

C. Holland Taylor: Discrediting Extremism

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by: Ryan Mauro



C. Holland Taylor

C. Holland Taylor is co-founder, chairman and CEO of [LibForAll Foundation](#). An expert on Islam and the process of Islamization in Southeast Asia, Mr. Taylor has lived, studied and worked in the Muslim world – from Iran to Indonesia – over a period of more than four decades.

His unique combination of experience in the fields of international business, strategy and the forging of cross-cultural relationships has enabled LibForAll to become “a model of what a competent public diplomacy effort in the

*Muslim world should look like,” according to *The Wall Street Journal*.*

*Mr. Taylor established LibForAll in December 2003, together with his close friend, the former Indonesian president [Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid](#) (1940–2009), whom the *The Wall Street Journal* called “the single most influential religious leader in the Muslim world” and “easily the most important ally the West has in the ideological struggle against Islamic radicalism.” Under their leadership, LibForAll has grown into “the world’s most potent and innovative anti-extremist network” (*Weekly Standard*).*

The following is RadicalIslam.org National Security Analyst Ryan Mauro’s interview with C. Holland Taylor:

1

Ryan Mauro: What is LibForAll and the International Institute of Quranic Studies (IIQS) doing to battle the Islamist ideology?

C. Holland Taylor: President Wahid and I established LibForAll to help reduce extremism and discredit the use of terror by widely disseminating a pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual understanding of Islam. We accomplish this

by identifying, mobilizing and encouraging powerful Muslim leaders in the fields of religion, education, pop culture, government, business and the mass media, who have the ability to transform Muslims' understanding of their religion and its mandates, including Islam's relationship with other faiths.

The International Institute of Quranic Studies (IIQS) is a key component of this strategy. It seeks to revitalize the profound spiritual and ethical teachings of Islam, as well as to propagate free thought and expand the bounds of debate within the Muslim world. For example, the IIQS is engaged in researching, developing and articulating the theological grounds for constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience and the separation of religion and state. Our goal is not to undermine faith, but rather, to prevent the political instrumentalization of religion and its subordination to a falsely divinized human understanding of God's will (*ghurur*), which is characteristic of Islamist ideology.



The powerful Muslim leaders who constitute the backbone of LibForAll and the IIQS are convinced that the principles of liberty, rooted in a profoundly spiritual understanding of Islam, are essential to the development of just societies and the protection of human rights throughout the Muslim world, so that Islam may truly function as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, or “a source of universal love and compassion.”

2

Mauro: What has the impact of former Indonesian President Wahid's work been?

Taylor: During his 15 years as chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization, President Wahid helped lay the foundation for Indonesia's successful transition from authoritarian rule to democracy.

Perhaps his greatest contribution, in this regard, was to inspire the nation's Muslim majority to reject the idea of theocracy and to embrace those of other faiths as equal citizens.

During his term in office, President Wahid liberated Indonesia's Chinese minority from decades of severe discrimination; abolished all governmental instruments for media censorship; and stepped down from office when unjustly impeached by remnants of the old regime, rather than provoke a civil war that would have destroyed Indonesia's budding democracy.

To cite one example of President Wahid's impact through our work at LibForAll: He and a group of Indonesia's most prominent Muslim leaders co-authored *The Illusion of an Islamic State*—a book that dramatically influenced Indonesia's 2009 national elections, and derailed the ambitions of a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political party.

Hailed as “path-breaking” (by *The Wall Street Journal*) “remarkable” (by *The Washington Post*) and “a book that makes history” (by *New Europe*), *The Illusion of an Islamic State* represents a landmark achievement in the field of counter-radicalization, which demonstrates how an alliance of moderate Muslim leaders can successfully isolate, and discredit, Islamist ideology.

Another example of President Wahid's impact may be seen in a long-term strategic endeavor, jointly undertaken by the Nahdlatul Ulama and LibForAll Foundation, to develop a broad center-left to center-right coalition in North America and Europe, in order to forge the societal consensus required to understand, and ultimately defeat, Islamist extremism. The Muslims affiliated with this effort have no animus against the West, and no sense of victimhood as a group. Rather, they are concerned about the well-being of humanity as a whole, and view Islamist movements as an existential threat to the civilized, humane order of any society where such movements take root.

3 ***Ryan Mauro: One of the criticisms we often hear of Muslims involved in the anti-Islamist movement is that there is a large number of Sufis involved in this movement. Sufis constitute a minority in the Muslim world and are considered heretical by mainstream authorities. How do you respond to this criticism?***

C. Holland Taylor: Muslims who oppose the Islamist agenda are subject to enormous grief, intimidation and often blood-chilling violence. It is only natural that those who have the moral courage to accept these consequences are often associated with the profound spiritual traditions of Islam known as *Sufism*. Yet, it is absolutely false to claim that *Sufism* is considered heretical by mainstream Muslim authorities, or even to assume that *Sufism* constitutes a distinct sect within Islam. *Sufism* is woven into the very fabric of Islam itself, for the inner, mystical dimensions of Islam complement its outer practice and give life to what would otherwise be mere, empty formalities, easily harnessed by ideologues to achieve their worldly objectives.

The criticism you cite parrots a *Wahhabi* narrative about Sufism, and illustrates how vulnerable Westerners can be to misinformation campaigns orchestrated by Islamists themselves. The fact is, mainstream Sunni authorities have considered *Wahhabism* virtually heretical for the past 270 years, ever since its violent eruption in the remote deserts of Arabia and its exploitation by brutal men to justify the murder of their opponents and the seizure of their women and wealth.

Americans should know that a majority of the world's Muslim population practice forms of religious piety directly or indirectly derived from *Sufism*, which has been recognized by *Sunni* Islam as an integral part of Muslim faith and practice since al-Ghazzali resolved this issue in the 11th century. Even Ibn Tamiyyah, whom the *Wahhabis* love to quote, was himself a *Sufi*. For over a thousand years, in nearly every region of the Muslim world, the dominant form of Islam has been *Sufi*. However, it is important to distinguish between formal *Sufi* brotherhoods and a “*Sufi*” outlook on life. Not all *Sufi* brotherhoods are tolerant and peaceful, and most Muslims who have a *Sufi* (i.e., spiritual) worldview do not belong to actual *Sufi* brotherhoods.

4

Ryan Mauro: What has the attitude of the major Muslim-American organizations in the U.S. been towards your work?

C. Holland Taylor: Several years ago the head of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) said to me, “I read every single thing that appears on LibForAll’s website.” I think most of these organizations are quite aware of our existence, but have avoided publicly discussing LibForAll — perhaps because of the extremely prominent nature of the Muslim theologians and mass organizations affiliated with us.

The Nahdlatul Ulama, for example, has approximately 50 million members and 14,000 *madrasahs*. In fact, the number of NU followers who live quietly and peacefully in the U.S. is far greater than the membership of any Muslim Brotherhood or Jamaat-e-Islami legacy group, while the theologians associated with LibForAll and the IIQS are some of the most knowledgeable and respected Muslim clerics in the world.

Of course, it is also possible that Islamist groups in the U.S. have pursued a strategy of ignoring LibForAll, in order to avoid highlighting the very real alternative we offer, in terms of Islamic teachings and legitimacy.

5

Ryan Mauro: If Nahdlatul Ulama has a larger following in America than the Islamist groups, how come these other groups put together the big conferences and seem to have a bigger platform?

C. Holland Taylor: Like most Muslim immigrants to the West, Nahdliyin (NU followers) came to improve their lives, not to pursue a political agenda. To cite a parallel phenomenon: Iranian-Americans constitute one of the largest demographic groups of Muslims living in the U.S. Yet we rarely hear about them, except as successful physicians, real estate investors or businessmen. That's because they generally have no grievance against the United States and are grateful to have found haven here, following

Khomeini's imposition of theocracy in Iran. The children of most Iranian immigrants from the 1980s have successfully integrated into Western societies.

The Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, on the other hand, have politics in their DNA. This leads them to execute a strategy of constant organization-building, which has been fueled by Arab petrodollars, both to indoctrinate other Muslims and to create the false impression that they speak for Islam, and all Muslims, to non-Muslim authorities.

Yet although they've been working for 50 years in the U.S., they still represent just a tiny fraction of all U.S. Muslims. Of course, their success at projecting strategic influence within North America and Europe is far greater, due to the energy and intelligence with which they operate and the financial resources they've managed to assemble.

As President Wahid wrote in *The Illusion of an Islamic State*: “A virulent ideology—supported by vast sums of foreign money, deployed in a systematic manner—can infiltrate nearly anywhere and overcome disorganized opposition.

In other words, as *ulama* (Muslim religious scholars) often state: *al-haqq bi lâ nizhâm tughlab al-bâthil bi al-nizhâm* (truth which is not organized may be readily defeated by evil that is).”

The Nahdlatul Ulama and LibForAll are at a very preliminary stage of addressing this problem in the West, but our aim is long term and strategic. If you're interested in knowing more about what we've done in this regard, and our overall strategy, these articles may prove useful:

LibForAll's [Global Counter-Extremism Network](#)

LibForAll's [Solution in Sight: "A Firewall Against Terrorism in Islam's Name"](#)

LibForAll's [Nahdlatul Ulama and LibForAll Foundation Call Upon the West to Overcome "Institutional Paralysis" in the Face of Extremism](#)

LibForAll's [Indonesia's "Big Idea"](#)



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