

# A New Religious Strategy for Effective Peacebuilding in the Middle East

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Yahya Cholil Staquf is an Indonesian politician and Islamic cleric who has served as the chairman of the Executive Council of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) since December 2021.



Brief Analysis

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**A leading Muslim thinker explains how religious figures can play a truly effective role in regional peacebuilding by questioning the embedded norms that fuel intercommunal violence, including in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.**

**O**n September 17, H. E. Yahya Cholil Staquf (“Pak Yahya”), General Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board in Indonesia, addressed a Washington Institute roundtable event. The following is a rapporteur’s summary of his remarks; they should not be cited or quoted as direct remarks by him.

The role of religion remains fundamental in many societies and has the potential to play a critical role in fostering Middle East peace. Yet all too often, religion is used to justify perpetual conflict and violence, pitting adherents of one religion against others. Establishing a viable framework for peace will necessitate recontextualizing obsolete and problematic tenets of religious orthodoxy that incite enmity and conflict, and developing a new set of religious norms rooted in universal ethics and humanitarian values.

Shortly after the October 7 attack, Nahdlatul Ulama convened the R20 International Summit of Religious Authorities (ISORA) in Jakarta to examine the role of religion in addressing Middle East conflict and threats to a rules-based international order. While Indonesian Muslims are distant from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza, there is naturally sympathy among Indonesians for their fellow Muslims in Palestine. The war in Gaza has given new impetus to an urgent question: do religious followers truly have an interest in ending the conflict, and what do their respective religions tell them about how to achieve a just and lasting peace?

Religious hatred, supremacy, and violence are often justified by specific tenets of religious orthodoxy and various norms that have been historically associated therewith. Throughout most of Islamic history, Muslims lived with an existential threat posed by conflict with non-Muslim powers. As a result, Muslims developed specific elements of

Islamic jurisprudence to defend themselves and regulate such conflict. This, in turn, gave birth to various norms, including the idea that Muslims must wage war against other religious groups in perpetuity.

Other religions have developed similar norms, which encourage their followers to pursue military, political, and religious supremacy. Throughout history, such norms have found legitimacy within the belief systems of various religions, despite the fact that the core ethos of religion is rooted in the idea that all of humanity is a single family whose members should coexist peacefully.

In order to recontextualize problematic tenets of religious orthodoxy that authorize violence, we must create a new framework for peace in which we restore primacy to this core ethos. One example of such an effort is what the Roman Catholic Church accomplished with the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Nostra aetate* and *Dignitatis humanae*—revolutionary reforms that encouraged greater openness and respect toward people of other faith traditions. Inspired by this legacy, we at Nahdlatul Ulama seek to recontextualize orthodox teachings within a specifically Islamic framework.

Ordinary human beings throughout the world have a shared interest in peace for the sake of our collective survival. Allowing religion to be weaponized and transformed into a pretext for conflict poses a clear danger to humanity. Religious authorities should play a central role in developing new sociocultural and religious norms that encourage peace, and in developing a geopolitical framework in which these norms can flourish. In other words: we need to develop a new strategy, in the Middle East and beyond, that allows religion to play a truly effective role in peacebuilding.

When it comes to the specific question of Israel, it is our view that there is no inherent theological obstacle to the existence of a Jewish state in Palestine, particularly considering the context of postwar history.

We recognize that today's global order, established in the wake of World War II and affirmed in the UN Charter, is very different from the "law of the jungle" that governed human affairs for thousands of years, when kingdoms, empires, and tribal confederations competed for power and influence. Two guiding principles of our current global order are the idea of equal dignity among sovereign states and respect for international borders. In 2023, Nahdlatul Ulama officially ruled that, from the perspective of Islamic law, the UN Charter is a legitimate agreement and thus binding upon Muslims worldwide. We also recognize that the State of Israel was established within the parameters of this global order and is very much a part of it.

As for the possibility that Indonesia may, one day, normalize relations with Israel: it is important to note that Indonesia's position regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not based primarily on religious views, but rather is rooted in the aspirations and principles articulated in the UN Charter. Historically, Indonesian leaders—going back to President Sukarno, the Bandung Conference, and the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement—have criticized Israel as a colonial power that is occupying Palestinian territory.

Former Indonesian president and Nahdlatul Ulama chairman KH. Abdurrahman Wahid was one of the few prominent voices in Indonesian history who argued in favor of recognizing Israel. In general, Indonesians oppose the recognition of Israel. However, clear gestures by Israel that demonstrate how its policies adhere to the terms of the postwar international order, as defined by the aspirations of the UN Charter, would go a long way toward improving Israel's image among the Indonesian people.

*This summary was prepared by Sydney Hilbush. ❖*

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