

## Toward a Kinder, Gentler Islam

**BY WALTER RUBY**

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**A former telecom CEO and the former Indonesian president look to expand their fight against religious extremism in Muslim world.**



*Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, left, and Holland Taylor:  
Offering an alternative to fundamentalist Islam. Courtesy of LibforAll*

Is there a tolerant, pluralistic form of Islam that has the self-confidence and mass appeal to counter the spread of violent and fundamentalist jihadist ideology across the Muslim world?

C. Holland Taylor, a North Carolina ex-businessman who was born Christian but terms himself a “universalist drawn to mystical traditions in all religions,” thinks so.

He is so convinced that such an alternative exists in the Sufi-influenced Islam of Indonesia that he quit his position as CEO of an international telecom firm and joined forces with Abdurrahman Wahid, a former president of Indonesia to form an international NGO known as the LibforAll Foundation. The organization is dedicated to supporting moderate Muslims in promoting a culture of liberty and tolerance.

That effort has been successful enough over the past five years in stemming the growth of militant Islam in Indonesia, a Southeast Asia archipelago with 240 million people — by far the world’s largest Muslim nation — that Taylor and Wahid now hope to extend LibforAll’s campaign against religious extremism throughout the Muslim world.

Last year, LibforAll sponsored two initiatives that signaled its determination to challenge Muslim militant ideology head on, even at the risk of being labeled pro-Zionist: a conference held last June in Bali at which Wahid made a speech rebuking Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for promoting Holocaust denial, and a visit to Israel last December by a delegation of high-level Indonesian Muslim leaders.

“We decided to move ahead with these initiatives because hatred of Jews and Israel is part and parcel of the radicalization of the entire Muslim world and, if we are to get to peace, that kind of thinking has to change,” Taylor told *The Jewish Week* in an interview during a recent stopover in New York, while traveling between LibforAll’s international headquarters in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta and his home in Winston-Salem, N.C.

“The courageous Indonesian Muslim leaders involved in our movement are ready to work with people of all backgrounds and faiths in the battle against Islamic extremism, which is a threat to all of humanity.”

A youthful-looking 51 with an infectious enthusiasm for a subject — Indonesian Islam — few Westerners know anything about, Taylor has had a fascination with the Muslim world ever since living with his family in Iran for four years as a child.

After graduating from Princeton, he wrote several books on politics and economics and served as CEO of a telecom firm called U.S. Global Link, traveling throughout the world during the late 1990’s to countries that were then privatizing hitherto government-linked telecom companies. One such country was Indonesia, of which Taylor became so enamored that he decided to leave telecommunications and relocate to Jakarta in order to study the Indonesian language and the history of Islam there.

“I was fascinated to learn that Java [the main island of Indonesia] was the only place in the entire Muslim world where the tolerant Sufi understanding of Islam triumphed over the stricter, more doctrinaire versions of the religion that exist elsewhere,” Taylor explained.

In the course of his study of Javanese Islam, Taylor became a friend and confidante of Wahid, a frail 67-year-old Muslim cleric who served as president of Indonesia from 1999 to 2001 before being forced out of office by the military. In the years since, Wahid, who is known popularly in Indonesia as Gus Dur, has devoted himself to promoting religious tolerance, pluralism and democracy.

Together, Taylor and Wahid decided to create LibforAll (the “lib” stands for both liberty and liberation), an Indonesian and U.S.-based organization dedicated to buttressing moderate Muslims as they fend off a lavishly-funded effort by the Saudi government and other backers of the strict Wahhabi brand of Islam to spread the tenets of that sect to Indonesia. In recent years, Indonesia has seen a spurt of terrorist violence by Islamic extremists, including suicide bombings in Jakarta and the tourist island of Bali that killed hundreds.

According to Taylor, “Gus Dur and I reach out to spiritual leaders and opinion leaders in Indonesian society who have a pluralistic understanding of Islam and are ready to advocate it publicly in order to dissuade Muslim population from supporting extremism and violence.”

In an article published last year in the *Wall Street Journal*, Wahid wrote, “Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the ‘right’ Islam, and thereby discredit extremist ideology...Our goal must be to illuminate the hearts and minds of humanity and offer a

compelling alternative vision of Islam, one that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.”

Soon after co-founding LibforAll, Wahid denounced a series of fatwas (religious rulings) issued by a high-ranking council of Indonesian Muslim clerics that condemned any Islamic teachings based on liberalism and banned the participation of Muslims in interfaith prayers with non-Muslims.

In the less than five years since the founding of LibforAll, Taylor has built a growing network of supporters in Europe and the United States. Last year, LibforAll received funding from the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for work advising European governments how to prevent the growth of Islamic extremism in their countries. In 2006, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations recommended that \$3.5 million be appropriated to LibforAll for programs targeting Muslim youth in the Middle East and elsewhere, but the appropriation later failed due to gridlock between Republicans and Democrats on the Hill.

While intent on building ties to both sides of the U.S. political divide, Taylor appears to have a greater affinity with neoconservatives like Bret Stephens, a former editor in chief of the *Jerusalem Post* and presently foreign affairs columnist at the *Wall Street Journal*.

Last year, after an extended visit to Indonesia to profile the efforts of Taylor and Wahid, Stephens, who is known for a staunchly hawkish stance on Israeli-Arab conflict and relationship between Islam and the West, stated: “My visit to Indonesia was an eye opener for me because for the first time I encountered a huge (Muslim) movement in confrontation with Muslim radicalism lavishly funded by Saudi Arabia. I came back convinced of the need for the U.S. to pursue public diplomacy more aggressively than in the past, to identify genuine moderates in Muslim countries and to give them the resources they need to prevail.”

In response to the notorious Holocaust-denial conference held in Tehran in December 2006, LibforAll sponsored a one-day “religious summit” in Bali. Among the highlights of the Wiesenthal Center-underwritten event, which was attended by Christian, Hindu and Buddhist priests and Rabbi Daniel Landes of the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, were appearances by badly scarred victims of terror from Israel and Indonesia, and by Sol Teichman, a 79-year-old Holocaust survivor. In his address to the conclave, Wahid said, “Although I am a good friend of Ahmadinejad, I have to say he is wrong [about the Holocaust]. I visited Auschwitz’s Museum of the Holocaust and I saw many shoes of dead people.”

Equally unprecedented was the next joint project of LibforAll and the Wiesenthal Center — a weeklong trip to Israel and the West Bank by a five-member delegation of leaders of the two largest Muslim movements in Indonesia. The participants visited with missile-plagued residents of Sderot, danced with yeshiva students in Kiryat Shemona, dialogued in Ramallah with Mohammed Dajani, a Palestinian proponent of non-violence, and held an hour-long meeting with President Shimon Peres.

Taylor was asked whether the credibility of his organization is not undercut in the Muslim world when it seeks U.S. funding and works closely with Jewish groups.

“The reality is that no matter what we do, our enemies are going to denounce us as tools of the Americans and Zionists,” he said. “So we might as well go ahead and take money from all available sources so that we can expand the scope and effectiveness of our efforts.”