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In Israel, Indonesian Muslim leader risks backlash at home



Yahya Staqf, secretary general of the 60 million member Nahdlatul Ulama poses for a photograph in overlooking Jerusalem, Monday, June 11, 2018. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, does not have diplomatic relations with Israel, and support there for the Palestinians is strong. Staqf's presence has triggered angry reactions in Indonesian social media. (Caron Creighton/Associated Press)

By Caron Creighton / Associated Press June 11, 2018

JERUSALEM — A leader of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization is visiting Israel this week, braving angry protests at home in order to spread what he calls a message of interfaith compassion.

Yahya Staqf, secretary general of the 60 million member Nahdlatul Ulama, is in Israel as a guest of the American Jewish Committee, a U.S. advocacy group holding a major conference in Jerusalem.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, does not have diplomatic relations with Israel, and support for the Palestinians there is strong. Staquf's presence has triggered angry reactions, as seen on Indonesian social media.

But in an interview, Staquf said he remains committed to the visit and hopes the controversy can bring more attention to his message of tolerance.

"Some people here are amazed by my decision to come, because they think it must be dangerous for this man to come, thinking that many, many Muslims must be threatening him with death or something," Staquf told the Associated Press on Monday.

Earlier this week, Staquf addressed the American Jewish Committee's conference, appearing alongside a rabbi in his discussion. His schedule also includes meetings at Israel's Hebrew University, and talks with local Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders as well. There were no meetings with Israeli politicians listed on his schedule.

Staquf said the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the sole focus of his trip. Instead, he looks at interfaith cooperation as a basis for solving many conflicts, including in Myanmar, where 700,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled persecution by the country's security forces to Bangladesh.

But Staquf remains aware of the "magnitude" of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We are facing a civilizational problem here, and it is related to religions," Staquf said. "As Muslims, we want to do our part related to our religion."

Staquf says he has identified portions of Islam that he considers problematic, including how Muslims interact with non-Muslims. He says there needs to be "a new discourse" to recognize that Muslims and non-Muslims are equal and should be able to coexist peacefully.

"These elements are problematic because they are not compatible anymore with the current reality of our civilization," he said.

In Indonesia, Twitter and Facebook have been filled with negative comments about the visit. Many are upset about the situation in Gaza, where over 120 Palestinians have been killed during protests along the Israeli border over the past two months. Israel accuses Gaza's militant Hamas rulers of using demonstrators as human shields while trying to carry out attacks and says it is defending its sovereign border and communities nearby.

A montage of Staquf's photo, and the Israeli and NU flags, has gone viral online. It is captioned: "When Muslims are wounded by an Israeli attack, the NU representative goes to Israel. This visit is a form of recognition of the state of Israel, hurting the hearts of Muslims and Palestinians."

Taufiqulhadi, a member of parliament from the National Democratic Party, one of the parties in the government coalition, said "the majority of Indonesians" do not want diplomatic relations with Israel.

In a letter to Indonesia's foreign minister that was published online, Staquf said the government could "deny" his actions if deemed harmful to state interests. "But if there is a 'benefit,' let's follow it up to be a real advantage."