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FATWAS AND HUMANITARIAN ACTIONS: THE POLITICAL ROLE OF ACEHNESE ULAMA IN THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

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Abstract

This article examines the political role of *ulama* in responding to the refugee crisis in Aceh. In the broader literature on religion and refugee governance, religious actors are often portrayed as having a limited role. This study challenges that assumption by analyzing the case of Aceh, where *ulama* actively fostered solidarity with Rohingya refugees. The article demonstrates that Acehnese *ulama* not only articulated moral narratives grounded in Islamic values but also mobilized their political authority to pressure the government to adopt more humane and accountable policies. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research explores both the moral and politicaldimensions of religious leadership in the crisis. Data were collected through the analysis of official documents—such as Fatwa No. 3 of 2024 and Tausyiah No. 6 of 2024—as well as print and digital media that capture public narratives articulated by *ulama*. The article argues that, in the Achenese context, religion functions not merely as a moral compass but also as an effective political instrument for policy intervention and the construction of transnational solidarity rooted in local values. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating religious actors into governance frameworks for refugee crises, particularly in societies where religious institutions play a central role.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji peran politik ulama dalam menangani krisis pengungsi di Aceh. Dalam literatur tentang agama dan isu pengungsi, seringkali agama dilihat sebagai faktor pembatas. Studi ini menantang asumsi tersebut dengan menganalisis kasus Aceh, di mana ulama secara aktif memupuk solidaritas dengan pengungsi Rohingya. Artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa ulama Aceh tidak hanya mempromosikan narasi moral yang berakar pada nilai-nilai Islam, tetapi juga memanfaatkan pengaruh politik mereka untuk menekan pemerintah agar mengadopsi kebijakan yang lebih manusiawi dan bertanggung jawab. Secara kualitatif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi kedalaman peran politik dan moral para ulama dalam mengatasi krisis pengungsi. Data dikumpulkan melalui analisis dokumen—seperti Fatwa No. 3 Tahun 2024 dan Tausyiah No. 6 Tahun 2024—serta media cetak dan digital yang mencatat narasi publik yang diungkapkan oleh ulama. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa, dalam konteks Aceh, fatwa (agama) tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai kompas moral tetapi juga sebagai alat politik yang efektif untuk intervensi kebijakan dan pembentukan solidaritas kemanusiaan global yang berakar pada nilai-nilai lokal. Temuan ini menyoroti pentingnya memasukkan dimensi agama ke dalam kerangka kerja tata kelola krisis pengungsi, terutama di masyarakat di mana lembaga agama memainkan peran sentral.

INTRODUCTION

　　This article explores the political strategies employed by Acehnese clerics in promoting solidarity with Rohingya refugees. Within the context of the global refugee crisis, religious communities draw on normative foundations rooted in sacred texts that

cultivate moral sensitivity toward human suffering. The Rohingya crisis, as several studies have shown, poses a serious dilemma for Indonesia by generating complex tensions between political considerations and humanitarian imperatives. On one hand, Indonesian Muslims' solidarity with the Rohingya reflects cosmopolitan moral values that have been historically upheld (Pratisti et al., 2019; Syahrin, 2019). On the other hand, as Prabaningtyas (2019) observes, Indonesia's policy position stands at a crossroads between humanitarian responsibility and national security concerns. This ambivalence reflects the position of a state that has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, thereby restricting refugee protection to domestic law and to limited international humanitarian principles.

From a policy perspective, the Indonesian government has not adopted a stance of rejecting refugees, yet it has also refrained from ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention. Under Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 on Refugees, refugee management in Indonesia is guided by humanitarian principles enshrined in Pancasila and the Constitution, while also taking into account national security and public opinion. However, the absence of a clear and consistent refugee policy has led to serious implementation challenges, including weak interagency coordination, limited resources, and refugee protection mechanisms that remain only partially effective (Darnela & Nugroho, 2019).

In other words, Indonesia finds itself caught in a structural tension between global aspirations to uphold human rights and the pressures of domestic politics—especially those shaped by religious identity, which often come into conflict with humanitarian solidarity. This conflict becomes particularly visible in Aceh, where the local community—initially eager to rescue stranded boats—eventually faced both moral and practical dilemmas as refugees encountered the absence of permanent policies and the persistence of social stigma (Sopamena, 2023). At the local level, especially in Aceh, religious identity plays a critical role in shaping social integration. Research by Herman Fithra et al. (2024) demonstrates that Aceh's strong collective identity fosters internal solidarity but simultaneously generates exclusivity toward Rohingya refugees, a tension further intensified by historical grievances and fears of competition over scarce resources. This dynamic is evident in the political stance of the Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama (MPU) Aceh, which voiced support for Rohingya refugees. For example, when a group of students in Banda Aceh expelled 137 refugees from Balee Meuseuraya in December 2023, the MPU issued a public statement affirming Aceh's obligation to protect Rohingya refugees. According to UNHCR, thousands of refugees have arrived in Aceh—over 2,300 between 2023 and early 2025—while challenges persist in providing essential services such as health care, shelter, sanitation, and psychosocial assistance, all under the constraints of refugees' limited access to employment (UNHCR, 2024).

This article proposes a more culturally informed academic approach to the refugee crisis, considering not only governance and security but also the essential role of religion. Cesari (2023) identifies a common bias in studies of religion and refugee crises, citing three main limitations: focus on formal religious actors, reliance on universal moral frameworks detached from domestic politics, and neglect of religion's complex and simultaneous dimensions across all stages of refugee crises. This article challenges these views by showing that, in Aceh, religion is central to advancing humanitarian policies and responding to the refugee crisis. It argues that *ulama* (religious scholars) mobilize moral—religious values of *mas'uliyatul jiwar* (responsibility toward neighbors) and *insaniyah* (humanity) to shape public opinion on Rohingya refugees, while also using formal political instruments to press the national government to take full responsibility for the crisis.

Empirically, a growing body of literature has documented the role of religion in the refugee crisis in Aceh. Specifically, studies show that the implementation of Islamic law has shaped a social ethos that initially strengthened solidarity with Rohingya Muslims, but this solidarity has gradually weakened under local economic and political pressures (Thaib et al., 2024). This phenomenon illustrates how Acehnese local identity—intertwined with historical conflict and anxieties over resource competition—produces ambivalence: strong internal solidarity among locals, coupled with exclusivity toward "outsiders." Even so, Islamic humanitarian norms continue to function as an anchor amid growing social resistance. Notably, most studies focus primarily on how religious ethics shape empathy toward refugees.

A study of fatwas issued by religious scholars and their relationship with politics in Aceh shows that both formal and informal religious institutions have a strong influence on the community's social and political life (Ichwan, 2011; Makin, 2016; Salim, 2015). Institutionally, the Ulama Consultative Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama/MPU) serves as the official body of religious scholars within the Aceh government system and holds normative authority in providing religious guidance (Feener, 2013). However, in everyday practice, the influence of local scholars, known as *tengku*, is often more dominant. Research by Nurlaila and Zulihafnani (2019) indicates that Acehnese communities tend to follow unofficial fatwas issued by local scholars more closely than formal decisions made by the MPU, which are often perceived as distant from local communities and less familiar at the grassroots level. This suggests that religious authority in Aceh is shaped not only by institutional legitimacy but also by social closeness, personal charisma, and cultural recognition of the *ulama*. A similar pattern can be observed during the COVID−19 pandemic, when religious scholars played a crucial role in shaping public understanding and responses through fatwas and religious messages. By drawing on their charisma and extensive social networks, *ulama* were able to influence public attitudes effectively, even on urgent public policy issues (Muazzinah et al., 2022).

Building on the theory of religious peacebuilding developed by Michelle Garred and Mohammed Abu−Nimer (2018), this article argues that *ulama* have the capacity to advocate for refugee integration by leveraging both their social influence and political authority. Garred and Abu−Nimer note that interreligious peacebuilding is an expanding field in which scholars and practitioners advocate for the inclusion of religious actors in global, national, and local conflict−resolution processes. Peacebuilding actors emphasize that sustainable solutions to global problems require inclusive processes that engage all relevant stakeholders, including religious institutions. This article applies their framework to the case of Aceh, analyzing the role of *ulama* in developing initiatives for refugee integration as part of broader peacebuilding efforts in line with Islamic values.

The article addresses two central research questions: (i) How do *ulama* use political instruments—such as moral authority, religious organizations, media platforms, and formal governmental channels—to influence public discourse on refugee reception? (ii) How do Acehnese *ulama* concretely implement political interventions to promote Rohingya refugee protection, including advocating for relocation facilities, engaging the central government, and mobilizing humanitarian aid based on Islamic jurisprudence and local wisdom?

This study employed a qualitative case study design to gain an in−depth understanding of the political and moral roles of *ulama* in responding to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Aceh. The case study method was chosen because it allows for contextual exploration of religious practices, local politics, and complex social dynamics. This

approach is especially useful in humanitarian emergency situations involving non—state actors. Building on this, the study specifically focuses on the involvement of Acehnese *ulama* in the Rohingya refugee issue. This region was selected for its strong socio—religious characteristics and the historical role of the *ulama* as key actors in local politics and in mobilizing humanitarian solidarity. The study's subjects included various documents and policies that directly or indirectly influence this issue. These included fatwas issued by the Aceh Ulama Consultative Assembly (MPU), tausiyah statements, and official statements from MPU members in the media. Sources were selected based on their relevance to understanding the political role of *ulama* in refugee issues and their strategic positions within local social and policy structures.

The analysis focuses on two types of documents. First, a document analysis was conducted, focusing on Fatwa Number 3 of 2024 and Tausiyah Number 6 of 2024 issued by MPU Aceh, as well as other official documents that reflect the *ulama's* institutional stance on the refugee crisis. These documents provided a normative foundation and served as political artifacts, demonstrating how *ulama* frame the Rohingya issue as a moral and religious concern. Second, media analysis was conducted across print and digital sources, including local news coverage, recorded Friday sermons, and social media posts by religious leaders and institutions. These sources were analyzed to capture the public narratives constructed by *ulama* to promote Islamic solidarity and humanitarian obligations. The collected data were analyzed using thematic coding to identify patterns relevant to the research objectives. The process began with a holistic view of all data, followed by coding key segments into themes such as "religious authority," "guest—host narratives," "transnational Islamic solidarity," "local policy intervention," and "humanitarian aid mobilization." These codes were then grouped to develop analytical categories that illustrate how *ulama* operationalize their political—moral roles in crisis situations.

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

Religion increasingly serves as an alternative framework in responding to global humanitarian crises, emphasizing the role of moral politics by religious actors. The idea that humanitarian action is fully neutral and separate from political and religious identities is being challenged. interests is being challenged. This premise of neutrality is being questioned in what many scholars describe as a post—secular world, where religion continues to serve as a dominant socio—political force for the majority of the global population (May et al., 2014). This debate has become a central focus in humanitarian studies, where "classicists" prioritize traditional humanitarian principles such as neutrality, independence, and impartiality, arguing that these are essential for legitimacy and effectiveness. In contrast, proponents of political engagement is necessary to secure effective aid distribution and achieve structural justice for crisis—affected populations (Assoudeh, 2015). Within this framework, religion is no longer considered a disruption to neutral humanitarianism; rather, it is recognized as both an actor and an ideological force shaping crisis governance.

Empirical evidence shows the resurgence of faith—based organizations in humanitarian practice, challenging assumptions of full secularization in the sector (Mellon, 2014). In particular, faith—based organizations from Islamic, Christian, and Hindu traditions, have emerged as key players in disaster response, emergency relief, and long—term advocacy. Moreover, this revival is observable not only at the civil society level but

also in national foreign policies of countries such as India and Turkey, which invoke religious legitimacy to justify cross－border humanitarian interventions (Cordier, 2009).

However, the engagement of religion in humanitarianism also presents inherent contradictions. On one hand, religious beliefs can foster community resilience, encourage solidarity, and accelerate aid distribution. On the other hand, preferential treatment toward particular religious groups in aid allocation can reinforce social polarization and exacerbate the marginalization of minorities, especially in contexts of horizontal conflict or systemic discrimination. As the frequency of humanitarian crises caused by conflict and climate disasters increases, exclusive religious favoritism operates ambivalently: it can act as both a source of displacement and a tool for reconciliation and peacebuilding. Thaib et al. (2024) demonstrate that faith－based aid targeted exclusively at co－religionists often results in discriminatory practices that threaten long－term pluralism and religious freedom. In this context, criticism of an overly secular international humanitarian system, which frequently overlooks the religious dimensions of affected communities, becomes increasingly pertinent. Normative prohibitions against religious expression in humanitarian settings have created gaps between aid providers and recipients, particularly in highly religious societies. Consequently, recent scholarship advocates for a post－secular approach to humanitarianism, recognizing religion not as a threat but as an integral component of global crisis governance that must be integrated critically and ethically (Cesari, 2023). This approach includes acknowledging the moral authority of religious organizations, their involvement in political mediation, and their capacity to construct alternative narratives of suffering and justice, all while maintaining a commitment to inclusivity and universal human rights.

In Indonesia, a country where the majority of the population actively practices religion, social structures are strongly influenced by religious norms. This influence is evident in the historical formation of national consciousness, where religion has functioned not only as a source of symbolic legitimacy for the state and society but also as a normative actor shaping collective understandings of justice, solidarity, and social responsibility (Al Qurtuby, 2022). Contemporary literature highlights the critical role of religious leaders in reformulating religion from a purely spiritual instrument into a comprehensive socialpolitical resource that addresses the broader dimensions of societal life (Hamdi, 2021). This role encompasses transformational leadership—the capacity to instill equality, human dignity, and tolerance for diversity; mobilize collective solidarity against discrimination; and foster democracy through dialogue (Hamdi, 2021). Under this approach, religion becomes not only a source of private morality but also a public foundation for humanitarian governance and peacebuilding.

Hamdi (2021) emphasizes that religious leaders in the era of globalization have a responsibility to strengthen interfaith harmony and maintain national unity. This responsibility is not merely a moral project but also a political strategy for sustaining social resilience and preventing national fragmentation due to identity－based provocations. Interfaith partnerships serve as vital mechanisms for building regional resilience and achieving national objectives through coalitions grounded in shared values.

The Rohingya refugee crisis in Indonesia exemplifies the complex interplay between faith－based moral solidarity, limitations in state capacity in responding to forced migration, and the social construction of horizontal diversity. Although Indonesia is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, the country has played a significant role in responding to the humanitarian crisis. Indonesia's non－participation in formal international refugee regimes is often attributed to limited resources and a preference for domestic management rooted in local wisdom and internal political

consensus (Prabaningtyas, 2019). However, this approach has created space for non－state actors, particularly religious organizations and local communities, to take a leading role in crisis mitigation.

Literature on the role of religion in migration crises in Indonesia underscores that religious actors are not only providers of aid but also normative agents capable of negotiating the meanings of vulnerability, dignity, and inclusion. The role of religion in post－disaster and humanitarian recovery in Indonesia can be understood through three primary functions: providing spiritual meaning and hope to affected individuals; strengthening community solidarity through collective rituals and prayers; and delivering material aid and spiritual counseling through religious institutions. In refugee contexts, these functions are crucial for reducing collective trauma, fostering social resilience, and creating temporary inclusive spaces amid state limitations. In a country constitutionally committed to religious and ethnic diversity, the religious role in humanitarian care must be linked to efforts to build social cohesion, strengthen human rights, and develop inclusive refugee governance. Religion thus becomes a key factor shaping societal responses to refugees, functioning not only as a spiritual source but also as a sociopolitical instrument mediating tensions between moral solidarity and structural exclusion.

Studies by Rahaldy et al. (2023) show that religious organizations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Indonesia play an active role in assisting Afghan refugees in Bogor through the provision of basic needs, counseling services, and advocacy. The Catholic pastoral perspective, highlighted by Ajisuksmo & Soge (2024), frames refugees as representations of Christus Patiens—the suffering Christ—thereby demanding an approach grounded in compassion, human dignity, and social justice. This demonstrates how religious doctrine can be translated into practical foundations for humanitarian work. Meanwhile, Muslim community interventions, particularly in Aceh, welcoming and assisting Rohingya refugees reveal another dimension of transnational religious solidarity. Local responses in Aceh—from providing temporary shelter to mobilizing logistical support—not only reflect Islamic values of *rahmah* (compassion) and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) but also strengthen Indonesia's position in regional humanitarian diplomacy (Herman Fithra et al., 2024). These local actions have conferred moral legitimacy on Indonesia in international forums, even in the absence of formal membership in global refugee protection regimes.

FATWAS AS INSTRUMENTS OF HUMANITARIAN ADVOCACY

In the context of the Rohingya refugee crisis, Acehnese *ulama* adopted two main approaches to build local support and articulate a humanitarian response grounded in Islamic values. First, through the exercise of religious authority, they issued Fatwa No. 3 of 2024 and Tausiyah No. 6 of 2024 as normative interventions directly addressing the conditions of the refugees. These fatwas not only affirmed the moral obligation to assist refugees as part of Islamic principles but also served as official instruments framing refugees as "guests" deserving respect, while establishing legal and social boundaries governing interactions between refugees and the local community. Second, this strategy was reinforced through media channels—including Friday sermons, local news outlets, and social media—which functioned as platforms for disseminating narratives of Islamic and humanitarian solidarity. Through these channels, the *ulama* communicated that assisting refugees is not only a humanitarian act but also a religious duty rooted in the values of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood).

Fatwa No. 3 of 2024 and Tausiyah No. 6 of 2024 illustrate the strategic role of Aceh's Ulama Consultative Assembly (MPU) in leveraging religious authority as a form of political influence in humanitarian governance. The rationale for issuing the fatwas includes several key considerations. First, every human being possesses fundamental rights that must be respected and upheld, including the right to protection from oppression and unjust treatment. Second, providing assistance to foreign migrants who are victims of persecution is regarded as a manifestation of high humanitarian principles and a moral responsibility for both individuals and the state. Third, the increasing influx of persecuted foreign migrants into Aceh was perceived as having the potential to generate social disparities within local communities.

The fatwa contains several important provisions. First, foreign migrants who are victims of persecution (refugees) are defined as individuals or groups who come from other countries due to physical or psychological oppression in their home countries, and who seek safety and protection. Second, assisting such persecuted foreign migrants is declared a mandatory (*wajib*) duty for all parties during emergency response periods, adapted to each party's function, position, and capacity, provided it does not cause harm. Third, refugees entering Aceh for protection are to be regarded as guests deserving respect for a specific period. Fourth, refugees are required to comply with prevailing Acehnese laws and customs, in accordance with local wisdom. Fifth, human trafficking and smuggling of persecuted foreign migrants are declared *haram* and subject to legal action under applicable laws.

In addition to Fatwa No. 3 of 2024, MPU Aceh issued Tausiyah No. 6 of 2024, which contains moral appeals and guidance to relevant parties regarding the management of persecuted foreign migrants entering Indonesia, particularly Aceh. The *tausiyah* includes several key points. First, the central government is encouraged to seek permanent solutions to the problem of persecuted foreign migrants entering Indonesia. Second, the Aceh provincial government and local governments are urged to provide humanitarian assistance during emergency response periods, in accordance with applicable laws and regulations. Third, the government is expected to strengthen maritime surveillance and border control to prevent illegal entry and human smuggling. Fourth, the government is encouraged to disseminate accurate information and foster a comprehensive understanding among the public about the objective realities of migration issues. Fifth, the Acehnese public is advised not to be provoked by irresponsible hoaxes concerning refugees, and security forces and the community are urged to monitor foreign migrants to prevent exploitation by third parties. Sixth, MPU Aceh called on UNHCR and other international organizations to take a more active role in the management, assistance, and protection of persecuted foreign migrants. Seventh, both government and the Acehnese public are reminded to acknowledge the support provided by other countries during past disasters, such as the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Aceh.

Beyond their normative－theological character, these documents represent a moral and political intervention in response to the recurring Rohingya refugee crisis in Aceh. The fatwa declares that assisting persecuted foreign migrants is obligatory during emergencies, provided it does not cause harm. In this context, refugees are not merely regarded as foreign entities posing challenges; theologically, they are transformed into "honorable guests" whose dignity must be respected and protected.

This normative argument is grounded in three main foundations: recognition of human rights as universal values aligned with Islamic principles; the moral obligation of the Muslim community to assist victims of injustice; and the importance of preserving local social harmony amid population pressures caused by the influx of refugees. Consequently,

the fatwa integrates sharia ethics with contemporary socio−political sensitivities, demonstrating that Islamic law is not isolated from global humanitarian challenges but can function as an adaptive and strategic framework for advocacy.

The strength of MPU Aceh's intervention also lies in its ability to negotiate Islamic legal norms within both national law and local wisdom. The fatwa does not confront state regulations directly; rather, it integrates them into religious discourse by emphasizing that refugees must respect Acehnese laws and customs. This constitutes a careful normative accommodation: religious principles are harmonized with secular legal systems through flexible local framing. This approach not only fosters normative consensus between society and the state but also strengthens the legitimacy of local responses to the refugee crisis. In this regard, *ulama* are positioned not as opponents of the state but as moral partners in building policy coherence between universal humanitarian principles and local social realities. As Garred and Abu−Nimer suggest, this constitutes a form of peacebuilding reliant on multilevel participation by religious actors capable of creating a "normative mediation space" in contexts of conflict or social tension.

Although the fatwa explicitly mandates assistance to refugees during emergency periods, the absence of clear temporal limits or mechanisms for transitioning refugees from "guests" to "permanent residents" opens a space of tension between moral empathy and socio−economic calculations. A critical question arises regarding how Islam as an ethical system can manage the shift from short−term solidarity to long−term integration, given local capacity limitations and the dynamics of identity politics. Resistance from parts of Acehnese society, including student demonstrations in late 2023, highlights the limitations of the fatwa's resonance in the face of disinformation and local anxieties over social change. In this case, the primary challenge lies not in the normative content of the fatwa but in the systemic capacity to disseminate, negotiate, and sustain humanitarian values within a fragmented socio−political landscape.

BETWEEN MORAL POLITICS AND INTEGRATIVE STRATEGY

In the context of the Rohingya refugee crisis in Aceh, *ulama* have played not only a symbolic role as custodians of spiritual values but also an active role as moral−political actors, shaping policy, public opinion, and even influencing the direction of local humanitarian diplomacy. As discussed in the previous section, their strategy involves two main approaches: exercising religious authority through fatwas and *tausyiah*, and leveraging public spaces via media, Friday sermons, and digital communication channels. This section complements that analysis by highlighting concrete *ulama*−led interventions, illustrating the practical dimension of a religious peacebuilding framework, as outlined by Garred and Abu−Nimer (2018).

One tangible intervention is the *ulama's* advocacy for improving facilities and relocating refugees from inadequate shelters. Abi Hasbi Albayuni, a prominent Acehnese *ulama*, publicly stated that the basement of the Balai Meuseuraya Aceh (BMA) was inhumane as a shelter for refugees and that relocation to more suitable sites was a moral imperative. This statement was not merely an ethical appeal but also a form of moral−political pressure exerted on the state to fulfill its responsibility to protect refugees in accordance with Islamic humanitarian principles and international humanitarian norms.

Within a religious peacebuilding framework, such actions represent a form of integrative advocacy, where religious authority is not passive but actively negotiates social spaces that enable refugees to live with dignity. Garred and Abu−Nimer (2018) argue that peace cannot be built solely through formal diplomacy or state institutions, but also

through the inclusion of religious stakeholders who understand local dynamics and possess social legitimacy within their communities. In Aceh, *ulama* not only articulate moral principles but also mediate relationships among refugees, local communities, and the state, while reminding society of its own historical experiences as victims of conflict and disaster.

Further interventions occur through political lobbying directed at both national and international authorities. For instance, Tgk. H. Faisal Ali, Chair of MPU Aceh, has advocated structural solutions to the refugee issue by submitting formal proposals to the President of Indonesia, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and other relevant institutions. This demonstrates that *ulama* do not merely serve as moral advisors but function as policy actors who actively demand state engagement in developing long−term solutions. Such engagement extends their role beyond the spiritual realm into the strategic domain, where they contribute directly to policy−oriented frameworks through informal channels of representation (Zulkifli, 2013).

Moreover, Faisal Ali has actively engaged in public education, emphasizing the importance of *tabayyun* (verification) of social media information and encouraging society to remain open and responsive to refugees. This reflects the *ulama's* role as cultural peacebuilding actors, seeking to break cycles of misinformation and prejudice that could trigger social tensions. As Garred and Abu−Nimer argue, religious actors can construct narrative infrastructures that foster tolerance and prevent social radicalization in conflict−prone contexts. By framing Aceh's historical experiences of conflict and the 2004 tsunami as a moral point of reference for solidarity, *ulama* create "narrative empathy," bridging past suffering and present moral responsibility, thereby encouraging sustained and active engagement with refugees.

Thus, Acehnese *ulama* interventions in the Rohingya refugee crisis extend beyond charity−based humanitarianism toward a complex moral−political strategy. They actively shape norms, influence policy, advocate for improved refugee conditions, and navigate public opinion by mobilizing both religious and political instruments. From the perspective of Garred and Abu−Nimer (2018), this positions *ulama* as key actors in transformative peacebuilding, operating not only symbolically but also structurally and strategically within the broader landscape of contemporary Southeast Asian migration policy.

The strategy employed to shape discourse on refugee acceptance in Aceh demonstrates the *ulama's* capacity for adaptive planning and strategic engagement. It highlights their ability to leverage religious authority not only as a moral instrument but also as a normative political tool with significant social mobilization potential. The utilization of media broadens the reach of fatwas to the public domain and serves as a counter−narrative to misinformation or anti−refugee rhetoric circulating in society. These dual approaches reveal that *ulama* are not merely guardians of orthodoxy but strategic actors who shape public opinion and guide societal responses to global humanitarian issues. While MPU Aceh has exercised its strategic function within existing structural limits, future peacebuilding efforts, as suggested by Garred and Abu−Nimer, should expand through public education, religious digital literacy, and strengthened interfaith and inter−institutional networks. In the Indonesian context, *ulama* serve not only as the moral anchor of their communities but also as norm entrepreneurs capable of bridging human rights, theological legitimacy, and social stability within an integrative policy framework.

Through the lens of religious peacebuilding theory developed by Michelle Garred and Mohammed Abu−Nimer (2018), the role of Acehnese *ulama* can be understood not merely as guardians of community morality but as strategic actors in designing social peace infrastructures. According to this framework, resolving contemporary conflicts and

humanitarian crises requires the active involvement of religious actors in an inclusive and multi―layered process—ranging from value―based advocacy and symbolic influence to the establishment of social norms. In the context of Aceh, *ulama* mobilize their religious authority to cultivate empathetic attitudes toward refugees, bridging tensions between transnational Islamic values and the structural limitations of the state.

MPU Aceh, through its fatwas and *tausyiah*, not only urges society to assist refugees but also formulates a series of practical recommendations: enhancing oversight of human trafficking, enforcing laws against smugglers, advocating for long―term state solutions, and highlighting the importance of global solidarity that once supported Aceh following the 2004 tsunami. In doing so, *ulama* articulate a collective humanitarian memory as an ethical instrument to mobilize intertemporal solidarity.This study contends that in the Rohingya refugee crisis in Aceh, the role of *ulama* cannot be understood conventionally as merely moral authorities or religious figures; rather, they function as non―state actors with institutional and political capacity to influence policy and shape public opinion. Acehnese *ulama* adopt two primary strategies that demonstrate their centrality in local humanitarian governance.

The first strategy is the exercise of normative and symbolic authority institutionalized in Fatwa MPU Aceh No. 3 of 2024 and Tausyiah No. 6 of 2024. These documents constitute a normative intervention directly addressing the Rohingya refugee crisis, affirming that aiding refugees fleeing persecution is *fardhu* (obligatory) during emergency response periods, provided it does not cause harm. Through this fatwa, *ulama* not only reproduce ethical Islamic discourse but also frame refugees as *dhuyuf* (guests) deserving of dignity, while simultaneously delineating legal and social boundaries in refugee―community relations. The strength of this intervention lies in its function as a hybrid mechanism bridging religious law and social policy, allowing the articulation of Islamic principles into a contextualized and operational policy narrative. In governance terms, the fatwa operates as a form of "soft law" from civil society that shape social norms and public attitudes while encouraging state actors to act. Here, *ulama* emerge as norm entrepreneurs, actors who initiate and promote normative change in situations of uncertainty or crisis (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

The second strategy is the use of online media as a platform for discourse articulation, including local media and social media channels. These outlets are actively employed to shape public opinion, framing refugee acceptance not only as a humanitarian act but also as a religious duty rooted in the values of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* and transnational solidarity heritage. A concrete example of *ulama* intervention in public governance is Abi Hasbi Albayuni's call to relocate refugees from the basement of the Balai Meuseuraya Aceh to more appropiate accommodations. This was not merely a moral statement but a form of moral―political pressure on formal authorities, demonstrating the *ulama's* influential position in policy spaces. From a political perspective, this action can be classified as policy advocacy by non―state actors, where informal social authority is leveraged to address or shift state response gaps during crises.

The apex of *ulama* political influence is evident in the actions of Tgk. Faisal Ali, Chair of MPU Aceh, who directly advocated for structural solutions at national and international levels. By bringing the issue to the President of Indonesia and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Acehnese *ulama* extended their influence beyond local spaces, connecting multi―level governance networks across local, national, and international domains. This illustrates how local religious institutions can operate

within global networks—a concrete example of transnational governance in migration and humanitarian affairs.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes the central questions concerning the political role of *ulama* in the Rohingya refugee crisis in Aceh. First, *ulama* utilize religious－political instruments—such as fatwas, tausyiah, sermons, and media platforms—to shape discourse on refugee acceptance grounded in Islamic values and humanitarian solidarity. They frame refugees as "guests" who must be respected and assisted, while simultaneously regulating social interactions in accordance with Islamic norms. Second, the political interventions of *ulama* are implemented concretely through advocacy for the relocation of shelters, exerting pressure on local and central governments, and mobilizing humanitarian aid, all informed by Islamic jurisprudence and local wisdom. Theoretically, this study contributes to an expanded understanding of governance within the study of religion and politics, demonstrating that religious actors such as *ulama* are not merely spiritual authorities but integral participants in decision－making processes and in shaping public opinion during transnational humanitarian crises. Empirically, the findings enrich the understanding of how local authorities can conduct effective moral diplomacy beyond formal state structures. The implications underscore the need for approaches that move beyond the secularist dichotomy in crisis governance studies, recognizing religion as a legitimate source of authority and political agency, particularly in societies with strong religious traditions. The relationship between the state, civil society, and religious authorities should be viewed as an interdependent network in responding to humanitarian challenges. The limitations of this study lie in its geographic focus on Aceh and its lack of consideration of national－level dynamics or responses from non－Muslim religious groups. Future research could expand the geographical scope and further investigate interfaith interactions and state responses in broader contexts.

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