Islamic Charitable Networks: From Southeast Asia to the Middle East?

By AMELIA FAUZIA

ABSTRACT

While the prevalent view of Islam, and specifically of Islamic charities, is that their influence flows from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, this paper examines transnational charity networks that flow in the opposite direction. It highlights the small flow of humanitarian assistance from Southeast Asia to the Middle East and the Southeast Asian-led charity network linking the two regions which is focused on exchanging ideas.

The common view of Islam, and specifically of Islamic charities, is that their influence flows from the Middle East to Southeast Asia. This view is not only based on the historical legacy of the Middle East as the birthplace of Islam and source of Islamic authority, but also on the fortunes of the region, particularly the Gulf countries, which have made financial contributions to many parts of the world, including Southeast Asia.¹ Since the pre-modern era, the countries of the Middle East have forged transnational networks with Southeast Asia through Islamic charitable activities. Following other recent studies that look into the multidirectional influence of networks,² this paper seeks to uncover possible transnational charity networks that flow in the opposite direction in recent times, i.e., to explore whether there is something the Middle East might be able to gain from Southeast Asia, long regarded as being on the periphery of the Islamic world, both geographically and in regard to Islamic studies?

---


This paper is based on the author’s ongoing research on networks of Islamic philanthropy in Southeast Asia, which examines organisations in eight Southeast Asian countries — in particular, Indonesia, where Islamic charitable organisations and movements have been most prominent, compared to the rest. While the flow of charitable assistance continues to be largely from the Middle East to Southeast Asia and the networks linking the two regions are predominantly driven by players in the Middle East, a new direction is emerging in the flow of assistance and Islamic discourse, that is, from Southeast Asia to the Middle East. This paper will focus on two early, and, at this point, minor developments that connect Southeast Asian Islamic charities with the Middle East, namely humanitarian assistance and the networks related to zakat (one of the pillars of Islam, which requires that Muslims give a proportion of their wealth to charity).

THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN ISLAMIC LANDSCAPE

Southeast Asia is home to a sizeable Muslim population. Indonesia, in fact, has the world’s largest Muslim population, numbering some 230 million. Of the 11 countries in the region, Malaysia and Brunei, along with Indonesia, have Muslim-majority populations, while Thailand and Singapore are Muslim-friendly states with significant numbers of Muslims.

Since the early 21st century, the process of Islamisation, coupled with growing incomes and the widening political space for Islamic expression, has led to a spurt in the practices of Islamic charities, especially in Indonesia. This growth of local Islamic charitable organisations, mainly in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, has encouraged the movements to go beyond national boundaries. The picture of Islamic charitable activism has been enriched not only with actors from non-governmental organisations and state-based agencies, but also individual philanthropists, research bodies/universities, and international funding agencies — each with its own purposes. Actors whose concerns include the enhancement of Islamic piety and Islamic brotherhood, as well as poverty eradication and development, have become more engaged in support of the activities of Islamic charities. Forms of giving varied from zakat, waqf (Islamic philanthropic endowment), and humanitarian relief, all of which have resulted in the creation of networks among Islamic charitable organisations within Southeast Asia and between these charities and those in the Middle East. The most active network has been created by non-governmental Islamic organisations that disburse humanitarian relief overseas. Indonesian Islamic charities have established branches or representatives in other countries, either for fundraising or for distributing assistance. For example, Dompet Dhuafa has branches in Hongkong, Japan, South Korea and Australia. Another Indonesian organisation, PKPU Human Initiative, has representatives in Saudi Arabia, Germany, Japan,

---

3 This research is supported by the Religion and Globalisation Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. As part of the project, the author undertook research trips to Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam.
Malaysia, Singapore, Qatar, Taiwan, Turkey, UAE, and has branches in England, Australia and Korea. The sending of relief aid overseas is not restricted to Islamic charitable organisations from Southeast Asia’s Muslim-majority countries; Islamic organisations in minority Muslim countries, such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar, also send “solidarity” donations overseas, including to the Middle East, notably to the Palestinians.

**HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE**

Awareness of the need for humanitarian relief first came to Indonesians and many Islamic charitable organisations in the region through the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami that hit Aceh in Indonesia and neighbouring countries at the end of 2004. The massive destruction in Aceh that took approximately 170,000 lives brought a flood of donations from individuals, both local and international, which to some extent, enhanced the capacities of local charitable organisations. Humanitarian relief thus became an important sector that these charitable organisations, including zakat organisations, became involved in. Two of the largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, gained assistance from AusAid, the Australian government’s international aid agency, for creating special advocacy organisations for disaster relief and prevention.

Exposure to relief assistance abroad came to Indonesia’s Islamic charities in 2012 at the time of the outbreak of the Rohingya crisis, which saw them taking the initiative to provide humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. Two organisations, Dompet Dhuafa (DD) and PKPU Human Initiative, gained competence in humanitarian assistance and succeeded in their missions in Myanmar. Since then, these organisations have continued to undertake humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions where these were within their capacities, such as during the earthquake in Nepal and typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. To date, the leading organisations working on overseas humanitarian assistance include DD, PKPU, Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC—now known as Muhammadiyah Aid), Medical Emergency Rescue Committee (MER-C), and Aksi Cepat Tanggap (ACT).

Owing to their religious affiliation and solidarity with the Muslim community, these Islamic charities have not found it difficult to secure donations. Most of them also have skills in fundraising. M. Sabeth Abillawa, DD’s Program Director, noted that many fundraising drives for humanitarian relief are media driven and require relatively little effort to draw support. Compared to fundraising for advocacy work and other activities, such as the training of poor farmers, fundraising for humanitarian crises can attract huge sums in donations within a short period.\(^5\) However, DD limits its overseas programmes and is selective about the areas chosen for assistance owing to the

---

\(^5\) M. Sabeth Abillawa, Statement made at seminar on “Fenomena Praktik Filantropi Masyarakat Muslim dalam kerangka Keadilan Sosial,” Social Trust Fund UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, March 27, 2018.
challenges of ensuring proper distribution and of linking with the right middlemen. So far, DD’s overseas programmes account for less than 10 percent of its total programmes. Humanitarian conflicts in the Middle East, such as the Palestinian conflict and Syrian crisis, have led to the region becoming one of the main beneficiaries of humanitarian relief from Indonesian charities. Thus far, DD has provided 500 million rupiah (US$34,000) each year since 2010 directly to the Palestinians, 1 billion rupiah (US$67,000) in 2012 to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and 300 million rupiah (US$20,000), along with an ambulance, to the Syrians.

DD’s work is only one example illustrating the flow of charitable assistance from Indonesia to the Middle East. The charities usually collaborate with local organisations in target countries to handle their programmes for providing food, temporary housing, and medical services. Most of these organisations take extra care to comply with international humanitarian procedures, especially in conflict zones — though many of them are unaware of proper procedures. Smaller organisations tend to entrust larger organisations, local or international, with disbursing the donations that they have collected. Having obtained consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2008, PKPU has set strict procedures for undertaking its overseas humanitarian relief efforts, ensuring that it has prior permissions from the Indonesian government and destination countries. It must be pointed out that the success of most overseas humanitarian missions undertaken by Indonesian charities is owed in part to support from the Indonesian government, which sees such assistance as a form of people-to-people diplomacy. An example of such support was the establishment of an Indonesian hospital in Gaza by MER-C at a cost of about US$9 million. The Indonesian government facilitated the process and provided part of the funding.

Overseas humanitarian relief work in the Middle East has also been undertaken by charitable organisations in Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. Bapa Relief, a charitable organisation in Singapore, revealed to the author in early 2017 that it had once raised about S$1 million (US$733,000) through a month-long fundraising campaign for Gaza. Likewise, mosques and charitable organisations in Thailand and Brunei have sent donations to Gaza, either through non-state or state-based networks.

**NETWORKING FOR EXCHANGE OF IDEAS**

---

6 Interview with M. Sabeth Abilawa, April 4, 2018.
7 Interview with M. Sabeth Abillawa, April 4, 2018.
8 In early 2016, the author personally observed the humanitarian work of PKPU and other Indonesian NGOs in Rakhine state, Myanmar, by joining them as a volunteer. Prior to being accepted on the mission, the author was given a long list of questions and lists of do’s and don’ts by a PKPU director. She was also told that she would need to exercise patience as tardy permission from local and national authorities in Myanmar would lead to many uncertainties over the mission’s schedules.
9 Interview with Haji Mohd Johan bin Haji Janif, Chairman Bapa Relief, January 11, 2017.
Some of the Islamic networks linking Muslims in Southeast Asia are driven by a sense of solidarity and interest in doing charity work. Indonesian and Malaysian organisations are among the most fervent about advancing zakat and waqf, followed by those in Brunei, Thailand and Singapore. With social and political situations that support Islamic charitable activism, activists from Indonesia and Malaysia collaborated in initiating the first associational networks of zakat movements in the region. The initiative started as far back as 2005, and resulted in the official setting up of the Southeast Asia Zakat Council (Dewan Zakat Asia Tenggara or DZAT) the following year. However, DZAT was dissolved in 2007 as it was subsumed by the unofficial meetings of the religious affairs ministers of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (known as MABIMS). In 2007 Malaysian’s then Prime Minister Ahmad Badawi initiated the International Zakat Organisation (IZO) as a part of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), but it was active for only two years.10

A waqf coordination forum for Southeast Asia — supported by the Islamic Research and Training Institute of the Islamic Development Bank (IRTI-IDB) and the Kuwait Awqaf Public Foundation — was officially set up in 2011 in Jakarta by Indonesia’s Waqf Board. This appeared to attract seven member countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia) as well as three observer countries, namely Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, but no further activities took place after its creation.

The one network that has so far been active and can potentially expand its reach in the Middle East is the World Zakat Forum (WZF), established with the idea of advancing zakat for the welfare of Muslim communities.11 DD and the Indonesia national zakat agency, BAZNAS, started this network with seven member countries in 2010. Its launch was marked by a grand conference in Yogyakarta.12 By 2017, its membership had grown to 21, including countries from the Middle East.13 The core members of WZF are state zakat authorities and other government bodies, followed by community-based zakat organisations (NGOs) and scholars who specialise in zakat matters. Learning from the failed DZAT experience, WZF roped in as a key partner BAZNAS, which was to later become the

---

10 Interview with Ariffin Purwakananta, former Program Director of DD and now Director of BAZNAS, February 13, 2016; Nana Mintarti, one of the initiators of WZF and a former commissioner of BAZNAS, September 7, 2018; and Ahmad Juwaini, former President Director of DD and former General Secretary of World Zakat Forum, September 5, 2018.


12 Interviews with Ariffin Purwakananta, Nana Mintarti, and Ahmad Juwaini. The author attended the conference, which was a big and splendid event opened by Indonesia’s Minister for Religious Affairs, Suryadharma Ali. It was effectively the first meeting of WZF, where its secretary general was selected. Hilman Latief, “Philanthropy and ‘Muslim Citizenship’ in Post-Suharto Indonesia,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no 2 (2016), p. 276, notes that the establishment of the WZF was in 2007. Perhaps the 2007 meeting refers to a preparatory meeting for its establishment.

13 The members are: Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Vietnam, India, Bangladesh, Saudi, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey, Bosnia, UK, Egypt, Morocco, Uganda, Sudan, Nigeria, South Africa, and United States. Interview with Irfan Syauki Beik, February 6, 2018.
main host of the organisation. Roping in Baznas may also have been in recognition of the fact that for many Muslim countries zakat is under the jurisdiction of the state. Irfan Syauki Beik, director of BAZNAS’s Center of Strategic Studies and head of the WZF Secretariat, explains that the involvement of countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is due largely to the fact that WZF has the character of state-to-state diplomacy. WZF’s focus on the academic angle and its conferences revolving around the role of zakat in development and the economy is another important factor attracting the interest of these Middle Eastern players. Subjects explored within WZF such as a National Zakat Index and zakat management have personal appeal for representatives of its member states. The Middle Eastern countries in particular joined the network after learning of its “Zakat Core Principles”.14 Currently, Saudi Arabia’s Director of Zakat and Tax serves as Deputy Secretary General of WZF. Kuwait’s Zakat House participated in one of its events and other countries such as the United Arab Emirates have stated their intention to become members.15

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show that there is another direction in the flow of assistance involving Islamic charitable associations, namely from Southeast Asia to the Middle East. The quantum of assistance is still not clear but, admittedly, it is still small. This paper has also attempted to show that there is a Southeast Asian-led network linking Southeast Asian Islamic charities with those in the Middle East and that this is focused on exchanging ideas. This flow of assistance and ideas thus puts paid to the popular notion that Southeast Asian Islam has nothing to offer its Middle Eastern counterpart. Whether this flow grows and contributes significantly to transformational change would depend on many factors, including sociopolitical and economic factors.

14 Interview with Irfan Syauki Beik, February 6, 2018.
15 Ibid.
About the author

Amelia Fauzia is a historian specialising in Islam in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, with expertise on Islamic philanthropy. Her main research topics include social movements, social change, women, and civil society. She is a senior lecturer at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta and Visiting Fellow at School of Humanities & Social Sciences, UNSW. From September 2015 to August 2018, she was a senior research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, where she conducted research on networks of Islamic philanthropy in Southeast Asia. She received her MA (1998) from the University of Leiden and PhD from the University of Melbourne (2009). Among her publications are ‘Faith and the State: A History of Islamic Philanthropy in Indonesia’ (EJ Brill, 2013), ‘Islamic Orientation in Contemporary Indonesia: Islamism on the Rise?’ with M.Sakai, (Asian Ethnicity, 2014), and ‘Penolong Kesengsaraan Umum: The Charitable Activism of Muhammadiyah during the Colonial Period’ (South East Asia Research, 2017).