Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf

Yahya Cholil Staquf serves as General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Supreme Council. As the world’s largest Muslim organization—with over 50 million members and 14,000 madrasahs—the Nahdlatul Ulama adheres to the traditions of ahlusunnah wal jama'ah (Sunni Islam), and teaches that the primary message of Islam is universal love and compassion. The organization was established in 1926, in direct response to the Wahhabi conquest of Mecca and Medina the previous year.

Descended from a long line of prominent Javanese ulama (religious scholars), KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf was educated from earliest childhood in the formal and esoteric (spiritual) sciences of Islam—first by his father, grandfather and uncle, of the renowned Bisri family of Rembang, Central Java, and subsequently by Kyai Haji Ali Maksum (1915 – 1989) at his madrasah in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. KH. Ali Maksum was himself a direct disciple of Shaykh Umar Hamdan al-Makki (1858 – 1948) and Shaykh Hasan Masshat al-Makki (1900 – 1979) of Mecca.

KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf was a member of Indonesia’s National Electoral Commission during that nation’s successful transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, and served as presidential spokesman to Indonesia’s first democratically-elected head of state—Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, who himself headed the Nahdlatul Ulama for 15 years prior to his election.
Yahya Cholil Staquf serves on the executive board of the U.S. – Indonesia Council on Religion and Pluralism, which was established pursuant to a bilateral agreement signed by President Obama and President Jokowi in October 2015, in order “to forge a strategic partnership between the U.S. and Indonesia.”

In addition to his management of Raudlatul Tholibin Madrasah in Rembang, Central Java, Shaykh Yahya is responsible for coordinating the execution of policy between the Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council and its Executive Board, and also for the expansion of NU operations to North America, Europe and the Middle East. In this capacity, he is coordinating NU efforts to help transcend the increasingly polarized and strident debate on Islam that has paralyzed most Western societies, and prevented the adoption of policies that would effectively address the multi-faceted threats posed by Islamist extremism, terrorism and a rising tide of Islamophobia in the West.

In pursuit of these objectives, Shaykh Yahya co-founded the U.S.-based organization Bayt ar-Rahmah li ad-Da‘wa al-Islamiyah Rahmatan li al-‘Alamin (The Home of Divine Grace for Revealing and Nurturing Islam as a Blessing for All Creation) in December of 2014, to serve as a hub for the expansion of Nahdlatul Ulama operations in North America, Europe and the Middle East, and to consolidate the global ahlusunnah wal jamaah (Sunni Muslim community), “in order to bring about a world in which Islam, and Muslims, are truly beneficial and contribute to the well-being of all humanity.” Shaykh Yahya is a member of Bayt ar-Rahmah’s board of directors and its Director of Religious Affairs (modir).

Shaykh Yahya also played a key role in the establishment of the Vienna Observatory for Applied Research on Terrorism and Extremism (VORTEX)—which combines academic rigor with theological expertise and generations of experience countering radical ideology and movements—and authored the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) Nahdlatul Ulama Declaration (2016) and the historic Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam (2017), which “seeks to reinterpret Islamic law dating from the Middle Ages in ways that conform to 21st century norms” (New York Times).

“Among Indonesia’s most influential Islamic leaders.” ~ TIME magazine

“An Islamic scholar who really lives up to the name. If only his kind of enlightened Islam predominated” ~ Richard Dawkins

“I don’t see any other Muslim leaders coming to Europe, standing up like a tower and saying, ‘Look, we’re prepared to take this on’… breaking new ground by proposing to make changes to Islamic law to better fit the modern era” ~ Terrorism expert Magnus Ranstorp on CNN

“I wish you the greatest success in your terribly important endeavor… to reshape the narrative space and redefine a profound and inspirational faith. You are doing the work that matters.”

~ LTC Brian Steed, Assistant Professor, US Army Command & General Staff College