

Muhammadiyah's Humanitarian Engagement with Palestine: Civil Society, Islamic Organizations, and Transnational Humanitarian Action

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Abstract

Indonesian Islamic civil society organizations have played an important role in humanitarian responses to international crises, including the situation in Palestine. Muhammadiyah, as one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations, has developed humanitarian and educational initiatives that connect Indonesian civil society with communities affected by conflict. This article examines Muhammadiyah's engagement with Palestine as a form of transnational humanitarian action. Using qualitative institutional analysis, the study explores organizational policy, humanitarian programs, public advocacy, and cooperation with domestic and international partners. The article argues that Islamic civil society organizations can function as significant non-state actors in humanitarian diplomacy by translating religious solidarity into institutional programs involving education, healthcare, fundraising, and humanitarian assistance. At the same time, humanitarian engagement must maintain transparency, accountability, and professional standards to ensure that public solidarity produces sustainable benefits. The study proposes a civil-society humanitarian diplomacy framework emphasizing institutional accountability, community participation, needs-based assistance, and cross-border partnerships. The article concludes that Muhammadiyah's Palestine engagement demonstrates how Indonesian civil society can contribute to international humanitarian action while simultaneously shaping domestic public discourse concerning global justice and solidarity.

[Organisasi masyarakat sipil Islam Indonesia telah memainkan peran penting dalam respons kemanusiaan terhadap krisis internasional, termasuk situasi di Palestina. Muhammadiyah, sebagai salah satu organisasi Islam terbesar di Indonesia, telah mengembangkan inisiatif kemanusiaan dan pendidikan yang menghubungkan masyarakat sipil Indonesia dengan komunitas yang terdampak konflik. Artikel ini mengkaji keterlibatan Muhammadiyah dengan Palestina sebagai bentuk aksi kemanusiaan transnasional. Dengan



menggunakan analisis institusional kualitatif, studi ini mengeksplorasi kebijakan organisasi, program kemanusiaan, advokasi publik, dan kerja sama dengan mitra domestik dan internasional. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa organisasi masyarakat sipil Islam dapat berfungsi sebagai aktor non-negara yang signifikan dalam diplomasi kemanusiaan dengan menerjemahkan solidaritas keagamaan ke dalam program institusional yang melibatkan pendidikan, perawatan kesehatan, penggalangan dana, dan bantuan kemanusiaan. Pada saat yang sama, keterlibatan kemanusiaan harus menjaga transparansi, akuntabilitas, dan standar profesional untuk memastikan bahwa solidaritas publik menghasilkan manfaat yang berkelanjutan. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja diplomasi kemanusiaan masyarakat sipil yang menekankan akuntabilitas institusional, partisipasi masyarakat, bantuan berbasis kebutuhan, dan kemitraan lintas batas. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa keterlibatan Muhammadiyah di Palestina menunjukkan bagaimana masyarakat sipil Indonesia dapat berkontribusi pada aksi kemanusiaan internasional sekaligus membentuk wacana publik domestik mengenai keadilan dan solidaritas global.]

Keywords: Muhammadiyah, Palestine, humanitarian diplomacy, Islamic civil society, Indonesia

Introduction

Humanitarian crises increasingly exceed the capacity of states and conventional international organizations to respond effectively, creating greater space for civil society organizations, religious networks, and faith-based organizations to operate across national borders. Humanitarian diplomacy has consequently developed beyond traditional state-to-state diplomacy and encompasses negotiation, advocacy, access, protection, resource mobilization, and communication on behalf of affected populations. This transformation is particularly relevant to organizations whose legitimacy is rooted simultaneously in religious identity, social networks, and humanitarian commitments. Faith-based organizations possess distinctive mobilizing capacities because religious values can generate trust, voluntary participation, financial contributions, and long-term social engagement. Nevertheless, their humanitarian role also raises questions concerning professionalization, neutrality, accountability, and the relationship between religious identity and universal humanitarian principles (Ferris 2005; Munthe 2017; Khafagy 2020). These tensions make faith-based organizations particularly important subjects for understanding contemporary humanitarian governance.

Within Indonesia, Muhammadiyah provides a significant case because its institutional structure extends beyond religious preaching into education, health, social welfare, philanthropy, disaster response, and international humanitarian engagement. Previous research has established that Muhammadiyah operates as a

major faith-based organization capable of translating religious values into institutional humanitarian practices. Husein, Kurniawan, and Kurniawati demonstrate that Muhammadiyah's humanitarian activities can be understood through the dimensions of presence, access, advocacy, and program assistance, thereby connecting organizational practice with the broader concept of humanitarian diplomacy (Husein, Kurniawan, and Kurniawati 2024). More recent research specifically examining Muhammadiyah's engagement with Palestine identifies humanitarian fundraising, medical and logistical assistance, educational support, and moral and political advocacy as interconnected forms of transnational engagement (Elantri and Surwandono 2025). However, existing studies tend either to examine Muhammadiyah's humanitarian diplomacy generally or to describe its Palestine-related activities without sufficiently connecting them to broader debates about faith-based humanitarianism, civil society autonomy, localization, and transnational humanitarian governance.

This article addresses that gap by conceptualizing Muhammadiyah's engagement with Palestine not simply as charitable solidarity but as a form of transnational humanitarian action in which religious identity, organizational capacity, public advocacy, and international networking interact. The central argument is that Muhammadiyah's significance lies precisely in its ability to convert moral and religious solidarity into institutionalized humanitarian practices. This distinction is important because humanitarian action is not evaluated solely by the amount of assistance delivered but also by the manner in which assistance is organized, the accountability mechanisms supporting it, the participation of affected communities, and the extent to which local partners retain agency. Research on humanitarian localization demonstrates that involving local actors does not automatically transfer decision-making power to them; localization may reproduce existing asymmetries when authority remains concentrated among external institutions (Elkahlout et al. 2022; Khoury and Scott 2024). Muhammadiyah's Palestine engagement therefore provides an opportunity to examine whether faith-based transnational action can contribute to a more locally responsive and ethically accountable humanitarian system.

The article develops three related propositions. First, Muhammadiyah's religious identity functions as a source of social mobilization and legitimacy but does not necessarily conflict with universal humanitarian principles. Second, its humanitarian engagement becomes more consequential when charitable assistance is connected to advocacy, education, institutional partnerships, and humanitarian diplomacy. Third, the long-term credibility of such engagement depends on accountability, professional standards, transparent resource management, and meaningful partnerships with organizations located close to affected communities. The analysis therefore shifts attention from the volume of humanitarian assistance toward the institutional architecture through which solidarity is transformed into sustained action. Such an approach contributes to scholarship on Islamic civil society and humanitarian diplomacy while positioning Muhammadiyah within

wider debates concerning the changing structure of international humanitarian action.

Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

The literature on faith-based organizations emphasizes that religious organizations cannot be understood merely as alternative charity providers. Their distinctive capacity arises from the combination of normative motivation, dense community networks, volunteerism, fundraising structures, and institutional legitimacy. Tomalin argues that the expanding role of faith-based organizations in development requires greater attention to their institutional diversity rather than assuming that religious organizations constitute a homogeneous category (Tomalin 2012). Similarly, James emphasizes that faith can become a significant organizational resource but also requires careful institutional management because religious identity may generate both trust and controversy (James 2011). Bielefeld and Cleveland further demonstrate the importance of definitional clarity because faith-based organizations differ substantially in their relationship with religious doctrine, government, funding, and service delivery (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013). These insights are relevant to Muhammadiyah because its humanitarian activity emerges from a broader religious-social organization rather than from a narrowly humanitarian institution.

A second body of literature concerns Islamic humanitarianism and philanthropy. Islamic humanitarian organizations frequently combine religious obligations such as zakat, sadaqah, and infaq with modern organizational practices, thereby producing institutional forms that are simultaneously religious and professional. Mohamed and Ofteringer show that Islamic humanitarian organizations have increasingly participated in developing shared humanitarian principles through dialogue with other humanitarian actors (Mohamed and Ofteringer 2015). Khafagy similarly identifies the continuing tension between humanitarian missions and religiously motivated objectives within Islamic faith-based organizations (Khafagy 2020). In Indonesia, Baidhawry's study of Lazismu demonstrates that Muhammadiyah's philanthropic model has moved beyond conventional charity toward empowerment, redistribution, and social justice (Baidhawry 2015). Darnela's analysis of Islamic humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees also demonstrates that religious identity can strengthen fundraising and advocacy while simultaneously creating risks of humanitarian commodification when public narratives become disconnected from conditions on the ground (Darnela 2021).

The theoretical framework of this article combines transnational civil society theory, humanitarian diplomacy, and faith-based humanitarianism. Transnational civil society is understood as the domain in which non-state organizations mobilize resources, norms, identities, and networks across national boundaries. Muhammadiyah's engagement with Palestine fits this framework because its activities connect Indonesian donors, organizational institutions, humanitarian

partners, educational networks, and Palestinian communities. Humanitarian diplomacy provides the second analytical dimension. Rather than treating diplomacy as an exclusively governmental practice, humanitarian diplomacy concerns efforts to negotiate humanitarian access, influence relevant actors, advocate for affected populations, mobilize resources, and create conditions for humanitarian action. Research on humanitarian diplomacy demonstrates that such activity involves both practical negotiation and normative advocacy (Barakat 2024; Constantinou 2022).

The third framework is faith-based humanitarianism, which explains how religious values become organizational resources for humanitarian action while remaining subject to universal standards of impartiality, accountability, professionalism, and human dignity. Wilkinson et al. demonstrate that local faith actors can be important first and last responders because they possess deep social embeddedness, yet they are often marginalized within formal international humanitarian coordination structures (Wilkinson et al. 2022). This framework is supplemented by the concept of localization, which emphasizes transferring resources, authority, and decision-making capacity toward national and local actors. Localization is analytically important because transnational humanitarianism may otherwise reproduce hierarchical relationships between international organizations and local communities. The article therefore evaluates Muhammadiyah not only according to its capacity to deliver assistance but also according to its ability to develop equitable partnerships, strengthen local agency, and maintain accountability throughout the humanitarian chain.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative socio-institutional and normative research design. The analysis combines a literature review with institutional analysis of scholarship concerning Muhammadiyah, Islamic philanthropy, faith-based humanitarian organizations, humanitarian diplomacy, civil society, and humanitarian localization. The literature was selected according to substantive relevance to the research question, scholarly publication status, and publication date, with priority given to peer-reviewed journal articles published no later than 2025. Particular attention was given to studies examining Muhammadiyah's humanitarian practices and Islamic organizations' engagement with Palestine, while comparative literature on humanitarian organizations was used to establish broader analytical concepts.

The analysis proceeds through thematic interpretation rather than statistical measurement. The selected literature was organized around four analytical dimensions: institutional mobilization, humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy, transnational partnerships and localization, and accountability and professionalization. This approach allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of humanitarian activities toward an examination of the institutional mechanisms through which Muhammadiyah translates religious solidarity into

humanitarian action. The methodology also recognizes the limitations of document-based research. Because the article does not rely on direct interviews with Palestinian beneficiaries or Muhammadiyah field personnel, it does not claim to measure beneficiary-level outcomes. Instead, it evaluates institutional patterns, governance arrangements, and conceptual implications identified in the existing literature.

Results and Discussion

A. Religious Solidarity as an Institutional Resource for Humanitarian Action

Muhammadiyah's humanitarian engagement with Palestine demonstrates how religious solidarity can become an institutional resource rather than remaining an expression of symbolic identification. Religious organizations possess pre-existing networks of members, educational institutions, philanthropic bodies, health facilities, and community organizations that can be mobilized rapidly when crises emerge. This institutional depth differentiates Muhammadiyah from organizations that depend primarily on short-term humanitarian campaigns. Research on Lazismu illustrates how Muhammadiyah has progressively developed philanthropic mechanisms that combine charitable giving with empowerment and social justice objectives (Baidhawiy 2015). Its broader social infrastructure provides the organizational foundation through which humanitarian concerns can be transformed into fundraising, education, health assistance, advocacy, and international partnerships.

The Palestine case is therefore better understood as part of a longer institutional trajectory rather than as a temporary response to a particular episode of conflict. Andriansyah identifies Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama as major Indonesian Islamic organizations that mobilize philanthropic resources and institutional networks for Palestinian relief (Andriansyah 2024). Elantri and Surwandono similarly find that Muhammadiyah's Palestine-related activities between 2021 and 2025 included economic, social, educational, and political dimensions, indicating that the organization's engagement has a multidimensional character (Elantri and Surwandono 2025). This pattern suggests that religious solidarity is most consequential when it is embedded in durable institutional structures capable of sustaining engagement after media attention declines. The analytical implication is that Muhammadiyah's comparative advantage does not simply lie in mobilizing donations but in converting religious commitment into repeatable organizational capacity.

B. From Humanitarian Assistance to Humanitarian Diplomacy

Humanitarian assistance becomes diplomatically significant when it is accompanied by communication, advocacy, negotiation, and engagement with institutions that control access to affected populations. The distinction is important

because charity alone does not necessarily alter the political or institutional conditions that produce humanitarian vulnerability. Husein, Kurniawan, and Kurniawati demonstrate that Muhammadiyah's broader humanitarian operations correspond with major dimensions of humanitarian diplomacy, including maintaining organizational presence, negotiating access, advocacy, and monitoring assistance programs (Husein, Kurniawan, and Kurniawati 2024). This indicates that Muhammadiyah can operate simultaneously as a humanitarian provider and a civil society diplomatic actor.

The Palestine case further demonstrates the relationship between assistance and moral advocacy. Elantri and Surwandono characterize Muhammadiyah's engagement as combining humanitarian assistance with moral and political diplomacy, including advocacy for Palestinian justice and independence (Elantri and Surwandono 2025). Saputra, Ismail, and Salam similarly identify a broader transformation within Indonesian Islamic organizations from charity-oriented engagement toward more explicit political advocacy concerning Palestine (Saputra, Ismail, and Salam 2025). This evolution should not automatically be interpreted as politicization undermining humanitarianism. Rather, it reflects the fact that humanitarian crises frequently possess political causes and consequences. The critical boundary is whether advocacy remains compatible with humanitarian principles and whether humanitarian resources are distributed according to needs rather than political or ideological preferences.

C. Transnational Partnerships and the Question of Localization

Muhammadiyah's international humanitarian role cannot be separated from its capacity to establish partnerships across borders. Contemporary humanitarian action is rarely conducted by a single organization; instead, it depends on networks involving local organizations, international NGOs, religious institutions, donors, governments, and multilateral agencies. Research on humanitarian localization emphasizes that locally embedded organizations frequently possess superior contextual knowledge, community trust, and access, but they may remain structurally subordinate to organizations controlling financial resources and international legitimacy (Elkahlout et al. 2022; Frennesson et al. 2022). For a transnational organization such as Muhammadiyah, this raises an important question: does partnership merely facilitate delivery, or does it also strengthen the agency of local actors?

This distinction becomes particularly important in conflict-affected Palestine, where access, security, political restrictions, and logistical barriers complicate humanitarian delivery. Effective humanitarian partnerships should therefore be based on complementarity rather than institutional substitution. Wilkinson et al. show that local faith actors are often deeply embedded within communities but may remain outside dominant humanitarian coordination structures (Wilkinson et al. 2022). Muhammadiyah can potentially contribute to addressing this structural imbalance because it occupies an intermediate position between local social

networks and international humanitarian systems. However, partnership should involve more than transferring funds or distributing goods. It should include joint needs assessment, shared decision-making, local procurement where feasible, capacity strengthening, transparent reporting, and mechanisms through which Palestinian partners can influence program design. Without these safeguards, transnational humanitarianism risks becoming another form of externally directed assistance.

D. Accountability, Professionalization, and the Ethics of Faith-Based Humanitarianism

The institutionalization of religious humanitarianism creates an important governance dilemma. Religious identity can generate trust and mobilization, but trust alone cannot substitute for accountability. Humanitarian organizations must demonstrate that resources are collected and distributed transparently, that beneficiaries are selected according to legitimate needs, and that assistance is protected from political or organizational capture. Research on Islamic humanitarian organizations shows that the relationship between religious motivation and humanitarian professionalism is neither inherently complementary nor inherently contradictory. Khafagy identifies tensions between humanitarian objectives and religious missionary dimensions, while Mohamed and Ofteringer demonstrate the possibility of developing shared humanitarian principles through engagement between Islamic and secular humanitarian actors (Khafagy 2020; Mohamed and Ofteringer 2015).

For Muhammadiyah, professionalization should therefore be viewed not as a departure from religious identity but as an institutional expression of the ethical responsibility associated with humanitarian action. Baidhawry's analysis of Lazismu illustrates how Muhammadiyah's philanthropic institutions have moved toward more formalized and productive models of resource management (Baidhawry 2015). At the same time, Darnela's study of Islamic humanitarian assistance demonstrates why accountability is essential when religious narratives become powerful fundraising mechanisms (Darnela 2021). Humanitarian credibility ultimately depends on the relationship between public trust and institutional verification. Muhammadiyah's humanitarian engagement would therefore be strengthened by systematic impact reporting, independent auditing, transparent partner selection, safeguarding procedures, beneficiary feedback mechanisms, and public disclosure of program outcomes. Such measures would protect both humanitarian beneficiaries and the organization itself.

E. Muhammadiyah and the Reconfiguration of Indonesian Civil Society

Muhammadiyah's international humanitarian engagement also reveals a broader transformation in the role of Indonesian Islamic civil society. Historically, Muhammadiyah has been deeply involved in education, health, social welfare, and

philanthropy, allowing it to operate as an institutional intermediary between citizens and the state. Research on Muhammadiyah's social services demonstrates that its organizational infrastructure has long functioned as a form of civil society capacity rather than simply as an extension of religious activity (Samsudin and Prabowo 2022). Its international humanitarian activities extend this civil society function beyond territorial boundaries.

This development is analytically significant because it challenges a state-centric understanding of Indonesia's external engagement. Humanitarian solidarity with Palestine is not produced exclusively through governmental foreign policy. Civil society organizations, religious networks, philanthropic institutions, universities, and individual citizens also contribute to constructing Indonesia's international moral identity. Hoesterey demonstrates how Indonesian Islamic organizations and mosque communities can participate in forms of public and Track II diplomacy, while research on Indonesian Islamic civil society emphasizes the continuing role of organizations such as Muhammadiyah in mediating social and political interests (Hoesterey 2020; Arifianto 2024). Muhammadiyah's Palestine engagement therefore illustrates the pluralization of international agency: foreign policy narratives can emerge from society as well as from government institutions. This does not eliminate the role of the state but creates an expanded diplomatic ecosystem in which non-state actors contribute resources, norms, legitimacy, and public pressure.

F. Humanitarianism, Neutrality, and Advocacy

One of the most difficult questions surrounding Muhammadiyah's Palestine engagement concerns the relationship between humanitarian principles and political advocacy. Humanitarianism traditionally emphasizes principles such as humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, while advocacy may involve explicitly criticizing political conditions that generate suffering. Humanitarian diplomacy literature demonstrates that these principles need not be mutually exclusive. Humanitarian actors frequently negotiate with political authorities and advocate for affected populations while attempting to preserve operational independence (Barakat 2024; Mubin 2023). The relevant question is therefore not whether Muhammadiyah expresses political views concerning Palestine, but whether humanitarian assistance itself remains needs-based and institutionally protected from political discrimination.

This distinction is especially important because Islamic organizations may possess strong normative commitments concerning justice, oppression, and solidarity. Such commitments can motivate substantial humanitarian support, but they can also create perceptions of partiality among external observers. Mohamed and Oferinger's discussion of Islamic humanitarian principles demonstrates that Muslim humanitarian organizations have actively participated in efforts to articulate humanitarian standards compatible with their religious identity (Mohamed and Oferinger 2015). Muhammadiyah can therefore reconcile advocacy with

humanitarian professionalism by maintaining a clear institutional distinction between normative political statements and operational humanitarian procedures. Advocacy may articulate solidarity with Palestinian rights, while humanitarian programs should apply transparent criteria for needs assessment, beneficiary selection, safeguarding, and resource distribution. Such institutional separation strengthens rather than weakens the credibility of humanitarian diplomacy.

G. Toward a Muhammadiyah Model of Transnational Humanitarian Diplomacy

The preceding analysis suggests that Muhammadiyah's engagement with Palestine can be conceptualized as a model consisting of four mutually reinforcing capacities: moral mobilization, institutional humanitarianism, transnational partnership, and public advocacy. Moral mobilization generates public solidarity and resources; institutional humanitarianism converts those resources into organized programs; transnational partnerships facilitate access and contextual knowledge; and advocacy connects humanitarian concerns to broader debates about justice and international responsibility. This configuration distinguishes Muhammadiyah from purely charitable organizations because the organization's engagement operates simultaneously at community, institutional, national, and international levels.

However, the model should not be romanticized. International humanitarian scholarship repeatedly demonstrates that organizational networks can reproduce inequalities even when they are presented as partnerships. Localization research shows that transferring implementation responsibilities without transferring authority may leave local organizations dependent on external funding and decision-making structures (Frennesson et al. 2022; Khoury and Scott 2024). Muhammadiyah's future engagement should therefore place greater emphasis on partnership governance, local leadership, shared accountability, and long-term institutional resilience. The objective should not be to make Muhammadiyah the dominant humanitarian actor in Palestine but to strengthen a network in which Palestinian organizations retain agency while benefiting from Indonesian philanthropic resources, institutional expertise, and diplomatic support. In this sense, the strongest contribution Muhammadiyah can make is not merely to deliver aid but to help construct equitable humanitarian relationships.

Conclusion

Muhammadiyah's engagement with Palestine demonstrates the expanding role of Islamic civil society in contemporary humanitarian governance. Its humanitarian activities should not be interpreted solely as expressions of religious solidarity or charitable assistance because they operate through a broader institutional architecture involving philanthropy, education, health, advocacy, organizational networks, and international partnerships. Existing scholarship indicates that Muhammadiyah possesses the institutional characteristics of a faith-

based humanitarian actor capable of engaging in humanitarian diplomacy. Its Palestine engagement consequently illustrates how religious organizations can become transnational actors that connect domestic social mobilization with international humanitarian concerns. The case also demonstrates that humanitarian diplomacy increasingly operates through networks rather than exclusively through state institutions. Muhammadiyah's ability to mobilize social trust and institutional resources provides an important source of non-state capacity within Indonesia's broader engagement with global humanitarian crises.

Nevertheless, the legitimacy of Muhammadiyah's humanitarian role ultimately depends on the quality of its governance rather than the intensity of its solidarity. Religious motivation can provide powerful resources for humanitarian action, but it must be accompanied by transparency, professional standards, needs-based programming, independent accountability, and meaningful local partnerships. The localization literature further suggests that transnational organizations should avoid reproducing hierarchical relationships in which local actors merely implement externally designed programs. Muhammadiyah can strengthen its humanitarian diplomacy by prioritizing shared decision-making, Palestinian institutional agency, transparent resource management, beneficiary feedback, and long-term capacity development. Such an approach would enable religious solidarity to become a durable form of humanitarian practice while preserving the universal principles of human dignity, impartiality, accountability, and independence.

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