

CAN INDONESIANS HELP MODERATE ISLAM IN EUROPE?

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BY MANFRED GERSTENFELD | JANUARY 12, 2019 21:23



A general view shows the Sehitlik Mosque in Berlin, Germany, November 28, 2018. (photo credit: REUTERS/FABRIZIO BENSCH)

The mass migration of Muslims into Europe with little selection has brought with it many problems. No influential Muslim groups have emerged that regularly speak out against the misbehavior of extremists of their faith. In the past there was the hope that in the course of time, a European Islam integrated in democracy would emerge. The prominent Muslim academic Bassam Tibi, originally from Syria, has promoted the idea

of a European Islam for a quarter-century. In 2016 he gave up on this. He explained the reasons in an article in German whose title translates as “Why I capitulate.”

Few European politicians know that the world’s largest Muslim organization is a moderate one. The Indonesian Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has more than 45 million members and tens of millions of additional sympathizers. Its secretary-general, Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staqf, in a 2017 interview with the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, said Western politicians should stop saying extremism and terrorism have nothing to do with orthodox Islam.

Staqf added that contemporary Islamism is rooted in certain obsolete and problematic elements of Islamic orthodoxy. He heavily criticized Western political and intellectual elites who claim that Islam is inherently peaceful. He remarked that by analyzing Muslim scholarship, one understands that Muslims who in Western media are called Islamists and terrorists are the elite of political Islam. These so-called Islamists often know Islamic jurisprudence much better than the majority of Muslims. They interpret literally and act upon passages from the Qur’an and sayings attributed to the prophet Mohammed which enjoin violence against non-Muslims.

Staqf furthermore observed that the leadership of extremist mosques often incite hatred and violence towards non-believers. Some even encourage ‘martyrdom’ (suicide bombing) operations—a particularly dangerous form of incitement, given the revered status of a martyr within Islamic teachings. The West, Staqf added, should stop claiming that discussing these issues is Islamophobia. He remarked: “I am a Muslim scholar. Does anyone want to call me Islamophobe?”

Staqf contrasted the moderate majority of Indonesian Muslims with the violent, but legitimate, currents of Islam the Western world is increasingly confronted with. He said moderate Indonesian Muslims are of the opinion that certain traditions from the Middle Ages have to be seen in the context of the time in which they originated, not as operational instructions for our times, and that national laws take precedence over Islamic laws.

Had all this been said by a Muslim scholar in Europe, it would not have had much relevance. This, however, is a leader who represents an organization with far more members than there are Muslims in the European Union. Staqf, an adviser to Indonesian President Joko Widodo, affirmed his comments in a lengthy dinner conversation during a visit to Jerusalem more than half a year ago.

SEVERAL EUROPEAN governments recognize the extreme need for influential Muslim organizations that will stand up against religious extremists in their countries. One idea was that courses to train imams at European universities should be established. In this way, it was thought, a new type of moderate imam would emerge. This poses not only a problem of legitimacy in European Muslim circles, but there is also the threat of such imams being intimidated by fanatics.

It would have been logical for Western governments to have looked for contacts with major moderate Muslim organizations abroad and incentivize them to set up representations in their countries. A recent visitor to Germany who met with senior officials in ministries told me, however, that ministry officials knew nothing or next to nothing about the NU.

Trying to promote and support a representation of NU in Germany should have been a priority, as it has a consolidated view of what moderate contemporary Islam should be. Such an NU presence could be vocal and provide courses and literature, provided its security is assured. Even if the NU only served as a powerful focal point for Muslim moderates in the country, that would be a great gain.

This is not without challenges, because Muslims have traditionally looked for new concepts primarily in the Middle East and, to some extent, in Pakistan. With sufficient government support, this handicap could probably be overcome. In today's German reality, after its misconceived immigration policy in recent years, the authorities have nothing to lose.

Such an approach could also help to improve relations between Muslims and Jews. The only Indonesian president who visited Israel – and did so a number of times – was Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, chairman of the NU executive board from 1984 to 1999 and president of Indonesia from 1999 to 2001. American businessman C. Holland Taylor, a friend of both President Wahid and Staquf, mentions that Wahid cosponsored the 2007 Bali Holocaust Conference with the Simon Wiesenthal Center. He studied Kabbalah when he worked with an Iraqi Jew in Baghdad during the 1960s.

During his first week in office as president, Wahid publicly called for establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. Taylor quotes him as saying, "Indonesia has diplomatic relations with China, a communist and thus atheist country, why shouldn't we have normal relations with Israel, whose people and government believe in God as we do?" Taylor remarks that today, a large part of the NU and its related political party PKB accept Wahid's attitude toward Israel.

Establishing NU representation in Europe, particularly in Germany, could make a significant contribution to counteracting the ongoing excesses of Muslim extremists in the public domain.

The writer is emeritus chairman of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He was given the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Journal for the Study of Antisemitism, and the International Leadership Award by the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

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