



“Gus Dur” at al-Azhar

Egypt’s al-Azhar University celebrates
the life and legacy of KH. Abdurrahman Wahid

*“Al-Azhar considers Nahdlatul Ulama to be its sister organization, for NU employs
the same classical Sunni religious methodology taught at al-Azhar al-Sharif”*

~ Dr. Osama al-Azhari

Advisor for Religious Affairs to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi



CAIRO, Egypt, 28 January 2024 — In a sign of Nahdlatul Ulama’s burgeoning influence in the Middle East, al-Azhar University — one of the oldest and most influential seats of learning in Sunni Islam — held an official celebration of H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid’s life and legacy. Popularly known as “Gus Dur,” the long-time Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (1984 – 99) and first democratically elected president of Indonesia, attended al-Azhar University in the 1960s.

[President Wahid](#) (1940 – 2009) was [renowned](#) for his lifelong efforts to promote a pluralistic and tolerant understanding of Islam that enables Muslims to live at peace with the modern world and to embrace the values of democracy and universal human rights. Nahdlatul Ulama’s current initiatives — including the [Humanitarian Islam](#) movement, [Islamic Jurisprudence for a](#)

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[Global Civilization](#) (*fiqh al-hadarah*), and the [Movement for Shared Civilizational Values](#) — were directly inspired by President Wahid and are being executed by his [close friends and disciples](#).



President Wahid's eldest daughter, Alissa Qotrunnada Wahid, headlined the Nahdlatul Ulama delegation that participated in al-Azhar's celebration of President Wahid's life and legacy. Alissa Wahid serves as Vice Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board and Executive Director of the GUSDURian Movement, a grassroots organization that continues to popularize and promote President Wahid's legacy.

The day-long celebration of Gus Dur was addressed by Dr. Salama Daoud, the President of al-Azhar University, and leading figures within Egypt's clerical establishment, including the highly respected and influential scholar Dr. Osama al-Azhari, who advises Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on religious affairs. Following the celebration, members of the NU delegation met with H.E. Dr. Ahmed al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar (image below). Both the celebration and meeting with Shaykh Tayyeb were heavily covered by Egyptian mass media.



Further reflecting the significance of these developments, Gulf media also covered what was widely described as “Gus Dur’s Day” at al-Azhar University. One such article may be read, in English translation, below. It was published in *Khaligyoun (Gulf Arabs)*, which is based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.



What is the secret behind al-Azhar al-Sharif’s celebration of a former Indonesian President and his legacy?

Cairo, Sunday 28 January 2024



al-Azhar celebrates former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid

[On Sunday, Egypt's pre-eminent center of Islamic authority] al-Azhar celebrated the memory and legacy of Indonesia's fourth president, KH. Abdurrahman Wahid, who was the nation's first head of state to be democratically elected.

Known for his moderate, reformist tendencies and protection of minorities — especially Indonesia's Chinese and Christian communities — Abdurrahman Wahid also led Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Islamic movement in the world.

In the past few years, Abdurrahman Wahid's name has begun to echo within the cloisters of al-Azhar al-Sharif. Recently, a prominent Azhari scholar travelled from Egypt to visit the family of the late president in Indonesia. So, what is behind al-Azhar's growing interest in Wahid?

Four years within the cloisters of al-Azhar

The answer may lie in the four years that Abdurrahman Wahid spent within the cloisters of al-Azhar University, after travelling to Cairo from Indonesia to complete his studies.

Wahid was born on the island of Java in 1941 to a family of Muslim scholars well-known for their piety and preservation of Islamic traditions. Prior to assuming the presidency of Indonesia, Wahid was already one of the nation's most prominent social and religious figures, having

gained the admiration and respect of millions during his tenure as Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama from 1984 – 99.

Al-Azhar celebrates the life and legacy of Indonesia’s former president

On Sunday, al-Azhar University held a celebration to commemorate the former Indonesian president, who died on December 30, 2009. Attended by senior Azhari scholars — including Dr. Osama al-Azhari, Advisor for Religious Affairs to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi — the celebration is the largest of its kind to commemorate an alumnus and former president of Indonesia.

During the celebrations, Dr. Salama Daoud — President of al-Azhar University — stressed the long-standing and historic nature of scholarly interchange between Indonesia and Egypt. He continued that Grand Imam Dr. Ahmed al-Tayyeb and the entire leadership of al-Azhar al-Sharif take pride in those sons of Indonesia who come to study in Egypt, due to their gentle manners and appreciation for religious leaders and their scholarship.

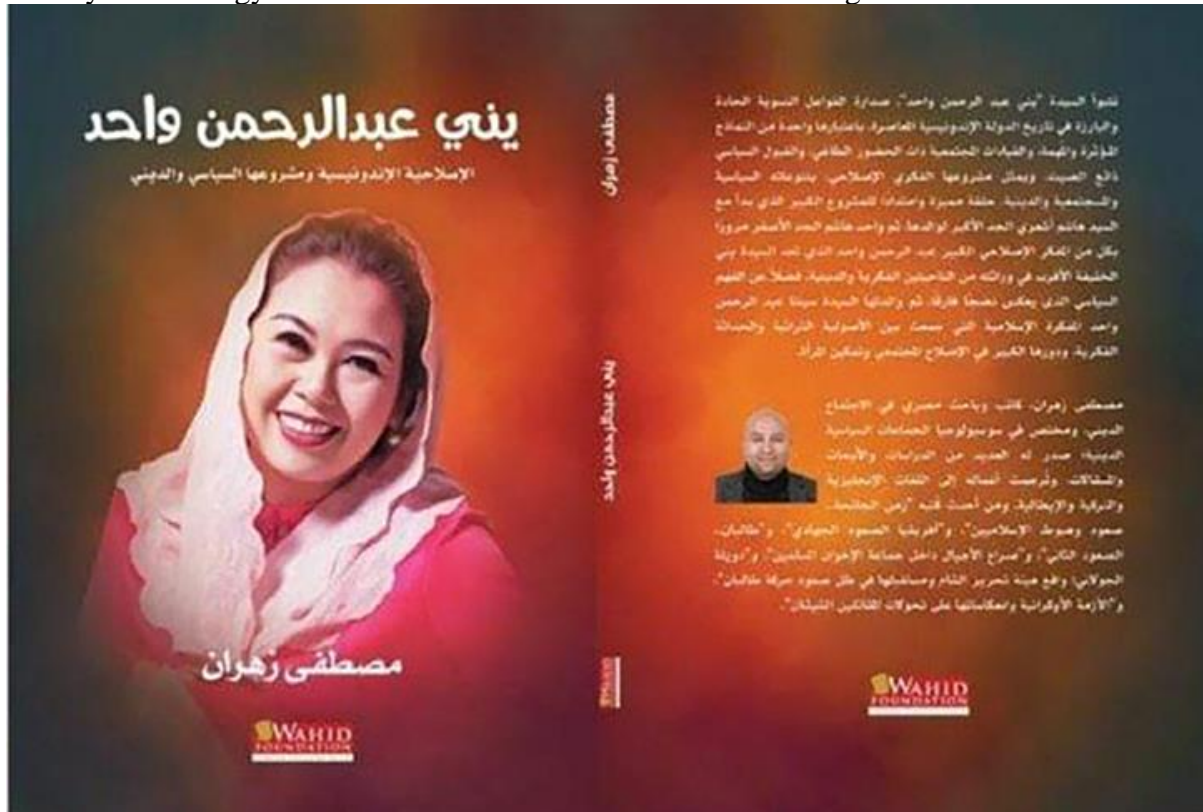


al-Azhar celebrates the life and legacy of Indonesia’s former president

During the commemorative celebrations, which were titled “Humanitarianism and Peace,” Dr. Daoud said that President Wahid’s life represented a milestone on the path towards stronger

Egyptian–Indonesian relations. When the topic of education arises, said Daoud, President Wahid’s name is always mentioned as a shining example of an alumnus of al-Azhar al-Sharif, who once walked within its cloisters and upon Egypt’s streets.

Dr. Daoud continued that the commemorative celebrations coincided with the anniversary of Nahdlatul Ulama’s founding by Abdurrahman Wahid’s grandfather Shaykh Hasyim Asy'ari in January 1926. Daoud stressed that both Abdurrahman Wahid and Nahdlatul Ulama enjoy great standing and respect within al-Azhar al-Sharif and Egypt at large, and are the subject of scholarly works, including: *An Overview of Indonesia’s Relationship with al-Azhar al-Sharif* by Dr. Hossam Shaker and a scholarly investigation by Dr. Tawfiq al-Baydawi of al-Azhar’s Faculty of Theology titled “Nahdlatul Ulama and its role in calling Indonesia to Islam.”



The first Arabic-language book about the former Indonesian President’s family

Last year, Egyptian writer Mostafa Zahran published the first Arabic-language book to examine the life and career of Indonesian reformer Yenny Wahid, Abdurrahman Wahid’s daughter and the most prominent female member of Nahdlatul Ulama.

In his book, Zahran explores the Wahid family’s involvement in Islamic, civic, social, and political advocacy, and their impact upon Indonesian society. The book has been widely discussed in academic circles and distributed by the Indonesian embassy to official delegations.

The life of Indonesian reformer Yenny Abdurrahman Wahid

The father of pluralism and the theory of “Indigenizing Islam”

Zahran said: “The time has come to place Abdurrahman Wahid and his intellectual legacy under the researcher’s microscope. His progressive thought’s importance lies in its capacity to combine Islam with modernity in a Muslim-majority society brimming with diverse ethnic and religious minorities.”

In exclusive remarks to *Khaligyoun (Gulf Arabs)*, Zahran added that Wahid “primarily tried to promote what he termed the ‘indigenization of Islam,’ by linking Islam to the cultural heritage of Asia in a complementary rather than a discordant manner. Wahid worked to fuse religion with local practices consistent with fundamental Islamic principles, and thereby foster national cohesion and an Indonesian Islam that differs from its counterparts in the Middle East. These valuable contributions, and his tireless effort to ‘humanize religion’ and protect it from ignorance, extremism, and superstition earned Abdurrahman Wahid enormous respect from the followers of other faiths and his epithet: ‘the father of pluralism.’”



Egyptian writer Mostafa Zahran

Following the celebrations, the President of al-Azhar University, Dr. Salama Daoud, and [advisor to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi] Dr. Osama al-Azhari hosted Alissa Qotrunnada Wahid, one of President Abdurrahman Wahid’s daughters.

Dr. Salama Daoud said that Nahdlatul Ulama plays a prominent role in proselytizing Islam and strengthening [bilateral] social and scholarly relations, for its resources span the entire archipelago, and its followers abroad are numerous.

During his speech, Dr. al-Azhari said that he had a close relationship with Abdurrahman Wahid, and was always delighted to meet and spend time with him, adding “during one of my

visits to Indonesia I was honored to meet the family of the President, including his esteemed daughters and wife. I was intent on listening carefully to President Wahid’s wife, because she was the closest person to him and can provide the keys to understanding his scholarship and thought.”

Dr. al-Azhari explained that President Abdurrahman Wahid is one of a number of heads of state, judges, writers, and statesmen to graduate from al-Azhar University, a testament to the capacity of its curricula to produce scholars who are loyal to their homelands.



The daughter of President Abdurrahman Wahid at al-Azhar University

Advisor to the Egyptian President: Nahdlatul Ulama is al-Azhar’s sister organization

The Egyptian President’s Advisor for Religious Affairs said that al-Azhar considers Nahdlatul Ulama to be its sister organization, for NU employs the same classical Sunni religious methodology taught at al-Azhar al-Sharif.

Earlier in the day, Dr. Sahar Nasr — Executive Director of the Zakat and Charities Fund — received an undertaking from Dr. Alissa Wahid to purchase 5 fully equipped ambulances to be presented to the people of Gaza.

In a statement, the Zakat and Charities Fund explained that Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama had made a financial donation to purchase the ambulances, which will be part of the fifth convoy that the Zakat and Charities Fund intends to send into the Gaza Strip to deliver humanitarian aid in the coming days.

English translation (from Arabic) by Thomas G. Dinham.