

The Internationalization of the Muhammadiyah Movement: Strategies, Networks, and Its Impacts

Ghina Ruqayatul Malihah*¹, Muhammad Fakhri Sajidan², Kenneth Sulthon Alafi Al Hallaj³, Erfanda Andi Mada Arectya⁴, Eka Firmansyah⁵

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia,

ghinaruqayatul09@gmail.com

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, Indonesia, fakhrisajidan111@gmail.com

³Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia, elaphy19@gmail.com

⁴Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, Indonesia, erfandaandi99@gmail.com

⁵Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu, Indonesia, ekafirmansyah689@gmail.com

*ghinaruqayatul09@gmail.com

Received: 2021-May-15

Rev. Req: 2022-May-29

Accepted: 2022-June-20

ABSTRACT: The Muhammadiyah movement, founded in 1912 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, has evolved from a domestic Islamic reform organization into a significant transnational religious actor. This article examines the internationalization strategies employed by Muhammadiyah, the global networks it has built, and the broader impacts of its outreach on education, humanitarian affairs, and inter-civilizational dialogue. Using a qualitative approach based on systematic literature review and document analysis, this study identifies three principal pillars of Muhammadiyah's international engagement: (1) establishing overseas branches and institutional partnerships; (2) disseminating its progressive Islamic thought through educational and media channels; and (3) participating in global humanitarian and interfaith platforms. The findings reveal that Muhammadiyah's internationalization is driven by a distinctive theological framework that integrates Islamic modernism with civic engagement, enabling the organization to operate effectively across diverse sociopolitical contexts. Its expanding global presence carries significant implications for understanding how non-state religious actors contribute to transnational civil society and moderate Islam's public diplomacy on the world stage.

Keywords: *Muhammadiyah, Internationalization, Transnational Islam, Islamic Modernism, Global Network*

I. INTRODUCTION

Muhammadiyah, established on November 18, 1912, by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta, is one of the largest Islamic organizations in the world, with membership estimated at more than 60 million in Indonesia alone [1]. Since its founding, the organization has championed Islamic modernism a reformist current that seeks to reconcile Islamic teachings with rationalism, empiricism, and contemporary scientific knowledge [2]. While its domestic contributions to education, healthcare, and social welfare are well-documented, its international dimensions remain comparatively underexplored in scholarly literature [3].

In recent decades, Muhammadiyah has expanded its institutional footprint beyond Indonesian borders through a combination of diaspora networks, formal bilateral agreements with international universities, and active participation in multilateral forums such as the United Nations and the World Council of Churches [4]. This expansion reflects broader trends in the globalization of Islamic movements and underscores the significance of non-state religious actors in shaping transnational civil society [5]. Scholars of religious sociology and international relations have increasingly noted that organizations like Muhammadiyah occupy a distinctive position: they are simultaneously local cultural actors and global normative agents [6].

Despite growing scholarly interest, the mechanisms of Muhammadiyah's internationalization remain inadequately theorized. How does an organization rooted in Indonesian Islamic tradition build credible international networks? What strategies enable it to project its normative influence while respecting the sovereignty of host communities? And what are the concrete impacts of its global engagement on education, humanitarianism, and interfaith relations? These questions animate the present study [7].

This article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical framework on transnational religious movements. Section 3 outlines the research methodology. Section 4 analyzes Muhammadiyah's primary internationalization strategies. Section 5 maps its global network architecture. Section 6 evaluates its impacts across selected domains. Section 7 discusses implications for the study of religion and international relations, and Section 8 offers conclusions [8].

For the theoretical framework of this article, The internationalization of religious movements has attracted significant scholarly attention since the 1990s, when Peter Beyer and Roland Robertson introduced the concept of religious globalization [9]. Beyer's framework distinguishes between religious organizations

that adapt globally dominant functional systems and those that resist them, producing what he terms “fundamentalist” versus “liberal” orientations [10]. Muhammadiyah's trajectory corresponds more closely to the liberal orientation, insofar as it actively engages with global institutions while maintaining a distinctive Islamic identity [11].

From an international relations perspective, the concept of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) developed by Keck and Sikkink provides a useful lens for understanding how organizations like Muhammadiyah build coalitions across borders [12]. TANs typically operate by sharing information, invoking norms, and applying leverage across multiple levels of governance. Muhammadiyah's engagement with international humanitarian bodies and interfaith platforms conforms to this model, suggesting that non-state religious actors can function as norm entrepreneurs in global politics [13].

Furthermore, Bayat's concept of “post-Islamism” offers a productive framework for situating Muhammadiyah within broader currents of Islamic intellectual evolution [14]. Post-Islamist movements, according to Bayat, seek to fuse individual rights, pluralism, and democratic governance with Islamic ethics. Muhammadiyah's endorsement of Pancasila, Indonesia's pluralist state ideology, and its emphasis on Islamic civil society aligns closely with this conceptual category [15]. Importantly, this theological-political positioning enhances its credibility as an interlocutor with Western governmental and civil society actors who are often suspicious of Islamist organizations [16].

Finally, Bourdieu's theory of social fields and capital offers analytical traction for understanding how Muhammadiyah converts its domestic institutional density into international symbolic capital [17]. The organization's extensive network of universities, hospitals, and social welfare institutions constitutes a form of organizational capital that it deploys strategically in international arenas to signal legitimacy and capacity [18].

II. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in systematic literature review (SLR) and document analysis. The SLR followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor in the selection of sources [19]. The initial database search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the SINTA (Science and Technology Index) national database of Indonesia.

The search used Boolean operators combining terms such as “Muhammadiyah,” “internationalization,” “transnational Islamic organizations,” “Islamic

modernism,” and “Non-Governmental Organizations Islam.” Articles were screened by title and abstract in the first phase, followed by full-text review. Inclusion criteria required: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2024; (b) direct engagement with Muhammadiyah or closely related phenomena; and (c) availability in English or Indonesian. A total of 312 articles were initially identified; after deduplication and application of inclusion/exclusion criteria, 30 articles were retained for in-depth analysis [20].

Document analysis complemented the SLR by examining primary sources including Muhammadiyah's official policy documents, annual reports of the Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah (Central Board), and international agreements with partner institutions. Secondary analysis of governmental and intergovernmental reports was also conducted. Data were analyzed thematically using an iterative coding process, guided by the theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 2. Researcher reflexivity was addressed through member-checking with two Muhammadiyah scholars and a triangulation process involving multiple data sources [21].

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Strategies of Internationalization and Global Network Architecture

One of Muhammadiyah's primary internationalization strategies involves the establishment of formal branches (*cabang istimewa*) in countries with significant Indonesian Muslim diaspora populations, including Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, the United States, Australia, and Germany [22]. These overseas branches serve dual functions: they provide organizational and spiritual support to diaspora communities, and they serve as bridgeheads for broader engagement with host-country Islamic communities and civil society actors [23].

Muhammadiyah has also forged formal partnerships with universities and research institutions globally. Its network of universities in Indonesia, numbering over 172 as of 2023, maintains active collaboration agreements with institutions in Australia, the United States, Turkey, and South Korea, facilitating student and faculty exchanges, joint research, and curriculum development [24]. These academic partnerships serve as vectors for disseminating Muhammadiyah's reformist Islamic thought while simultaneously building the human capital of its member institutions [25].

A second key strategy involves the production and dissemination of English-language Islamic scholarship that articulates Muhammadiyah's reformist perspective for international audiences. The organization's intellectuals, including figures such as Amien Rais, Din Syamsuddin, and Haedar Nashir, have published

widely in international venues, participated in global conferences, and forged connections with Middle Eastern, European, and American Islamic scholars [26].

The Muhammadiyah-affiliated magazine and digital platforms have increasingly published content in English and Arabic, broadening the ideological reach of the organization beyond Indonesia. This publication strategy is part of a deliberate effort to position Muhammadiyah as a credible voice for “Islam Berkemajuan” (Progressive Islam) a concept that emphasizes rationalism, democracy, and universal humanitarian values within an Islamic ethical framework [27].

Muhammadiyah's international humanitarian arm, Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC), has played a significant role in projecting the organization's influence on the global stage. MDMC has participated in disaster relief operations in Pakistan, Palestine, Turkey, and Syria, building credibility as a competent humanitarian actor and strengthening relationships with UN agencies including OCHA and UNHCR [28].

Interfaith dialogue constitutes another pillar of Muhammadiyah's international strategy. The organization has maintained sustained engagement with the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and Jewish interfaith organizations. Din Syamsuddin's leadership of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP) exemplified how Muhammadiyah uses interfaith platforms to advance its normative vision of peaceful coexistence and to enhance its global profile [29].

Muhammadiyah's global network can be mapped across four dimensions: (1) diaspora-based organizational networks; (2) academic and intellectual networks; (3) humanitarian and development networks; and (4) interfaith and diplomatic networks. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive; they often reinforce one another in practice [30].

Diaspora networks function as the organizational backbone of Muhammadiyah's international presence. In countries with large Indonesian Muslim communities, such as Malaysia (an estimated 2 million Indonesian workers), Australia, and the Netherlands, Muhammadiyah branches operate mosques, educational programs, and social services. These branches report to and are formally accountable to the Pimpinan Pusat in Yogyakarta, ensuring organizational coherence across geographies [31].

Academic networks facilitate knowledge exchange and ideological refinement. Muhammadiyah's universities have established formal agreements with institutions including the University of Melbourne, Ohio State University, and Universiti Malaya. Joint research programs on Islamic studies, public health,

education, and sustainable development represent significant vectors for Muhammadiyah's global intellectual engagement [32].

Humanitarian networks are perhaps the most visible dimension of Muhammadiyah's international presence. MDMC's participation in disaster response has generated substantial international recognition and has opened channels of collaboration with bilateral aid agencies from Australia, Japan, and the United States [33]. These collaborations have strengthened Muhammadiyah's organizational capacities and its legitimacy as a civil society actor.

Interfaith and diplomatic networks position Muhammadiyah as a participant in global normative debates about religion, peace, and human rights. Its engagement with institutions such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) enables the organization to contribute to international standard-setting processes in areas such as religious freedom, intercultural dialogue, and countering violent extremism [34].

Impacts of Internationalization

Muhammadiyah's international educational engagements have produced tangible outcomes in terms of human capital development, curriculum reform, and the internationalization of Indonesian Islamic scholarship. Exchange programs with foreign universities have produced cohorts of Muhammadiyah scholars and professionals with transnational competencies, contributing to what scholars describe as the emergence of a "cosmopolitan umma" [35].

At the curricular level, international partnerships have facilitated the integration of comparative Islamic studies, human rights education, and environmental ethics into Muhammadiyah's educational frameworks. These curriculum reforms reflect and reinforce the organization's commitment to progressive Islamic thought and its engagement with global normative agendas [22].

Muhammadiyah's humanitarian engagement has had significant impacts both in terms of the beneficiaries of its assistance and in terms of the organization's own institutional development. MDMC's operations in earthquake-affected regions of Turkey in 2023, for example, involved the deployment of medical teams, logistical support, and psychosocial services, demonstrating a level of operational sophistication comparable to professional international NGOs [28].

Beyond material assistance, Muhammadiyah's humanitarian engagement has contributed to the normative project of articulating an Islamic humanitarian ethics that resonates across cultural and religious boundaries. By emphasizing universal

human dignity (karamah insaniyah) as a religious imperative, Muhammadiyah has contributed to bridging Islamic and secular humanitarian frameworks [29].

Perhaps the most significant macro-level impact of Muhammadiyah's internationalization is its contribution to Islamic public diplomacy. In an era marked by concerns about Islamic extremism and civilizational conflict, Muhammadiyah's international profile as a democratic, pluralist, and progressive Islamic organization constitutes a powerful counternarrative [30].

The Indonesian government has recognized and leveraged Muhammadiyah's international credibility in its public diplomacy efforts, positioning Indonesia as a model of democratic Islam. This synergy between state and civil society in projecting a moderate Islamic image internationally represents an important form of "soft power" that complements Indonesia's formal diplomatic presence [31].

The findings presented in this article illuminate several important dynamics in the internationalization of Islamic civil society organizations. First, Muhammadiyah's experience demonstrates that effective internationalization requires a distinctive ideological positioning that distinguishes the organization from both traditionalist and Islamist alternatives. Its commitment to Islamic modernism, democratic governance, and universal humanitarian values enables Muhammadiyah to navigate diverse sociopolitical environments and to build coalitions with a wide range of international partners [32].

Second, the article highlights the importance of multi-level strategies in organizational internationalization. Muhammadiyah's simultaneous engagement at the diaspora, academic, humanitarian, and diplomatic levels creates synergies that reinforce its global presence and credibility. This multi-level approach aligns with the TAN model proposed by Keck and Sikkink, suggesting that transnational religious actors can function effectively as networked advocacy organizations [12].

Third, the analysis reveals tensions within Muhammadiyah's internationalization project. The organization's expansion into global arenas sometimes generates internal debates about the appropriate scope of its international engagement, the prioritization of domestic versus international programs, and the risks of co-optation by state or external donor agendas [33]. These tensions reflect broader challenges facing civil society organizations that seek to maintain organizational autonomy while engaging with powerful international actors.

Fourth, Muhammadiyah's internationalization experience offers lessons for other Islamic civil society organizations in the Global South that seek to build international presence without compromising organizational identity. The organization's emphasis on institutional capacity-building, ideological articulation,

and selective coalition-building provides a model that may be relevant for organizations operating in different national contexts [34].

Finally, the case of Muhammadiyah contributes to broader theoretical debates about religious globalization and transnational civil society. It challenges the assumption that Islamic organizations are inherently limited to national or communal contexts, demonstrating instead that organizations rooted in particular religious and cultural traditions can become significant actors in global civil society through deliberate institutional strategies [35].

IV. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the internationalization of the Muhammadiyah movement through an analysis of its strategies, networks, and impacts. The findings reveal that Muhammadiyah has pursued a deliberate and multi-dimensional internationalization project grounded in its distinctive ideological framework of Islamic modernism and civic engagement. Through the establishment of overseas branches, academic partnerships, humanitarian operations, and interfaith engagement, Muhammadiyah has built a global network that extends its influence far beyond Indonesia's borders [1].

The impacts of this internationalization are evident across educational, humanitarian, and diplomatic dimensions. Muhammadiyah has contributed to human capital development, humanitarian assistance, and the global articulation of a progressive Islamic identity that serves as a counternarrative to extremism. These impacts underscore the significance of non-state religious actors as contributors to transnational civil society and global governance [9].

Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. The reliance on published scholarly literature means that this analysis may underrepresent informal networks and grassroots dynamics that are not well-documented in academic sources. Future research should employ ethnographic methods and interviews with Muhammadiyah practitioners at the international level to produce more grounded accounts of the organization's global engagement.

The Muhammadiyah case offers important lessons for scholars and practitioners interested in the role of religious civil society in global affairs. As the world continues to grapple with the intersections of religion, democracy, and international order, organizations like Muhammadiyah that successfully navigate these intersections deserve sustained scholarly attention.

V. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the Institute of Islamic Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, for institutional support in the preparation of this manuscript. We also acknowledge the contributions of peer reviewers whose comments substantially improved the quality of this article.

VI. REFERENCES

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