the Abrahamic faiths can reach consensus. This is not only a matter of vital theological importance, but is also key to any strategy that seeks to transform our religious communities so that they may have a more tolerant and peaceful attitude towards one another.

“This initiative should subsequently be expanded beyond the Abrahamic traditions to include all faiths—such as Hinduism and Buddhism—so that religion may serve its proper function as a source of universal peace and harmony, rather than division and conflict.”