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Humanitarian Islam or Board of Peace? Nahdlatul Ulama's Perspective on Resolving the Palestinian Crisis

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Abstract

The ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is deeply rooted in weaponized religious and cultural narratives that justify exclusion and territorial domination. This article explores the role of Humanitarian Islam, proposed by Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the R20 International Summit of Religious Authorities (ISORA), in offering theological and social frameworks to mediate this conflict. By emphasizing universal compassion (*rahmah*) and equal citizenship (*al-muwatinun*), Humanitarian Islam counters divisive sacred narratives to foster peacebuilding grounded in human dignity. Using a qualitative analytical approach, this research examines the mechanisms of recontextualization in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) applied to the Palestinian crisis. The study argues that by dismantling obsolete legal categories like *kafir* (*infidel*) and aligning faith with the UN Charter, Humanitarian Islam provides a sustainable alternative to technocratic peace models.

*Krisis kemanusiaan yang sedang berlangsung di Wilayah Terjajah Palestina berakar kuat pada narasi keagamaan dan budaya yang dijadikan senjata untuk membenarkan pengucilan dan dominasi teritorial. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi peran Islam Kemanusiaan yang diusung oleh Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Indonesia dan KTT Internasional Otoritas Keagamaan R20 (ISORA) dalam menawarkan kerangka teologis dan sosial untuk menengahi konflik ini. Dengan menekankan kasih sayang universal (*rahmah*) dan kewarganegaraan yang setara (*al-muwatinun*), Islam Kemanusiaan melawan narasi suci yang memecah belah guna mendorong pembangunan perdamaian yang berlandaskan martabat manusia. Menggunakan pendekatan analitis kualitatif, penelitian ini mengkaji mekanisme rekontekstualisasi dalam yurisprudensi Islam (*fiqh*) yang diterapkan pada krisis Palestina. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa dengan membongkar kategori hukum yang usang seperti *kafir* (*infidel*) dan menyelaraskan keyakinan dengan Piagam PBB, Islam Kemanusiaan menyediakan alternatif yang berkelanjutan bagi model perdamaian teknokratis.*

Keywords

Humanitarian Islam; Palestine; Nahdlatul Ulama; Religious Moderation; Peacebuilding.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The early decades of the twenty-first century have been defined by a metastasizing crisis of civilization, where the intersection of globalization, religious resurgence, and political fragmentation has birthed a new era of identity-based conflict. In many parts of the world, religious and cultural narratives are no longer mere sources of spiritual solace but have been systematically weaponized to justify territorial claims, social exclusion, and existential violence (Makarim, 2024). The Palestinian crisis serves as the most enduring manifestation of this trend, where the invocation of sacred terminology—such as the Israeli government's strategic use of "Judea and Samaria" to describe the West Bank—functions as a mechanism for "territorial consolidation" that frames displacement as a theological necessity (Israel Institute, 2025).

This theological justification is deeply intertwined with the concept of the "Promised Land" (*Eretz Yisrael*). Historically and religiously, Zionism is embodied by the belief that the land of Palestine is the land promised by God to the Jewish people, as recorded in the Torah and other Abrahamic scriptures (Makarim, 2024). This faith is directly confronted by the demographic and historical reality of the Palestinian people who have resided in and built a civilization on that same land for centuries (Makarim, 2024). The clash between the "historical-mythological framework" of a biblical homeland and the legal right to self-determination has created a zero-sum conflict where the "divine right" of one group necessitates the erasure of the other (Israel Institute, 2025).

Simultaneously, the Islamic world is grappling with its own internal challenges. Elements within classical Islamic orthodoxy contain tenets that encourage segregation and discrimination against those perceived as non-Muslims (Staquf, 2023). These "obsolete and problematic" elements of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), premised upon a context of imperial expansion and perpetual conflict, have been exploited by both state and non-state actors to fuel a sense of grievance and alienation from the modern world order (GP Ansor, 2017). Humanitarian Islam (*al-islam li al-insaniyyah*) emerged as a direct response to this dual crisis. It seeks to restore *rahmah* (universal love and compassion) as the primary message of Islam by reconciling religious teachings with the 21st-century "civilizational reality" (ISEAS, 2026). This effort is intrinsically linked to the concept of *Fiqh Peradaban* (Fiqh of Civilization), which anchors the legitimacy of the modern nation-state and the United Nations Charter within Islamic law (Rois et al., 2024). By arguing that the international consensus for

peace has a strong basis in Islamic Shari'ah, *Fiqh Peradaban* provides a theological pathway to solve the Palestinian crisis not through medieval concepts of conquest, but through the modern framework of human rights and shared human dignity (Mutiullah, 2024).

Indonesia's role in this effort is rooted in its unique constitutional mandate to abolish colonialism and its long history of involvement in global crises. From its pioneering role in the 1955 Asian-African Conference to its active participation in UN peacekeeping missions, the Indonesian state has consistently supported Palestinian independence as a moral and legal imperative (Gontor, 2025). Beyond state diplomacy, civil society actors like Nahdlatul Ulama have long engaged in "Track Two Diplomacy." For example, former NU Chairman Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) was recognized for his efforts to foster interfaith harmony between Islam and Judaism, seeking a "smiling face of Islam" that could bridge the emotional divides of the Middle East (Makarim, 2024). This article argues that this Humanitarian Islam framework, supported by both state and non-state actors, offers a more sustainable path to peace than purely technocratic models.

NU scholars are steadfast in promoting humanitarian ideals. The study of classical and contemporary texts in pesantren affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama consistently emphasises these humanitarian aspects. More broadly, NU scholars also promote humanitarian ideals through the books they have written.

In accordance with scholarly standards this study identifies at least five previous studies relevant to the discourse on Humanitarian Islam and global peace. First, Tania (2024) explores the relationship between Islam and citizenship, arguing that NU's Humanitarian Islam initiative views these as compatible and mutually beneficial, providing a "bulwark" against radical ideologies. Second, Jamilah (2021) analyzes how Indonesian Islamic leadership has shaped a democratic ethos that aligns universal Islamic values with the norms of a modern nation-state.

Third, Zuhdi (2022) provides a detailed analysis of *al-muwatinun* as a socio-political identity that transcends traditional religious classifications, reflecting a departure from premodern exclusionary categories. Fourth, Mujahid (2023) examines the specific application of NU's public attitudes—*tawasuth* (moderation) and *tasamuh* (tolerance)—as tools for facilitating inter-religious dialogue in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Fifth, Satibi and Supriadi (2023) demonstrate that Humanitarian Islam serves as a mechanism to foster peace between Muslims and non-Muslims by promoting "lived citizenship" and social justice.

Sixth, Rois et al. (2024) investigate the recontextualization of *Fiqh Al-Siyasah* through the lens of *Fiqh Al-Hadarah*, arguing that the UN Charter is theologically legitimate for Muslims. Finally, Loo and Suryana (2026) analyze the challenges of implementing this vision at the grassroots level, noting the importance of "universal vocabularies" in building international social partnerships with groups like the World Evangelical Alliance. This research builds upon these studies by applying the mechanisms of Humanitarian Islam to the specific "war of names" and technocratic governance proposals of 2025.

To structuralize the investigation, this study utilizes a qualitative-descriptive and analytical design focused on texts, formal declarations, and contemporary peace frameworks. By incorporating the methods of Islamic legal hermeneutics and critical thematic content analysis, the research evaluates how premodern Islamic legal categories are structurally recontextualized. This method allows the study to process data from global summits (e.g., the R20 ISORA communiqué) alongside classical orthodoxy to evaluate their dynamic application to the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. *The Context: Sacred Narratives as Instruments of Exclusion*

The Palestinian humanitarian crisis is exacerbated by a "war of names" where terminology reflects deeply held legal and moral claims. The transition from using "West Bank"—a term associated with the 1967 armistice line—to "Judea and Samaria" in official Israeli discourse is a strategic attempt to frame the territory as an exclusive religious homeland (Israel Institute, 2025). This is an act of "historical justice" for proponents, but for Palestinians, it constitutes a "territorial consolidation" that erases their centuries-old presence and legal rights to statehood (Israel Institute, 2025).

Proponents of this terminology argue it provides "moral clarity" in a region defined by propaganda (Hasten, 2025). However, from a humanitarian perspective, it reinforces a zero-sum conflict where sacred texts are weaponized to deny Palestinian citizenship and social existence (Makarim, 2024). This "territorial consolidation" effectively renders the Palestinian presence invisible or illegitimate in the eyes of those who prioritize biblical narratives over international law (Israel Institute, 2025).

The dynamics in the Middle East have become increasingly complex, with regional powers pursuing "proxy engagement" and "normalization recalibration"

(IJRISS, 2025). While some Arab states have secretly engaged in military cooperation with Israel under US supervision between 2022 and 2025, the broader "Arab League" has struggled to bridge the gap between rhetorical solidarity and substantive intervention (IRIS, 2025). This regional paralysis has allowed the humanitarian reality to deteriorate into what many scholars describe as a "genocide" or a "catastrophic breakdown" in ethical dialogue (Makarim, 2024; Gaza, 2023).

In this vacuum, international actors have proposed technocratic solutions such as the United States' "20-point plan" for Gaza (Trump, 2025). This plan envisions a "Board of Peace" chaired by figures like Donald J. Trump and Tony Blair to oversee the strip's redevelopment into a "Riviera" (Trump, 2025). While the plan calls for an immediate ceasefire and the release of all hostages, it is heavily criticized for potentially diluting the autonomy of the UN and establishing a governance model that lacks egalitarianism, as the Board gets to pick "competent Palestinians" for the strip (Völkerrechtsblog, 2025). Indonesia and other Muslim-majority nations have expressed skepticism toward this model, viewing it as a detachment from local social and religious realities (IRIS, 2025).

As systematically compared in the following Table 1, the conceptual divergence between the US 20-Point Technocratic Plan and the Humanitarian Islam paradigm manifests across five structural pillars: governance, security, economy, narrative, and legitimacy. In terms of governance and security, the technocratic model enforces a top-down transitional authority under the executive "Board of Peace" and relies on an International Stabilization Force (ISF) backed by unfettered military powers. Conversely, Humanitarian Islam offers an organic alternative that promotes equal citizenship (*al-muwatinun*), religious moderation, and a "ceasefire of hearts" achieved through genuine interfaith dialogue and theological reform.

Furthermore, Table 1 highlights a stark contrast in economic and narrative approaches; while the US plan prioritizes top-down international consensus and elite-driven economic expert panels to create "miracle-city" special zones, the NU/ISORA approach focuses on community-based mutual aid, social justice (*al-maslahah al-'ammah*), and a grassroots recontextualization of "hard texts" to foster mutual empathy. Ultimately, this leads to a fundamental conflict regarding legitimacy. The technocratic approach derives its validity strictly from the executive authority of the Board of Peace, whereas the Humanitarian Islamic framework anchors its legal and moral authority by directly aligning universal religious values with the UN Charter and Universal Human Rights.

Table 1. Comparative Framework: Technocratic vs. Humanitarian Islamic Peace Approaches

Feature	US 20-Point Technocratic Plan (Trump, 2025)	Humanitarian Islam (NU/ISORA) Approach (Staquf, 2023)
Governance	Transitional governance by technocrats under a "Board of Peace".	Promotion of equal citizenship (<i>al-muwatinun</i>) and religious moderation.
Security	International Stabilization Force (ISF) with unfettered military powers.	"Ceasefire of hearts" via interfaith dialogue and theological reform.
Economic	Special economic zones and "miracle-city" expert panels.	Community-based mutual aid and social justice (<i>al-maslahah al-'ammah</i>).
Narrative	Top-down international consensus managed by the Board.	Grassroots recontextualization of "hard texts" to foster empathy.
Legitimacy	Based on the Board of Peace's executive authority.	Based on aligning religious values with the UN Charter and Human Rights.

2.2. Humanitarian Islam's Social Mechanisms in Peacebuilding

If traced back to its origins, the concept of Islamic humanitarianism that is currently developing within the Nahdlatul Ulama movement actually has strong roots in the intellectual heritage of the scholars of the Indonesian archipelago in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Islamic humanitarianism in question is not merely a discourse on modern human rights, but rather a religious perspective that prioritises the protection of human dignity (*ḥifẓ al-karāmah al-insāniyyah*), the public good (*al-maṣlahah al-'āmmah*), compassion (*raḥmah*), justice (*'adl*) and moderation (*wasatīyyah*) as the primary aim of Islamic law. This tradition can be clearly traced in the works of the four great scholars who serve as the primary references for NU pesantren, namely Syekh Nawawi al-Bantani, Syekh Ihsan Jampes, Syekh Mahfudz al-Tarmasi, and Syekh Muhammad Yasin al-Fadani.

Sheikh Nawawi's most significant contribution lies in his ability to synthesise *fiqh*, *tafsir* and *tasawwuf* within the framework of the common good of the *ummah*. In his exegesis, *Marah Labid*, he interprets the verses of the Qur'an using an approach that combines legal, ethical, and spiritual dimensions, ensuring that

religion does not remain confined to formal legalism, but rather leads to the formation of a just and civilised society. Researchers have shown that Nawawi's method of exegesis integrates elements of fiqh, kalam and tasawwuf in a balanced manner.

In his works on fiqh, such as *Nihayat al-Zain*, Nawawi emphasises the importance of social responsibility, the protection of vulnerable groups, proper conduct in human relations, and the obligation to maintain social harmony. Consequently, Nawawi's intellectual legacy can be described as the foundation of humanitarian fiqh that is, fiqh which is oriented towards the welfare of humanity as the objective of sharia. In the context of the Palestinian crisis, this humanitarian jurisprudence serves as a critical template where the preservation of human life and social welfare in Gaza is positioned as a primary religious duty, overriding rigid, exclusionary theological claims.

Whilst Nawawi laid the foundations of humanity through exegesis and jurisprudence, Sheikh Ihsan Jampes developed them further through Sufism. His monumental work, *Siraj al-Talibin*, is a commentary on Imam al-Ghazali's *Minhaj al-'Abidin* and is recognised as one of the greatest works of Sufism to have emerged from the Indonesian archipelago.

In this book, Ihsan Jampes identifies the control of one's desires, the purification of the heart, empathy towards others, humility, and compassion as the core of a Muslim's spiritual journey. Humanitarianism, in Ihsan's view, does not stem solely from legal regulations, but rather from the moral transformation of the individual. The higher a person's spiritual quality, the greater their concern for the suffering of others. Thus, *Siraj al-Talibin* can be regarded as an important text for the development of an Islamic humanistic ethic grounded in spirituality and moral conduct. This core spiritual transformation serves as a necessary 'internal engine' to dismantle deep-seated psychological barriers and cycles of hatred, which are vital components in fostering empathy between Israelis and Palestinians.

Sheikh Mahfudz al-Tarmasi's contribution differs from that of Nawawi and Ihsan. As one of the greatest hadith scholars in the archipelago, he laid the foundations of humanity through a rigorous, moderate and responsible methodology of hadith scholarship. His most famous work, *Manhaj Dhawi al-Nazar*, is a commentary on *Alfiyyah al-Suyuthi* in the science of hadith and has become an important reference in hadith studies across the Islamic world.

Through this work, Mahfudz emphasises the importance of verifying information, exercising caution when interpreting religious texts, and respecting scholarly authority. These values are of paramount importance in the context of humanitarianism, as they prevent the emergence of extremism, which is often rooted in a haphazard interpretation of religion. In Mahfudz's view, the protection of religion and, by extension, the protection of humanity must be founded on sound scholarship and reliable chains of transmission. Applying this rigorous framework to the contemporary crisis provides a robust epistemological filter to neutralize radical digital propaganda, weaponized political interpretations, and disinformation campaigns that worsen polarization on the ground.

Unlike the three scholars mentioned earlier, Sheikh Muhammad Yasin al-Fadani is known as Musnid al-Dunya due to his extensive network of scholarly chains of transmission. His works, such as *Al-'Iqd al-Farid min Jawahir al-Asanid* and a number of *tsabat* (chains of transmission indexes), demonstrate that Islamic scholarship flourished through connections that transcended national, sectarian and ethnic boundaries.

From the perspective of Islamic humanitarianism, Yasin al-Fadani's contribution lies in the development of an inclusive and cosmopolitan intellectual culture. He brought together scholars from the Indonesian archipelago, the Middle East, Africa and South Asia within a scholarly network characterised by mutual respect. The tradition of *sanad* that he developed serves not only to preserve the authenticity of knowledge, but also to foster global human solidarity amongst the world's Muslim communities. This cosmopolitan network model serves as historical legitimacy for Track Two Diplomacy, offering an expansive theological baseline for contemporary global coalitions of religious authorities working collectively to solve the Middle Eastern stalemate.

To move beyond the technocratic stalemate, Humanitarian Islam offers three primary social mechanisms: the abolition of discriminatory categories, the recontextualization of *fiqh*, and the promotion of religious moderation.

A. The 'Kafir' and the Concept of *Al-Muwatinun*

In 2019, during the National Conference of Religious Scholars (Munas) in Banjar, Nahdlatul Ulama issued a groundbreaking ruling that abolished the legal category of the *kafir* (infidel) within the modern nation-state (Staquf, 2019). This decree replaced traditional hierarchies with *al-muwatinun*, or equal citizens, affirming that all

individuals share the same status regardless of faith (Zuhdi, 2022). This is theologically rooted in the belief that all human beings are descendants of Adam (Surah Al-Nisa Verse 1) (Mujahid, 2023).

This proposal has profound implications for a "Two-State Solution." By removing the theological legitimacy for religious supremacism, it allows Muslims to theologically accept a Jewish state as a legitimate peer in a pluralistic international order (Dorsey, 2025). Conversely, it calls for Israel to abandon its own exclusionary sacred narratives, potentially leading to a "binational state of mind" where both groups see each other as fellow citizens (*muwatinun*) of a shared region rather than theological enemies (Staquf, 2019).

B. Recontextualization of Fiqh of Civilization

Humanitarian Islam argues that classical *fiqh* contains tenets that are "obsolete" because they were premised upon a context of perpetual conflict (ISEAS, 2026). The movement seeks to "recontextualize" these teachings—including those related to relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the structure of governance, and the proper aims of warfare—to align them with the 21st-century "civilizational reality" (Staquf, 2023).

The "Muktamar International Fiqh Peradaban" (International Conference on the Fiqh of Civilization), launched in 2023, declared that the post-WWII international consensus, including the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is legitimate and binding from a religious perspective (Muhajir, 2023). This prevented the "politicization of Islam" and marginalized those who would exploit religious teachings to harm others (GP Ansor, 2016). For Palestine, this shifts the focus from "holy war" to "legal accountability" via the UN and the International Criminal Court (ICC) (JHCLS, 2024). In the field, this facilitates the creation of "mercy-based" humanitarian corridors, where aid is delivered as a religious obligation (*zakat/sadaqah*) to all afflicted humans without religious discrimination (ICRC, 2024).

2.3. Indonesia's Diplomacy: Weighing R20 ISORA vs. the Board of Peace

Indonesia's diplomatic tradition inherently positions the nation to act as an "honest broker" in fractured geopolitical landscapes (Makarim, 2024). This role is prominently manifested through the R20 International Summit of Religious Authorities (ISORA), where Indonesia has successfully convened leaders from highly

polarized regions, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Palestine (ISORA, 2023). This "spiritual soft power" approach stands in stark contrast to the United States' proposed "Board of Peace," a model widely criticized for its technocratic, top-down structure that risks diluting UN autonomy (Trump, 2025; Zidni, 2023). While the Board of Peace merely provides the economic and security "hardware," the ISORA communiqué offers the vital "theological software" required to heal the deep "rupture in the fabric of communicative relationships" (ISORA, 2023; Gaza, 2023). By urging religious authorities to "universalize religions' ethical teachings" and halt armed conflicts, this framework demonstrates that without structural theological reform, any technocratic arrangement will ultimately result in a "frozen conflict" rather than true reconciliation (ISORA, 2023).

The conceptual blueprint for this theological software is directly derived from the Indonesian "Religious Moderation" model. Built upon four foundational pillars—National Commitment, Tolerance, Non-Violence, and Openness to Local Culture—this model has already been successfully integrated into domestic *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) curricula to foster robust interfaith awareness and civic ethics among millions of students (Observer, 2026). Projecting this success onto the Palestinian crisis would require a similar, systematic restructuring of regional educational systems to replace institutionalized "incitement" with the universal love and compassion inherent in *rahmah* (Moore, 2025). For Palestinians, this means reclaiming a "civil Islam" capable of isolating extremist factions; for Israel, it necessitates a reciprocal confrontation with the entrenched "ultra-conservatism" within the settler movement that actively fuels existential violence (Dorsey, 2025; Moore, 2025).

Nevertheless, translating the profound theological software of Humanitarian Islam into field realities faces intense friction from entrenched *realpolitik* structures. Local actors ensnared in cycles of existential violence frequently reject structural moderation in order to preserve a hostile status quo. Consequently, theological discourse cannot operate within an idealistic vacuum; it demands an assertive and highly strategic Track Two Diplomacy backed by resilient global networks. Cultivating structural alliances with prominent non-Muslim global actors, such as the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), represents a critical vehicle for this diplomacy. By engaging these cross-cultural partnerships, Humanitarian Islam can exert meaningful moral and social pressure on secular, military, and state policymakers, ultimately compelling them to embrace universal human rights over zero-sum geopolitical advantages.

3. CONCLUSION

The Palestinian humanitarian crisis is a tragedy fueled by the weaponization of the sacred. However, as this study has demonstrated, the same faith-based narratives used for exclusion can be transformed into instruments of peace. Humanitarian Islam offers a viable theological and social framework to achieve this transformation. By restoring the message of universal compassion (*rahmah*), replacing exclusionary legal categories with equal citizenship (*al-muwatinun*), and leveraging non-state diplomacy through forums like R20 ISORA, this movement provides a foundation for social healing. The integration of these principles into international governance will ensure that religious inspiration remains a tool for harmony rather than a justification for perpetual division.

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