

# Defining Islamic Transnationalism: A Case Study of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as a transnational actor in international relations and comprehends its behavior based on the dimensions of Transnational Islam. NU is well recognized as an Indonesian national religious civil society organization and presented itself as the antithesis of Transnational Islam in the country. Meanwhile, NU conducts many cross-border activities, has members all over the world, and has offices based in various countries, enough to make it be perceived as a Transnational Islamic organization. This article examines why NU is a Transnational Islamic organization using Bowen's three dimensions of Transnational Islam: demographic movements, transnational religious institutions, and Islamic references and debates. This research applies qualitative descriptive methods from literary works. This research concludes that NU is a Transnational Islamic organization as it fits all three of Bowen's dimensions. NU's transnational dimensions are found at various but interconnected categories, specifically cultural, structural, and ideational levels.*

**Keywords:** *Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia, Islam, Islamic Transnationalism, Transnationalism*

*Artikel ini menguji status Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) sebagai aktor transnasional di dalam hubungan internasional dan menjabarkan perilakunya berdasarkan dimensi Islam transnasional. NU telah dikenal sebagai organisasi keagamaan Islam di Indonesia dan menampilkan diri sebagai antitesis gerakan-gerakan Islam transnasional di dalam negeri. Sementara itu, NU sendiri melakukan banyak kegiatan lintas batas negara, memiliki keanggotaan dari berbagai belahan dunia, dan memiliki kepengurusan internasional, sehingga dianggap cukup untuk menyebut NU sebagai organisasi Islam transnasional. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa NU adalah organisasi Islam transnasional berdasarkan tiga dimensi yang dikemukakan Bowen: demographic movements, transnational religious institutions, dan Islamic reference and debates. Artikel ini disusun dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif melalui penelusuran pustaka. Kesimpulan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa NU adalah organisasi Islam transnasional karena sesuai dengan ketiga dimensi Bowen. Adapun dimensi transnasionalitas NU berada di tiga level berbeda yang saling berkaitan, yaitu di level kultural, struktural, dan ideasional.*

**Kata-kata kunci:** *Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia, Islam, Islam Transnational, Transnationalisme*

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Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is the largest Islamic civil organization in Indonesia. NU was founded by Hasyim Asy'ari on 31 January 1926 in response to the Islamic world situation. Domestically, NU had a significant role in Indonesia's independence movement. NU leaders were actively involved in the preparations for Indonesian liberation and took part as the state apparatus right after Indonesia's proclamation. NU has the "*Hubbul wathan minal iman*" doctrine, which means loving the homeland is a part of faith (Sa'diyah et al. 2021). Nationalism became the domain of NU's effort, both at the discourse and practical levels. For instance, by promoting the idea of *Ukhuwah Wathaniyah* (national brotherhood) and issuing the resolution of *Jihad fii Sabilillah*, which refers to the national war (Noviyanti 2019).

The 1998 reforms that overthrew Suharto's New Order pushed the democratization process in Indonesia. The processes somehow enabled more transnational Islamic movements in Indonesia, such as the Tarbiyah Movement (Muslim Brotherhood), Salafi Wahhabism, Jemaah Islamiyah, and Hizb ut-Tahrir (Asroor 2019). The presence of the transnational movement and the ideology of pan-Islamism is a challenge for NU since it directly contradicts NU's doctrine to strengthen Indonesian nationality. Consequently, NU has placed itself as an opposer to transnational Islamic movements in Indonesia.

Nevertheless, although NU negates being labeled as a transnational Islamic movement in Indonesia, since the beginning, NU has been constantly going beyond national borders and actively involved in transnational advocacy and Islamic preaching. Even in NU's ruling constitution, some provisions authorize establishing overseas management called the NU Special Branch Office (PCINU). PCINU aims to be the home of not only NU's members living overseas but also Indonesian citizens and even local communities in the host country to practice NU's religious rituals. Furthermore, PCINU also plays a significant role in building friendships among the global Islam community and becoming NU's ambassador for peace abroad (Zaini 2020).

In general, since its establishment, NU has consistently been involved in transnational advocacy and carried out *da'wah* globally. However, on the other hand, NU argues that they are

not transnational Islamic organizations or movements, as some scholars would argue. Their rejection of the label was based on the argument that NU does not come from outside Indonesia (Assegaf 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to define Transnational Islam and ask: “*Why NU is (or is not) a transnational Islamic organization?*”. This paper aims to explore the key understanding of the term “Transnational Islam” in various works of literature, then examine the behavior of NU in the international sphere based on these characteristics. The aim is for the studies of International Relations to properly and accurately define NU as one of the transnational non-state actors in the study. This study is significant given that NU is the most recognized Islamic organization in the country with the largest Muslim population.

### **Understanding Islamic Transnationalism**

To answer the primary question above, this paper refers to the conception of Transnational Islam discussed in previous literature. The phrase transnational Islam consists of two words, i.e., transnational and Islam. In the study of International Relations, the term transnational developed in the early 1970s as a critique of the classical view that paid less attention to the relationship between non-state actors (Al-Makassary 2019). In contrast to traditional views that focused on state-centered international relations, Nye and Keohane (1971) then introduce “transnational relations” as contacts, coalitions, and interactions across national borders that are not controlled by government organs that operate national foreign policy.

From Nye and Keohane’s perspective, the word transnational occurs when an interactive process involves nongovernmental actors (individuals or organizations). Therefore, transnational interaction is the movement of tangible and intangible goods across national boundaries when at least one actor is not a government or intergovernmental organization agent. Keohane and Nye (2000) also define transnationalism using the terms “interdependence,” “globalization,” and “globalism.”

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Since transnationalism has various meanings, this article defines transnationalism as “Communities of outlook that include persons and organizations that share common world views, purposes, interests, and practices which they communicate and act across national borders and jurisdictions” (Juergensmeyer 2005, 193). This definition is in line with Nye and Keohane, who recognize the existence of intangible and ideational aspects, such as religion and ideology. Therefore, one of the actors in transnational relations that meet these criteria is a global religious organization such as a transnational Islamic organization.

The term Transnational Islam has various meanings among scholars. Some works of literature by Indonesian scholars define transnational Islam as a movement not native to Indonesia (Husni 2018). This movement is characterized as a religious group having international networks with a religious ideology from the Middle East, which tends to be different from the religious understanding that has existed in local society, with a different religious approach from traditional Indonesian Islam (Suhanah 2011). Other literature mentions Transnational Islamic organizations as fundamentalist and radical groups headquartered in countries other than Indonesia and aim to change Indonesia's political system (Noor 2011). Their members frequently are the targets of the deradicalization program of the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (Hermastuti et al. 2016). They are referred to as groups with an orientation toward the plan of unifying Muslims around the world, where Islamic ideology is dominated by scriptural, textual, normative, radical, and fundamental ones, different from the concept of the nation-state (Aksa 2017). In summary, as defined by Indonesian academics, Transnational Islam is a movement that comes from outside Indonesia, is radical and fundamentalist, plans to unite Muslims around the world, and has an ideology different from Indonesia's principles. With such a definition, it is understandable why NU is reluctant to identify itself as a Transnational Islamic organization even though it has an area of influence that crosses national boundaries.

This article decides to use the definition of Transnational Islam that is different from the kinds of literature above. Instead, this article adopts Bowen's definition, which focuses on the critical features

of the Transnational Islamic movement. Bowen's definition of transnational Islam is not limited to specific nationalities, so it can be used to assess the behavior of all Islamic movements in the world. According to Bowen's Three Transnational Dimensions of Islam, he emphasizes three phenomena to refer to the phrase "transnational Islam": demographic movements, transnational religious institutions, and Islamic references and debates (Bowen 2004). Muslims can move across national boundaries for social and economic reasons. In other words, they participate in transnational migration to work and live in other countries. Although it does not necessarily mean "Islamic migration", Muslims who carry out demographic movements may spread and change religious ideas and rituals.

Bowen's second dimension of transnational Islam is related to religious practice. Some Muslims belong to religious organizations that promote transnational movements as part of religious practice or include and promote cross-national communication within their religious hierarchy. The organization, which is based in the country of origin, would send its followers to live in other parts of the world to teach Islam. These organizations maintain their ties to their home countries and keep their relations from generation to generation. In this dimension, Levitt (2001) focuses on analyzing the everyday practices of migrant religion in two or more different locations.

The third meaning of Transnational Islam is as a space of reference and public debate that refers to the history of Islamic movements, communication, and institutional innovation. In Islam, the idea of a worldwide community (the Umma) that includes all Muslims worldwide is highly promoted. Arabic language and literature have a role in enabling international communication between scholars and developing global jurisprudence. The feeling of one Umma encourages Muslims to reject particularistic loyalty to ethnic groups or particular nation-states. This awareness mainly creates the image of an Islamic community that transcends boundaries. Using the three dimensions above, this article examines the behavior of NU from time to time to see its compatibility with the characteristics of Transnational Islam by Bowen.

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This study applies qualitative methods to data gathering and analysis. This paper traces NU activities in a transnational dimension through primary and secondary data. The primary data is obtained using questionnaires. Meanwhile, secondary data are obtained through literature studies on journal articles, books, and mass media. After examining the collected data by putting them into categories to draw some patterns, this article answers the research questions and identifies how NU behaviors match the three dimensions of Transnational Islam from Bowen.

### **NU as Diasporic Muslim Organization**

Bowen's first dimension relates to transnational Islam characterized by the cross-border movement of people for economic and social purposes. In this aspect, a migrant residing in the host country still practices their religious values in the country of origin. Levitt (2001) calls this phenomenon a "diasporic religion", which identifies a transnational religious movement. Within this context, Hinnells in Vertovec (2000) defines diasporic religion as a religious practice of any people who have any sense of living away from the land of religion or away from the old country. In addition, Vertovec also argues that the religious and sociocultural dynamics sometimes evolve differently whether or not migrants carry minority status, whether or not they become part of the diaspora, or whether or not they engage with transnational religious practices.

Using the term above, NU which has many members abroad – Indonesian citizens studying or working in other countries, can be identified as a transnational Muslim diaspora organization. PCINU administrators abroad are dominated by Indonesian students studying for their master's or doctoral degrees while simultaneously organizing, unifying, and mobilizing Indonesian workers in the residing country to learn altogether about Islam. PCINU runs programs to support NU members abroad and continue carrying out NU religious rituals practiced by NU members in Indonesia, such as Quran recitation, *tahlilan* (praying for the deceased), daily prayers, etc.

NU can also be identified as a diaspora religious organization because it bridges Indonesia's Islam identity of its members with the realities of everyday life of their overseas members in their host countries. NU provides a guideline for migrants to continue practicing their religion despite the different cultures, values, and religious beliefs of their community. Although NU members are mostly Indonesian citizens, NU's activities are transnational.

The dimension of NU's demographic movement can also be identified in the many Indonesian migrants who still attach to NU's teachings in their current host country. NU members have loyalties and beliefs beyond national boundaries and thus maintain their ties to NU. NU provides sociocultural and religious identity to each of its members. No matter where they live, they will keep their NU identity and practice their beliefs as usual. The presence of Indonesian migrants who identify themselves as NU members in various countries inevitably indicates the existence of a Transnational Islamic dimension of NU, at least at the people's cultural level.

The cultural level means that NU's members, wherever they live overseas or in Indonesia, persist in practicing NU ways of worshiping with or without facilitation from the official organizational system (PCINU). NU's religious rituals are still practiced because the members believe that the rituals have some theological justifications, following their Islamic tradition and obeying the guidance they learned from their parents and teachers. Although they live overseas, they still feel comfortable worshiping NU's rituals as they have an emotional and spiritual attachment to NU in Indonesia. Apart from regular worship, their loyalty to NU is also shown by participating in activities organized by PCINU in their host countries. There are many NU religious rituals that its members continue to carry out while living overseas—for instance, grave pilgrimages, prayers, and commemorating major Islamic days.

We argue that the success of NU members overseas in organizing various programs shows that the local government tends to allow and accommodate NU activities. NU is based in Indonesia and sends missions out to urge its members residing elsewhere to teach Islam's correct practice. Considering that they are abroad

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for economic and social reasons and still remain loyal to NU in Indonesia, this confirms the fulfillment of Bowen's first dimension to prove NU's transnational character.

### **NU International Offices**

Since its establishment, NU has always carried out its international mission, such as the delegation of the Committee of Hejaz, a group of Indonesian ulama visited Saudi Arabia to give a letter of request from NU to King Ibn Saud in the late 1920s. NU's international involvement particularly got stronger during the leadership of Hasyim Muzadi (2000–2010) (Purwono 2020). During that time, NU actively contributed to promoting and advocating international issues such as antiterrorism, antiradicalism, the environment, and world peace. Muzadi also established a network of NU administrators in various countries through the Nahdlatul Ulama Special Branch Office (PCINU) in Europe, America, Asia, and the Middle East. PCINU was first initiated during the 30th NU Congress at Pesantren Lirboyo, Kediri, East Java, in 1999, in which NU officially acknowledged PCINU in the organizational constitution (AD/ART) and produced a Decree as the legal basis for PCINU establishment (Halim 2016).

PCINU aims to actively organize activities to support NU's objectives in introducing the value of Moderate Islam. Furthermore, PCINU is responsible for representing NU's da'wah, both to Indonesians living overseas and the host communities. PCINU's responsibilities include being "a home" to the Indonesian diaspora and facilitating the practice of religious rituals according to NU's way. PCINU is also expected to spread and maintain the principles of friendships and solidarity, not limited to only within overseas NU members but also with the global communities.

PCINU organizes various international forums which include religious leaders worldwide, such as the International Conference of Islamic Scholars (ICIS) in 2008, the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) in 2016, and the World Sufi Forum in 2019 (Purwono 2020). Other examples are PCINU Australia which established Muslim in Australia After the Sydney

Siege event in 2014 (Niam 2015); PCINU Pakistan hosted a book review event titled *Religious Radicalism: The Causes and Antidotes* in 2020 (Muhammad 2015); PCINU United Kingdom held a short course for *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) inviting international speakers as a comparative study to develop educational institutions in Indonesia; and PCINU Netherland and PCINU Germany which are expected to maintain the harmony between Islam and West (Shohibuddin 2015).

By 2022, NU had 34 PCINU representatives worldwide. There are PCINU in the Middle East countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Yemen. Meanwhile, in Europe and Eastern Europe, NU has established PCINU in Belgium, England, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Russia, Scotland, and Spain. PCINU also has African branches, particularly in Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia. In Asian countries, PCINU is actively raising solidarity among Muslims in Brunei, China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Timor Leste. There are also PCINU for the United States and Canada and PCINU for Australia and New Zealand. The international units of NU prove that NU is a transnational Islamic organization or transnational religious institution, as Bowen labels it. Indonesian Muslim diaspora belongs to NU sub-organizations that promote cross-border movements as part of their religious practices and promote cross-border communication to their religious hierarchy.

### **Promotion of *Wasathiyah Islam***

Bowen's third dimension of Transnational Islam relates to Islamic transnational discourse and debate. In this aspect, NU actively promotes *Wasathiyah Islam*, or Moderate Islam, to the international community. Through this effort, NU aims to reshape the face of Islam, which has been widely portrayed as Middle Eastern Islam. NU aspires to make the moderate Islam of Indonesia the reference for global Islam. Since Islam in Indonesia can coexist with a nation-state, culture, and local wisdom, adapt to the system of democracy, and be compatible with modernity.

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Hasyim Asyari, the founder of NU, once conveyed the idea of “*Hubbu l-wathan min al-iman*”, which means loving the homeland as a part of the Islamic faith. This statement later becomes the background of the conception of *Ukhuwah Wathaniyyah*, which means brotherhood of fellow nationals, complementing the idea of *Ukhuwah Islamiyyah* or brotherhood among Muslims and *Ukhuwah Basyariyyah* or brotherhood of fellow human beings, which was introduced by Prophet Muhammad (Noviyanti 2019). NU’s commitment to nationalism was proven through its strong resistance against the colonials and is currently shown through the spread of Islamic education, which contains national values.

NU’s emphasis on nationalism is also inseparable from the context in which NU was established during the trend of Islamic purification in the Middle East in the late 1920s. The emergence of movements to purify Islam’s and restore Islamic teachings as applied by Prophet Muhammad and his earlier followers was called Salafussalih; thus, it is known as Salafi Wahhabism. Conversely, NU believes Islam does not seek to change the local culture and that practicing local wisdom is not a barrier to becoming a good Muslim. This idea which was later called “Indigenization of Islam” by Abdurrahman Wahid (NU chairman 1984–1999), is that Islam as a culture can manifest the interests of all people in the world (Burhani 2016).

NU’s commitment to nationalism and nation-state makes it readily accepted by the international system, mainly because it does not conflict with state actors and the mainstream modern state’s political system. This idea is different from the ideology carried by other transnational Islamic movements such as Hizbut-Tahrir, which plans to change the state system and implement the caliphate as a system of government, or Ikhwanul Muslimin, which seeks to formalize sharia and Islamic law through parliamentary politics. Instead, in realizing its agenda, NU follows a culture, religion, education, and public welfare strategies rather than politics. In particular, in 1984, NU explicitly declared Khittah NU or the organization’s fundamental commitment to return to the original purpose of NU establishment as a religious organization and to withdraw from politics or depoliticize itself (Zarkasyi 2008).

To spread *Wasathiyah Islam* internationally, NU held various conferences that strengthened the interconnectedness between different religious epistemic communities, built networks, and provided a framework for constructive relations between Islam and the West. The conferences emphasized the moderate character of Indonesian Islam, which was compatible with democracy and modernity.

NU, with its authority, carries a great moral responsibility to reconstruct the impression of Islam in the world. Therefore, NU is increasing the internationalization of the values of moderate Islam. Through various programs and efforts to disseminate *Wasathiyah Islam*, NU mainstreams the approach of international dialogue and conferences and applies a cultural approach (soft diplomacy) rather than a political approach (hard diplomacy) in responding to global conflicts (Mahfudin and Sundrijo 2021). This approach effectively promotes NU's agenda as it does not contain political interest in seeking political power. As a socio-religious organization, NU is assumed to have no political interests, so it can quickly establish relationships and gain the trust of the government, community leaders, and local organizations in other countries (Faizin 2020).

The concept of *Wasathiyah Islam* developed and disseminated globally by NU is the third dimension of Bowen's Transnational Islam. The idea is that the value of Islam is moderate, upholds local culture, and is adaptive to modernity. It can be implemented by the people of all nations worldwide without being limited by national borders. One of NU's missions that underlies NU's global advocacy is to have a moderate global Islamic community transcending national boundaries. Even though they live in different countries, NU members overseas also feel attached to the organization's ideology. The idea of *Wasathiyah Islam* also formed a network of epistemic communities that facilitated debate and discussion and provided input on implementing Indonesia's foreign policy.

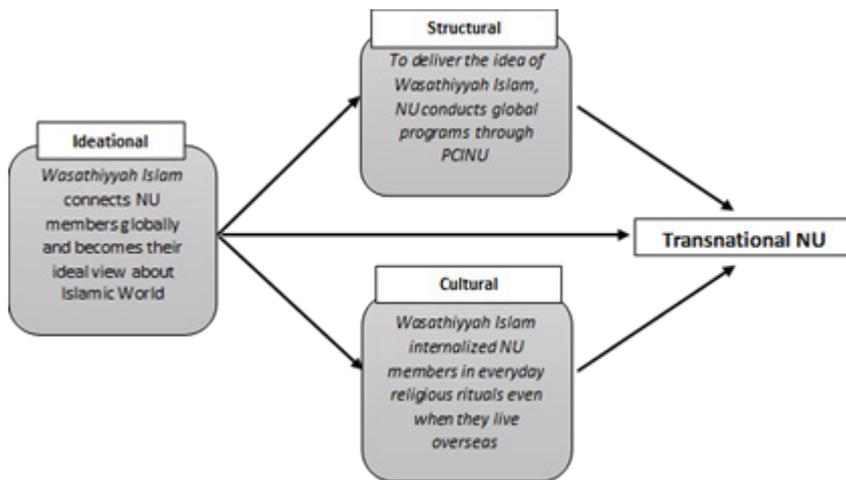
### **NU Islamic Transnational Dimension**

The previous section shows that NU meets the indicators of the three dimensions of Transnational Islam proposed by Bowen.

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The three dimensions of NU's Transnational Islam are different but interrelated: cultural, structural, and ideational. First, the cultural levels show that NU's teachings have been embedded as the value system and individual social practices in daily worship. The presence of NU members in various parts of the world shows the dimension of NU's transnational Islam itself. The second is the structural aspect; NU has the vision to develop its goals at the international level. This goal is then maintained by establishing organizational structures in various countries called the PCINU. NU organizes various activities abroad through this structure and brings together the Indonesian diaspora in various countries. The third level, ideational, lies in the idea of *Wasathiyah Islam*, which promotes peace, and supports nationalism, moderation, and tolerance, so the global community and nation-state could presumably easily accept it. The spread of the idea of *Wasathiyah Islam* transnationally was carried out by NU agents such as the PCINU and individual NU members. This idea makes them feel ideologically connected beyond national boundaries.

**Figure 1.**  
**Levels relationship of Islamic Transnationalism in NU**



*Source: Composed by authors (n.d)*

The cultural, structural, and ideational dimensions are interconnected (Figure 1), with the ideational aspect being fundamental among the three. The idea of *Wasathiyah Islam*

became the goal as well as the vision of the organization to make Islam a blessing for the universe (*Islam rahmatan Lil Alamin*). According to NU, moderate Islam is a religious view that respects tradition and culture, is tolerant of differences, and is committed to national values in every country where Muslims live. This view is generally compatible with the modern international system, so it goes beyond state boundaries or transnational.

These visions are then articulated into various activities and programs through organizational structures at the transnational level (PCINU). The structural level is the process of putting the *Wasathiyah Islam* idea into practice. NU maintains the Islamic traditions practiced by Indonesian at home to those who live overseas through this organizational support while promoting *Wasathiyah Islam* to the global community. These cross-border institutions mean NU's transnational Islam is not only found at the ideational level but also structural (formal) level.

Meanwhile, the cultural level is the result of the previous efforts. NU's success in instilling the values of Moderate Islam and campaigning for *Wasathiyah Islam* has earned the loyalty of its members living overseas and made them ideologically connected. This idea connects all NU members worldwide and maintains members' obedience to the NU Central Board in Indonesia. In addition, people join NU because they are individually interested in its ideas and have been practicing NU rituals from generation to generation, from their ancestors and teachers, and through a series of debates and discussions in the community. As a result, they internalize *Wasathiyah Islam* at the individual level as a daily religious guideline.

## Conclusions

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is a Transnational Islamic organization because it meets the three dimensions proposed by Bowen: demographic movement, international religious institution, and reference to debate and discussion. The first dimension is primarily seen in the existence of cultural NU members spread in various countries, practicing NU religious rituals in their daily lives. The

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second dimension is indicated by the structural organization of the PCINU and the Special Agency for the Development of Foreign Cooperation, which coordinates programs and carries out NU's mission beyond the boundaries of Indonesia's national jurisdiction. Still, it maintains compliance with the Central Board structure of NU in Indonesia. Meanwhile, the third dimension is identified by the idea of *Wasathiyah Islam* which unites NU members and becomes their ideal view of the Islamic world so that it is propagated globally. NU's Islamic transnationalism exists at three different but interconnected levels: cultural, structural, and ideational. This article is an input for Transnationalism Studies, where scholars must properly understand how a transnational religious movement and organization work. This study particularly enriches knowledge about the characteristics and roles of Transnational religious organizations as non-state actors in International Relations.

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