

EDITOR'S NOTES: A MESSAGE OF PEACE AND RAHMA

The leader of the world's largest Islamic movement visits Jerusalem bringing a universal message of Islam

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Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf shakes hands with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, June 14, 2018.. (photo credit: HAIM ZACH/GPO)

It's not every day that the leader of the world's largest Islamic movement visits Jerusalem; it's even rarer when that leader comes from Indonesia. But that is exactly what happened this week when Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf arrived in Israel's capital.

Yahya Staquf is general secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Supreme Council, said to be the

largest Muslim organization in the world, with more than 50 million members and some 14,000 madrasas (schools). I met him this week in Jerusalem where he came to attend the American Jewish Committee Global Forum.

While Israel and Indonesia don't have formal diplomatic ties – just this week Israel announced it was barring Indonesian tourists from the country – Yahya Staquf did not have second thoughts before accepting AJC's invitation.

He has been in Israel once before, in 2005.

His message is universal, and applies not just to Israelis and Palestinians. It is about reshaping the narrative and presenting a different, more peaceful and accepting – and in his mind, real – portrayal of Islam. A few weeks ago, for example, he was in Washington where he met with Vice President Mike Pence.

The bottom line is this: Stop being stuck on history and past grievances.

“Everyone knows everyone did bad things,” he said. “Israel did and the Palestinians did. Do we want to continue pursuing vengeance and fight for the annihilation of others? Is that our choice, or do we want an alternative?” The alternative, Yahya Staquf said, is rahma, the Muslim concept of compassion and caring for others.

“I call on the world to choose it, since I believe it is a matter of choice – it is for you to choose,” he said. “I call on the world to choose it because I see that this is the only door to open to all the good things we need for the betterment of our civilization. If you have rahma, you are prepared to give justice, and if you don't have it you don't want to give justice. If you have it you will be prepared to share and so forth. This applies to everybody – Muslims and non-Muslims.”

How, I asked Yahya Staquf, do you reconcile the difference between your approach to Jews and Israelis and that of other Islamic movements like Hamas or Hezbollah, which both – in the name of their religion – call for the destruction of Israel? The answer, he said, has to do with his own birthplace, Indonesia, where the indigenous culture of tolerance meshed with Islam some five centuries ago.

“That is the fundamental capacity that we have,” he said. “The reason I come and engage is that I don't want the hope for peace to die. I want to keep the hope for peace alive.”

Moreover, he continued, Hamas has a very different “historical experience” than he does as a devout Muslim from Indonesia. “All this area of territory from Morocco to Pakistan was under the Ottoman Empire,” he said. “We don't have the historical burden and trauma that they have,” which is why in Indonesia, Muslims and non-Muslims have lived peacefully side-by-side for centuries.

“We don't have an urge to persecute minorities, but it doesn't mean we don't have any problems,” Yahya Staquf said.

“Since the connection between our people and the other parts of the world, including the Middle

East, is undefeatable, so are influences from other parts of the world that come into our society and facilitate the emergence of groups of Muslims who demand a more pure Islam. They want to purify Islam from all the non-Islamic elements of local culture.”

Yahya Staquf said he is working on trying to foster more tolerance and appreciation, starting with his own country and its approach to Israel.

Appointed last week to the Indonesian Presidential Council, Yahya Staquf said that Indonesia doesn’t recognize Israel due to political positions that were set 70 years ago on the basis of the revolution against colonialism and imperialism.

“Now, we see after 70 years, is that this problem is still going on and some people either want to keep the conflict for any kind of political interest, [while] some others begin to simply give up the hope for peace because of the complexities of the matter,” he explained. “I am not trying to blame any side. I just hope that peace will stay possible.”

But how do you change the Islamic world, and what often seems like an overwhelming negative bias against Israel? In reply, he offered as an example Wahhabism, a fundamentalist and ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam promoted by the Saudi kingdom.

“Wahhabism was a small part of the Islamic world,” he said. “There are not many of them compared to the main population of the Islamic world, but they can spread influence widely and globally because they have the resources to win the authority.”

In other words, he said, with authority comes the ability to influence people and their interpretation of Islam.

“The struggle is then for the authorities: Which interpretation would seem to be more authoritative by the people?” Yahya Staquf said. “What we need now is a strategy to win the heart and minds of the people so they follow an interpretation that would serve peace more than violence and enmity.”

There are no guarantees that Yahya Staquf will succeed. Just hours after our meeting, an Israeli teenage girl was stabbed and seriously wounded by a Palestinian from Jenin in Afula.

But then again, someone has to start somewhere.

As Yahya Staquf said: “I call on people to choose compassion. Wherever you are, every human being has the potential to choose.”

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