

Nahdlatul Ulama and the Palestinian Question: Religious Authority, Humanitarian Solidarity, and Indonesian Public Discourse

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Abstract

The Palestinian issue occupies an important position within Indonesian Muslim public discourse, with major Islamic organizations contributing to debates concerning humanitarianism, international justice, and religious solidarity. This article examines the role of Nahdlatul Ulama in shaping Indonesian perspectives on Palestine. Using qualitative institutional and discourse analysis, the study examines organizational statements, religious discourse, humanitarian initiatives, and public engagement. The article argues that Nahdlatul Ulama's position illustrates the complex role of religious organizations in connecting Islamic moral principles with Indonesia's foreign policy traditions and humanitarian commitments. Palestine-related discourse is not limited to theological solidarity but also encompasses questions of civilian protection, international law, peace, and humanitarian assistance. The study analyzes how religious authority influences public understanding of the Palestinian conflict while also considering the organization's emphasis on moderation and peaceful engagement. The article proposes that Indonesian Islamic organizations can contribute to international humanitarian discourse by combining religious legitimacy with evidence-based advocacy and humanitarian principles. The study concludes that Nahdlatul Ulama represents an important intermediary between religious values, civil society, and Indonesian public discourse concerning Palestine.

[Isu Palestina menempati posisi penting dalam wacana publik Muslim Indonesia, dengan organisasi-organisasi Islam besar berkontribusi pada perdebatan mengenai humanisme, keadilan internasional, dan solidaritas keagamaan. Artikel ini mengkaji peran Nahdlatul Ulama dalam membentuk perspektif Indonesia tentang Palestina. Dengan menggunakan analisis institusional dan wacana kualitatif, studi ini meneliti pernyataan organisasi, wacana keagamaan, inisiatif kemanusiaan, dan keterlibatan publik. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa posisi Nahdlatul Ulama menggambarkan peran kompleks organisasi keagamaan dalam menghubungkan prinsip-prinsip

moral Islam dengan tradisi kebijakan luar negeri dan komitmen kemanusiaan Indonesia. Wacana terkait Palestina tidak terbatas pada solidaritas teologis tetapi juga mencakup pertanyaan tentang perlindungan warga sipil, hukum internasional, perdamaian, dan bantuan kemanusiaan. Studi ini menganalisis bagaimana otoritas keagamaan memengaruhi pemahaman publik tentang konflik Palestina sambil juga mempertimbangkan penekanan organisasi pada moderasi dan keterlibatan damai. Artikel ini mengusulkan bahwa organisasi-organisasi Islam Indonesia dapat berkontribusi pada wacana kemanusiaan internasional dengan menggabungkan legitimasi keagamaan dengan advokasi berbasis bukti dan prinsip-prinsip kemanusiaan. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa Nahdlatul Ulama merupakan perantara penting antara nilai-nilai keagamaan, masyarakat sipil, dan wacana publik Indonesia mengenai Palestina.]

Keywords: Nahdlatul Ulama, Palestine, religious authority, humanitarianism, Indonesian society

Introduction

The Palestinian question has acquired a durable position within Indonesian public life that exceeds the boundaries of conventional foreign-policy debate. Indonesia's historical opposition to colonialism, its constitutional commitment to international peace, and the strong affective connection between Indonesian Muslims and Palestine have produced a political environment in which Palestinian issues are simultaneously understood as questions of justice, humanitarian protection, religious solidarity, and national identity. Recent studies show that public support for Palestine in Indonesia is expressed through humanitarian fundraising, demonstrations, religious discourse, political advocacy, digital campaigns, and community-based mobilization. Such engagement demonstrates that foreign-policy preferences are not produced exclusively by state institutions but can also emerge through interactions between government, religious organizations, civil society, and wider publics (Prakoso and Haryanto 2024; Sofea and Fawzy 2024; Kaslam 2024).

Within this environment, Nahdlatul Ulama occupies a particularly significant position. NU is not merely a religious association with a large membership base; it possesses educational institutions, pesantren networks, philanthropic structures, intellectual communities, international branches, and long-established relationships with political and civic institutions. These organizational resources provide NU with multiple channels through which religious values can enter public debate. Research on NU's international activities demonstrates that the organization has increasingly developed transnational networks through which its understanding of moderate Islam, religious agency, and social responsibility is

communicated beyond Indonesia (Pribadi 2022). Consequently, NU's engagement with Palestine should be examined not only as a response to a foreign-policy issue but also as an expression of the organization's broader role as a religious civil society actor.

Previous studies have addressed several dimensions of this relationship. Zidni (2023), for example, demonstrates that NU has maintained a relatively consistent commitment to Palestinian independence while the reasoning and strategies of different NU leaders have varied according to domestic political circumstances and international relationships. Other research has emphasized NU's broader contribution to Indonesian foreign policy and religious diplomacy, showing that its identity as a moderate Islamic organization can generate international networks and diplomatic opportunities (Utama 2024). Studies of Indonesian Islamic organizations also reveal that humanitarian solidarity with Palestine is increasingly connected with advocacy, public mobilization, and political communication rather than remaining confined to charitable activity (Andriansyah 2024; Aswar, Fajri, and Mulia 2025).

Despite these contributions, an important analytical gap remains. Existing research frequently treats religious solidarity, humanitarian action, religious authority, and foreign-policy advocacy as separate phenomena. Such separation risks overlooking how NU's authority allows these dimensions to reinforce one another. A statement concerning Palestine may simultaneously function as religious guidance, moral framing, humanitarian advocacy, and public diplomacy. Similarly, humanitarian assistance may not only provide material relief but also reproduce organizational legitimacy and connect Indonesian communities to transnational networks. This article therefore asks how NU's religious authority shapes its engagement with the Palestinian question and how that authority is translated into humanitarian and public discourse.

The article argues that NU's engagement with Palestine is best understood as a form of religiously grounded humanitarian public diplomacy. This concept refers to the capacity of a religious civil society organization to mobilize moral authority, organizational networks, humanitarian resources, and public communication in order to influence perceptions and advocacy concerning an international issue. Unlike state diplomacy, this form of engagement does not depend on sovereign authority. Its influence derives instead from social legitimacy, religious credibility, institutional networks, and the ability to connect domestic publics with transnational humanitarian concerns. NU's Palestine engagement therefore illustrates how non-state religious actors can participate in international affairs while remaining embedded in national civil society.

Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

The first theoretical foundation of this study concerns religious authority. Religious authority should not be reduced to the formal capacity to issue binding legal

decisions. In contemporary Indonesia, authority is produced through knowledge, institutional recognition, moral credibility, organizational affiliation, public communication, and community acceptance. Research on Indonesian religious authority demonstrates that traditional organizations such as NU operate within an increasingly competitive environment in which religious knowledge circulates through television, websites, social media, and other digital platforms (Musyarrofah and Zuhhannan 2023; Mudhofi and Karim 2024). This transformation does not necessarily eliminate traditional authority. Instead, it changes the conditions through which authority is demonstrated, interpreted, and contested.

The second framework concerns religious soft power and public diplomacy. Religion can constitute a source of influence when religious identities, moral narratives, institutional networks, and values affect perceptions and relationships beyond the immediate membership of a religious organization. Yang and Li (2021) conceptualize religious soft power through performative, discursive, and relational dimensions, suggesting that religious influence emerges not merely from doctrinal claims but from interactions among identity, discourse, and social relationships. Similarly, studies of faith-based diplomacy emphasize that religious actors can contribute to conflict transformation by mobilizing moral language, reconciliation practices, and transnational relationships (Cox and Philpott 2003; Troy 2008; Johnstone and Svensson 2013).

The third framework is civil society and transnational advocacy. Religious organizations may operate between state institutions and social communities, converting societal values into organized action. NU's extensive institutional infrastructure allows it to translate individual religious sentiment into collective programs, while its international branches and partnerships extend these activities beyond Indonesia. Pribadi (2022) demonstrates that NU's transnational networks provide organizational mechanisms for exercising religious agency abroad. Such networks are particularly important for Palestine because humanitarian solidarity requires connections among donors, religious leaders, humanitarian organizations, educational institutions, and international partners.

The fourth framework concerns humanitarian diplomacy. Humanitarian action is frequently distinguished from political advocacy because humanitarian principles emphasize humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. However, contemporary humanitarian diplomacy demonstrates that humanitarian organizations inevitably interact with political institutions and public discourse. The challenge is therefore not to eliminate the political implications of humanitarian action but to ensure that humanitarian objectives are not subordinated to narrow political interests. Abu-Nimer (2011) demonstrates the potential of religious leaders to move from conflict-related incitement toward nonviolent engagement, while Omer's approach to religious peacebuilding emphasizes the practical contributions of religious actors to social transformation and humanitarian work. These perspectives are useful for examining how NU can combine religious solidarity with humanitarian principles.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative socio-legal and institutional approach. The study treats NU's engagement with Palestine as a multidimensional phenomenon involving religious discourse, organizational practice, humanitarian action, and public diplomacy. Rather than measuring public opinion statistically, the research examines how meanings and institutional roles are constructed through scholarly literature, organizational documents, public statements, and documented humanitarian activities. This approach is appropriate because the central research problem concerns the relationship between religious authority and public engagement rather than the frequency of particular organizational activities.

The primary analytical materials consist of peer-reviewed journal articles and publicly available institutional materials concerning NU, Indonesian Islamic civil society, Palestine solidarity, humanitarian action, religious authority, and Indonesia's foreign-policy orientation. Particular attention is given to scholarship examining NU's position toward Palestinian independence, its transnational networks, its role in Indonesian foreign policy, and the humanitarian activities of Indonesian Islamic organizations. The study also considers research concerning broader Indonesian Muslim mobilization because NU's influence cannot be assessed independently from the wider discursive environment in which other Islamic organizations, activists, and humanitarian actors operate.

Data were analyzed thematically through four interconnected categories: religious authority, humanitarian solidarity, public discourse, and transnational engagement. The analysis first identifies the normative narratives through which Palestine is interpreted; it then examines the organizational mechanisms through which those narratives are converted into action. The final stage considers the relationship between NU's religious legitimacy and its public influence. This analytical sequence allows the study to distinguish between symbolic solidarity and institutionalized engagement while also recognizing that the two may reinforce one another.

Results and Discussion

A. Religious Authority and the Construction of the Palestinian Question

NU's engagement with Palestine is rooted in a religious authority structure that combines traditional Islamic scholarship, organizational legitimacy, and historical experience. The organization's religious authority is not derived from a single charismatic leader but from a broader institutional ecosystem involving ulama, pesantren, educational institutions, organizational councils, and established traditions of Islamic legal reasoning. This structure enables Palestine to be interpreted within a moral vocabulary that includes justice, protection of the oppressed, solidarity, peaceful coexistence, and opposition to colonial domination.

Zidni (2023) shows that NU's support for Palestinian independence has persisted across different leadership periods, even though individual leaders have differed in their diplomatic approaches and political emphases. This continuity indicates that Palestine has become embedded within NU's institutional memory rather than being dependent solely upon temporary political preferences.

The significance of NU's religious authority becomes clearer when Palestine is situated within the organization's broader understanding of moderate Islam. Studies of NU demonstrate that moderation is associated with principles such as tolerance, balance, social responsibility, and the integration of Islamic identity with Indonesian citizenship (Pektas 2021; Fuadi 2022). Consequently, support for Palestine does not necessarily require the adoption of maximalist or exclusionary political positions. NU can frame Palestinian solidarity through humanitarian and international-law language while maintaining its commitment to peaceful engagement. This distinguishes its approach from forms of political mobilization that interpret Palestine exclusively through confrontation. The analytical importance of this distinction is that religious authority does not merely increase the intensity of solidarity; it also influences the form that solidarity takes.

At the same time, NU's religious authority should not be understood as uncontested. Contemporary Indonesian religious communication is increasingly characterized by competition among institutional scholars, independent preachers, digital religious figures, and activist networks. Research on new media demonstrates that religious organizations must negotiate their authority within a fragmented communication environment (Ronaldi, Saidek, and Lestari 2023). This condition affects Palestine discourse because individuals may encounter competing interpretations concerning the appropriate religious, political, or humanitarian response. NU's influence therefore depends increasingly on its capacity to communicate credible interpretations rather than merely relying on its historical organizational prestige.

B. From Religious Solidarity to Humanitarian Engagement

The second major finding concerns the transformation of religious solidarity into institutional humanitarian action. Indonesian Islamic organizations have long contributed humanitarian assistance to Palestine, and recent research confirms that NU and Muhammadiyah have mobilized organizational resources and membership networks for Palestinian relief (Andriansyah 2024). Humanitarian action gives religious solidarity a practical dimension: solidarity is not limited to prayer, statements, or public demonstrations but can be expressed through fundraising, medical assistance, educational support, reconstruction, and humanitarian partnerships. This transformation is important because it allows religious sentiment to generate measurable social outcomes.

NU's humanitarian engagement can therefore be interpreted as an institutional mechanism for translating moral authority into public action. Religious legitimacy can encourage trust among donors and supporters, while organizational

infrastructure facilitates resource mobilization. Research on Indonesian humanitarian responses indicates that Islamic organizations are able to use their community networks to collect and distribute resources while maintaining a connection between religious obligation and humanitarian responsibility (Kaslam 2024). The humanitarian dimension also expands the constituency of Palestine solidarity. Individuals who may not participate in political activism can nevertheless contribute through charitable or humanitarian channels.

Nevertheless, humanitarian solidarity creates an accountability challenge. The stronger the moral legitimacy of an organization, the greater the responsibility to ensure transparent management of public contributions. Humanitarian assistance should therefore be assessed not only by the amount of resources mobilized but also by needs assessment, accountability, professional standards, distribution mechanisms, and institutional transparency. Recent research on Indonesian Islamic humanitarian organizations emphasizes the importance of organizational credibility in sustaining public trust. NU's humanitarian role would therefore be strengthened when religious legitimacy is accompanied by clear institutional procedures and publicly verifiable humanitarian outcomes.

C. NU as a Bridge between Domestic Public Discourse and International Engagement

NU's role becomes more distinctive when its domestic religious authority is connected with transnational networks. Pribadi (2022) demonstrates that NU has developed organizational structures outside Indonesia through which the organization communicates its conception of Islam Nusantara and exercises religious agency. These networks provide an institutional basis for engagement with international issues. Palestine is particularly suited to such engagement because it is simultaneously a humanitarian crisis, an international-law issue, a foreign-policy concern, and a subject of religious solidarity. NU can therefore approach the issue through several overlapping institutional languages.

This bridging function is important because religious organizations can communicate with audiences that may not be reached through formal diplomatic channels. Government diplomacy generally operates through states, international organizations, and official negotiations, whereas NU can communicate through religious communities, civil society organizations, educational networks, interfaith institutions, and international religious actors. Research on NU's strategic role in Indonesian foreign policy indicates that the organization's international engagement can complement state diplomacy by projecting moderate Islamic values and strengthening Indonesia's wider diplomatic objectives (Utama 2024). NU consequently operates within what may be described as a multi-level diplomatic environment.

However, non-state diplomacy should not be romanticized. Religious organizations can possess considerable moral authority, but their interpretations do not necessarily represent the entire Indonesian Muslim population. Recent research

on representation within NU demonstrates that claims to speak on behalf of the organization and its constituency can be contested (Rahman 2025). This observation has direct implications for Palestine discourse. NU can be influential without being the exclusive representative of Indonesian Muslims. Its legitimacy therefore depends partly on acknowledging internal plurality and avoiding the assumption that organizational authority automatically translates into universal public consent.

D. Humanitarianism, Peace Advocacy, and the Limits of Religious Diplomacy

NU's emphasis on moderation provides a basis for framing Palestine through humanitarian and peace-oriented discourse. Research on religious actors in conflict transformation demonstrates that religious organizations can function as epistemic communities when they share normative commitments and possess networks capable of communicating those commitments across social boundaries (Haynes 2011). In the Palestinian context, this capacity can support narratives emphasizing civilian protection, humanitarian access, international law, and peaceful resolution. Such an approach allows NU to participate in Palestine advocacy without reducing the issue to a binary religious confrontation.

The peace-oriented dimension is especially important because Palestine discourse in Indonesia can become highly polarized. Studies of Indonesian Muslim mobilization show that Palestine can function simultaneously as a symbol of justice, resistance, Islamic solidarity, and anti-colonial identity (Rahmadani and Mubiina 2025). These interpretations can generate powerful collective action, but they can also simplify complex political realities. NU's potential contribution lies in connecting solidarity with ethical discipline: rejecting civilian harm, supporting humanitarian protection, encouraging lawful advocacy, and distinguishing criticism of state policies from hostility toward religious or ethnic communities.

This approach also establishes limits to religious diplomacy. Faith-based diplomacy cannot replace formal diplomacy, international law, humanitarian institutions, or political negotiations. Marsden (2014) warns that faith-based approaches may become problematic when religious advocacy assumes moral superiority or becomes too closely integrated with political or military agendas. NU's comparative advantage therefore lies not in replacing state diplomacy but in complementing it. Its contribution is strongest when it mobilizes trust, dialogue, humanitarian resources, and moral persuasion while maintaining institutional independence and respect for pluralism.

E. Digital Public Discourse and the Reconfiguration of NU's Authority

Digital communication has transformed the conditions under which NU participates in Palestine-related discourse. Social media enables religious organizations to disseminate statements rapidly, mobilize donations, publicize

humanitarian activities, and engage younger audiences. At the same time, digital platforms weaken the traditional gatekeeping function of established religious institutions. Independent preachers, activists, influencers, and ordinary users can produce interpretations of Palestine that compete directly with organizational narratives. Research on NU's use of new media indicates that the organization has had to adapt its religious communication strategies to preserve relevance within an increasingly fragmented digital public sphere (Musyarrofah and Zulhannan 2023; Mudhofi and Karim 2024).

The digital environment also alters the relationship between religious authority and public participation. Authority becomes increasingly dialogical because audiences can comment, challenge, reinterpret, and circulate religious messages. This means that NU's authority depends not only on what organizational leaders say but also on how communities interpret and reproduce those messages. Palestine activism therefore becomes a useful case for understanding the broader transformation of Indonesian religious authority. The organization's statements may provide normative direction, but digital publics determine how those statements are translated into campaigns, fundraising initiatives, boycotts, demonstrations, and humanitarian practices.

This transformation produces both opportunities and risks. Digital communication can expand humanitarian reach and enable rapid mobilization, but it can also accelerate misinformation, emotional polarization, and oversimplification. Research on Indonesian Palestine discourse has identified online disinformation as a significant challenge to informed public engagement. NU's role should therefore include not only mobilizing solidarity but also strengthening media literacy and responsible information practices. Religious authority in the digital age is most sustainable when it combines moral credibility with epistemic responsibility.

Conclusion

Nahdlatul Ulama's engagement with the Palestinian question demonstrates how religious authority can operate beyond the conventional boundaries of religious instruction. NU's position is constructed through the interaction of Islamic traditions, organizational legitimacy, historical memory, humanitarian practice, and transnational networks. Palestine has become an important field in which these dimensions intersect. The organization's support for Palestinian rights cannot therefore be reduced to religious sentiment alone. It reflects a broader institutional orientation in which Islamic moral principles interact with Indonesia's anti-colonial identity, humanitarian commitments, and foreign-policy traditions. The continuity of NU's engagement across different leadership periods further indicates that Palestine occupies a durable position within the organization's institutional consciousness.

The article further argues that NU's most significant contribution lies in its ability to connect different levels of action. At the domestic level, it shapes religious

and civic discourse; at the humanitarian level, it mobilizes resources and institutional networks; and at the international level, it can participate in transnational dialogue and public diplomacy. This multidimensional role makes NU a significant non-state actor in Indonesia's engagement with Palestine. Yet its influence must not be equated with uncontested representation. Religious authority remains plural and increasingly contested, particularly within digital environments. NU's legitimacy therefore depends on transparency, inclusiveness, evidence-based advocacy, and recognition of the distinction between religious solidarity and political representation.

Ultimately, NU's experience suggests that religious organizations can contribute constructively to international humanitarian discourse when moral authority is translated into accountable institutional practice. A sustainable model of religious humanitarian public diplomacy should combine solidarity with civilian protection, humanitarian principles, peaceful advocacy, and respect for international law. NU is particularly positioned to develop such a model because its organizational identity incorporates religious tradition, Indonesian nationalism, social responsibility, and international engagement. The Palestinian question consequently provides not only a case for studying Indonesian solidarity but also a broader lens through which to understand the evolving role of religious civil society in contemporary international affairs.

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