



Muslim World League: Forum on Common Values

At Saudi Conference, NU Chairman Invites Religious Leaders to Develop a Strategy for Transforming the Mindset of Religious Communities Worldwide

“Many religious communities still view the relationship between religions as a form of political competition. Hence, it is no surprise that religion is often used as a political weapon to acquire or retain power.”

Will Saudi Arabia sever its long-standing ties with Indonesian groups that seek to establish an Islamic state?

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — May 12, 2022: For the first time in its 61-year history, the Saudi-funded Muslim World League has chosen to engage substantively with the world’s largest Muslim organization — Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama — and convey NU’s message of religious pluralism and tolerance to Muslims worldwide.

Long known for spending billions of dollars to promote ultra-conservative Sunni Islam, in recent years the Muslim World League (MWL) has begun to shift its messaging and modes of engagement under the leadership of Dr. Mohammad bin Abdulkarim al-Issa, who was appointed Secretary General of MWL in 2016.

On May 11 – 12, 2022, the Muslim World League convened 90 religious leaders for the Forum on Common Values among Religious Followers. Participants included 47 Muslim scholars, 24 Christian leaders, 12 rabbis and 7 Hindu and Buddhist figures.

As reported by Religion News Service, “The Forum, for the first time in history, convened within Saudi Arabia Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist religious leaders alongside Islamic leaders to explore shared values and a common global vision for interfaith cooperation.”

Attendees and speakers at the conference included Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State; His Holiness Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch and spiritual leader to 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide; Banagala Upatissa Thero, President of the (Buddhist) Mahabodhi society of Sri Lanka; Bishop Thomas Schirrmacher, Secretary General and CEO of the World Evangelical Alliance; and KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Chairman of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama.

Indonesian media including *Kompas*, the nation’s largest newspaper, reported on the forum in Riyadh, noting that NU Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf

urged the world’s religious leaders to develop a strategy for transforming the mindset of religious communities globally... In [Mr. Staquf’s] opinion, many religious communities still view the relationship between religions as a form of political competition. Hence, it is no surprise that religion is often used as a political weapon to acquire or retain power. This prevailing mindset must be changed, or it will destroy social harmony between religious communities and render it impossible for those of different faiths to live peacefully side by side...

Yahya also emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue as the basis for creating cooperation between followers of different faiths. “Last year (2021) I delivered a speech at the [International Religious Freedom Summit](#) in Washington, DC, discussing the importance of identifying the values we all share as a foundation for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. And today we gather for that purpose,” said Yahya.

Nahdlatul Ulama’s involvement in the Forum on Common Values represents a potential turning point in the Muslim World League’s engagement with Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim-majority nation and democracy. For nearly sixty years, the MWL has worked closely with Islamists who sought to transform Indonesia from a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state into a de facto Islamic state.

Indonesian members of the Muslim World League’s Supreme Council have included Mohammad Natsir, whom President Sukarno jailed for his participation in the Islamist PRRI-Permesta armed rebellion, which sought to overthrow the Indonesian government, and Islamist politician Hidayat Nur Wahid. Mr. Wahid co-founded and remains a prominent figure within Indonesia’s virulently antisemitic Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political party, PKS, which seeks to destroy Indonesia’s traditionally pluralistic and tolerant understanding and practice of Islam.

As documented in the book [The Illusion of an Islamic State](#), PKS cadres often view democracy as a vehicle to transform Indonesia from a multi-religious and pluralistic nation state into an Islamic state or transnational caliphate. Hence, it is not surprising that many PKS schools refuse to hold Indonesian flag raising ceremonies or to sing the national anthem, which is standard practice in Indonesian public and private schools.

A text authored by a senior PKS figure, long used to train party cadres, contains the following antisemitic tropes [*TRIGGER WARNING: extreme antisemitic language*]:

“Four thousand Jewish employees who worked at the World Trade Center building stayed home from work on the day of the tragedy; in fact, before the attack occurred, Jews had purchased the WTC building in order to profit from the subsequent insurance payout... Jewish history is full of cruelty, including slavery, vicious oppression, arrogance, extreme partisanship, blind fanaticism, implacable greed, usury and other despicable behavior, such as licking the feet of those in power, trickery, hypocrisy, rotten intentions, hard-headedness, seizing the wealth of others through deception and preventing people from entering the path of Islam.” (*Jews as the Party of Satan, Which Rules the World*, quoted by Burhanuddin Muhtadi in his book, [Dilema PKS](#))

Significantly, Hidayat Nur Wahid continues to represent Indonesia on the Muslim World League’s Supreme Council, despite his affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood and his having declined to participate in Secretary General Mohammad al-Issa’s highly-publicized January 2020 visit to Auschwitz in the company of rabbis.

On March 4, 2020 Muhammad al-Issa [appeared on France 24](#) TV’s Arabic-language channel and declared that there is no place for political Islam in France or anywhere else because it does not abide by the values of Islam or by the national values of any country. Shaykh al-Issa said that people must respect the constitution, laws, and culture of the country in which they

live, and that they should move somewhere else if they don't like them. He also explained that his recent visit to Auschwitz was meant to deliver the message that there are no double standards in Islam when it comes to confronting all forms of injustice.

In 2018 PKS leaders, including Hidayat Nur Wahid, [vehemently criticized](#) Mr. Staquf for [visiting Jerusalem](#), where he delivered a keynote address to the American Jewish Committee's Global Forum, met with Israeli political leaders and participated in the recording of a [music video](#) produced in honor of his historic visit. Koolulam, the group that produced the music video, subsequently won the 2018 Asia Society's [Game Changer of the Year Award](#), for "spreading unity through song in one of the world's most divided cities."

The Muslim World League's continuing relationship with Hidayat Nur Wahid indicates just how difficult — or, possibly, unappealing — it has been for Saudi Arabia and the MWL to unwind relationships with ultraconservative Sunni Muslims developed over a period of nearly 60 years.

The extent to which the Muslim World League chooses to embrace and propagate a pluralistic and tolerant understanding of Islam — *within the Muslim world* — may prove crucial to international perceptions of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and his efforts to reform Islam, which have begun to noticeably transform social and religious life in Saudi Arabia itself.

**Highlights from the Speech of His Eminence Shaykh
Dr. Yahya Cholil Staquf
Chairman, Executive Council of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia
in the Forum on Common Values among Religious Followers**

I am grateful to Dr. Al-Issa for organizing such an historic and important forum. Everyone who works in the arena of faith wishes to be part of this event.

All believers have common values, such as compassion, human dignity and seeking to ensure justice. In addition, other values must spread among us if we are to live peacefully together. These additional values include love, coexistence and equality under the rule of law.

Followers of the various religions cannot ignore their differences, but they can commit to respecting each other, and the differences of their faiths. All of this cannot be achieved without being clear and honest in our discussions.

In every society there are people who seek to disrupt social harmony. They often employ religious pretexts to accomplish this. It is important for us to provide clear evidence that what they are doing is wrong.

We should work tirelessly to spread awareness of the importance of tolerance to everyone in society, not only among the class of leaders and elites [such as those gathered here today].

Read the [Declaration on the Common Human Values](#) issued in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on May 11, 2022.