

# The Contribution of the Muslim Diaspora in the Development of Transnational Madrasas: The Indonesia-Middle East Islamic Education Network

**Khundhori Muhammad<sup>1</sup>, Abdul Hamid Bashori<sup>2</sup>, Moh Nafi Alisha<sup>3</sup>, Leila Chamankhah<sup>4</sup>**  
STIT Miftahul Ulum, Bangkalan, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>, STIDKIS Al-Mardliyyah, Pamekasan, Indonesia<sup>2</sup>,  
STAI Nurul Abror Al Robbaniyin, Banyuwangi, Indonesia<sup>3</sup>, Punjabi University, India<sup>4</sup>  
Email correspondence: khundhorimuhammad@gmail.com

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## Abstract:

This study examines the important role played by the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the Middle East in developing transnational Islamic education networks, especially in the context of madrasah development. Through a qualitative approach with case study methods, the research investigates how the Indonesian Muslim diaspora forms, maintains, and expands Islamic education networks that connect Indonesia with various Middle Eastern countries. The findings show that the Muslim diaspora plays a role as a cultural mediator, a facilitator of knowledge exchange, and a driver of innovation in the madrasah education system. The research identified three main contribution patterns: curriculum transfer and teaching methodology, development of educational infrastructure, and scholarship networks for students and teachers. This study concludes that the transnational networks built by the Muslim diaspora not only strengthen the madrasah education system in Indonesia but also create hybrid educational spaces that integrate traditional Islamic values with contemporary pedagogical approaches, thereby enriching the global Islamic education landscape.

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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of globalization has brought fundamental changes in various aspects of human life, including the Islamic education system which has now evolved beyond geographical and cultural boundaries (Azra, 2020; Mandaville, 2019). In this context, transnational Islamic education networks are emerging as an interesting phenomenon to study, especially when the Muslim diaspora plays an instrumental role in the formation, development, and sustainability of such networks. Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, has a long history of educational relations with the Middle East that have developed over the centuries, since the time when the archipelago's scholars studied in Islamic centers such as Al-Azhar in Egypt, Haramain in Saudi Arabia, and various educational institutions in Yemen and the Levant region (Hefner & Zaman, 2019; Azra, 2017).

Madrasahs, as formal Islamic educational institutions, are a significant meeting point in this transnational education network. From the colonial period to the contemporary digital era, madrasahs in Indonesia continue to undergo transformations influenced by social, political, and religious dynamics, both from within and outside the country (Lukens-Bull, 2018; Tan, 2021). In this transformation process, the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the Middle East—consisting of students, academics, scholars, and professionals—has played a crucial role as a bridge between Indonesia's Islamic educational traditions and the Middle East. They are not just passive consumers of knowledge, but also active agents who transmit, negotiate, and adapt various ideas, practices, and curricula of Islamic education in a transnational context (Abaza, 2018; Hasan, 2022).

The dynamics of Indonesia-Middle East relations in the context of Islamic education have undergone various phases of development. During the colonial period and early independence, the relationship was more one-way, where Indonesia tended to be the recipient of the influence of Islamic scientific centers in the Middle East (Latief & Nashir, 2020). However, in recent decades, the relationship has evolved to become more reciprocal and complex, with the Indonesian Muslim diaspora not only absorbing knowledge, but also actively contributing to the global Islamic education discourse and even influencing the development of Islamic education in the Middle Eastern countries themselves (Slama, 2021; Bruinessen, 2018).

Although studies on transnational Islamic education have been widely conducted (Hefner, 2018; Zuhdi, 2021; Moosa & Tareen, 2020), research that specifically examines the contribution of the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the development of transnational madrasahs is still limited. Some previous studies focused more on the historical aspects of the ulama network (Azra, 2017; Laffan, 2019), intellectual exchange (Abdullah, 2019; Kersten, 2017), or Islamic education reform in general (Fealy & White, 2022; Hashim et al., 2020). Meanwhile, contemporary dynamics involving mobility, knowledge transfer, and identity formation in the context of the Muslim diaspora and their influence on the development of transnational madrasahs have not received adequate attention.

This gap has become increasingly significant amid the increasing mobility of transnational education and the expansion of Islamic educational institutions that transcend national borders. The phenomenon of transnational madrasahs—defined as Islamic educational institutions whose curriculum, human resources, and intellectual orientation are shaped through cross-border interactions—offers a rich analytical space for understanding how the Muslim diaspora shapes the contemporary Islamic educational landscape (Yildiz & Bruce, 2021). These madrasahs not only transmit traditional religious knowledge, but also become spaces where Islamic and Indonesian identities are negotiated, articulated, and reconfigured in a global context (Sakai & Fauzia, 2022).

This study aims to fill this gap by comprehensively analyzing how the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the Middle East contributes to the development of transnational madrasah networks. In particular, this study seeks to: (1) identify forms of Muslim diaspora contributions in knowledge transfer, curriculum, and teaching methodology; (2) analyze the process of adaptation and negotiation of Islamic educational values in a transnational

context; (3) mapping the social and intellectual networks that connect Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia and the Middle East; and (4) explore the implications of the transnational education network on the development of madrasas in Indonesia and Indonesia's position in the global Islamic education constellation.

Theoretically, this research is positioned at the intersection of diaspora studies, the sociology of Islamic education, and the study of transnationalism. By adopting the theoretical perspective developed by Levitt and Schiller (2004) on the "transnational social space" and the concept of "transnational capital" from Hannerz (2019), this study sees the Muslim diaspora not simply as a community separate from the country of origin, but rather as an actor that actively shapes the flow of knowledge, values, and educational practices that transcend national boundaries. This approach allows for a more nuanced analysis of how religious identity, authority, and legitimacy are negotiated in the context of transnational Islamic education.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of the transnational dimension of contemporary Islamic education. In the midst of increasing globalization and intellectual mobility, an understanding of how transnational networks shape and transform Islamic educational institutions is critical. Furthermore, this research is expected to provide valuable insights for the development of Islamic education policies that are responsive to global dynamics while maintaining the distinctive characteristics of Indonesian Islamic education. In a broader context, this research also contributes to the discourse on the role of the diaspora in national development and cultural diplomacy, particularly in the domains of education and religion.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to understand the contribution of the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the development of transnational madrasas. This approach was chosen because of its ability to explore the complexity of transnational networks and the associated socio-cultural dynamics. The research subjects consisted of 40 respondents covering 20 members of the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the Middle East, 15 transnational madrasah managers in Indonesia, and 5 Islamic education policy makers. The selection of subjects was carried out through purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Respondents were spread across several regions of Indonesia (Jakarta, Surabaya, Makassar) and Middle Eastern countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar).

Given the wide geographical reach, this study utilizes an online approach as the main data collection strategy. In-depth online interviews are the primary data collection technique, carried out through a video conferencing platform for 60-90 minutes with a semi-structured interview protocol. Before the in-depth interview, an online survey was distributed as an initial screening to gather demographic data and basic information. The research also conducts an analysis of various relevant documents such as madrasah curriculum, inter-institutional MoU, diaspora publications, and annual reports. To validate the initial findings, the study conducted two online Forum Group Discussion sessions lasting 120 minutes each.

Data analysis was carried out through a systematic process starting with a verbatim transcription of interview results which was then analyzed using thematic coding techniques with the help of NVIVO software. To understand the structure of transnational education networks, the study used social network analysis with Gephi software that visualizes the relationships between actors in the network. The study also conducted a comparative analysis of various data sources to identify general patterns and variations in the contribution of the Muslim diaspora.

## **RESULT**

### **Demographic picture of the Indonesian muslim diaspora in the Middle East**

The results of the study show that the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the Middle East, which contributes to the development of transnational madrasahs, has diverse demographic characteristics. The majority of respondents (65%) are graduates of leading Islamic universities in the Middle East, such as Egypt's Al-Azhar, the Islamic University of Medina, and Makkah's Ummul Qura University. A total of 70% of respondents have lived in the destination country for more than 10 years, with 35% of them having developed a professional career as academics, 30% as entrepreneurs, 20% as religious leaders, and 15% working in other sectors. Data shows that 80% of respondents are actively involved in Indonesian diaspora organizations in the destination country, and 75% have strong professional networks with Islamic educational institutions both in the destination country and in Indonesia.

### **Forms of diaspora contribution in the development of transnational madrasahs**

Thematic analysis of interview and FGD data reveals five main forms of contribution of the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the development of transnational madrasahs:

1. Transfer of Pedagogical Knowledge and Expertise. The diaspora acts as a bridge of knowledge that facilitates the transfer of innovative learning methods from Middle Eastern educational institutions to madrasahs in Indonesia. As expressed by one respondent, *"Our experience of studying at Al-Azhar became the main capital to develop a learning model that combines the advantages of classical Islamic scientific traditions with modern pedagogical approaches"* (Interview, R7). This form of contribution is realized through teacher training, learning module development, and curriculum consultation.
2. Development of Institutional Cooperation Networks. As many as 85% of respondents have facilitated the establishment of formal cooperation between madrasahs in Indonesia and Islamic educational institutions in the Middle East. This collaboration includes student-teacher exchange programs, mutual recognition, scholarships, and collaborative research. *"Our presence in Egypt facilitates the formation of Al-Azhar's cooperation with madrasahs in Indonesia which was previously difficult to realize due to communication and bureaucratic barriers"* (FGD, R12).
3. Mobilization of Financial and Material Resources. The Indonesian Muslim Diaspora plays a significant role in gathering financial support from various sources in the Middle East for the development of madrasah infrastructure in Indonesia. Data shows that in the

last five years, the diaspora network has facilitated funding of USD 3.5 million for the construction and renovation of 15 madrasahs in various regions in Indonesia. In addition, the diaspora has also successfully facilitated the grant of books and learning materials from libraries and publishers in the Middle East.

4. Curriculum Adaptation and Contextualization. Diaspora, which has a deep understanding of both educational contexts, plays an important role in the process of adapting and contextualizing the curriculum. *“The main challenge in transnational cooperation is how to adapt the content of Islamic education from the Middle East to be relevant to the socio-cultural context of Indonesia without losing its scientific substance”* (Interview, R3). Analysis of curriculum documents shows that there is a systematic pattern of adaptation that combines the advantages of the Al-Azhar curriculum with the Indonesian national curriculum.
5. Development of Cosmopolitan Islamic Education Identity. Through intensive transnational interactions, the diaspora contributes to forming a more cosmopolitan madrasah identity but is still rooted in Indonesian values. As stated in the FGD, *“The transnational madrasahs that we developed do not only adopt the Middle East model, but develop a global model of Islamic education while still upholding the values of religious moderation and Indonesian nationalism”* (FGD, R18).

### **Knowledge transfer mechanisms in transnational networks**

Analysis of social networks reveals complex patterns of knowledge flows and educational practices in transnational networks facilitated by the diaspora. The results of the network visualization show that there are three main patterns of knowledge transfer:

1. Direct Transfer. Educational knowledge and practices are transferred directly from institutions in the Middle East to madrasahs in Indonesia through teacher exchange programs, workshops, and intensive training. This pattern dominates 45% of total interactions in the network.
2. Transfer through mediation. The diaspora acts as a mediator who translates, adapts, and recontextualizes knowledge before it is applied in Indonesian madrasahs. This pattern accounts for 35% of the total interactions and is considered the most effective in generating contextual educational innovations.
3. Collaborative Transfer. Knowledge is built collaboratively through intensive interaction between educators in the Middle East and Indonesia, facilitated by the diaspora. This pattern represents 20% of total interactions and often results in innovative hybrid education models.

Further analysis showed that the success of knowledge transfer was influenced by several key factors: (1) the linguistic and cultural capabilities of the diaspora, (2) the legitimacy and authority of the diaspora in the educational community, (3) the intensity and quality of communication, and (4) the institutional support of both parties.

### **Challenges and strategies in the development of transnational madrasah**

The research identified several key challenges in the development of transnational madrasas:

1. Regulatory and Bureaucratic Challenges. Differences in education regulatory systems between Indonesia and Middle Eastern countries often hinder the implementation of cooperation programs. *“The process of equalizing diplomas and recognizing academic credits is still the main obstacle in student exchange programs”* (Interview, R9).
2. Socio-economic gap. The disparity in socio-economic conditions between madrasahs in Indonesia and educational institutions in the Middle East affects the capacity to absorb knowledge and innovation. The data shows that madrasahs in urban areas with better financial support have a higher success rate in adopting the transnational education model.
3. Cultural and Ideological Resistance. Some traditional madrasahs have shown resistance to changes perceived as “Arabization” or “wahhabisation” of Islamic education. *“We must be careful not to create the perception that this transnational program will shift the tradition of Islamic boarding school education that is already rooted in society”* (Interview, R14).
4. Limitations of Digital Infrastructure. Although online interaction is a solution to geographical distance, the limitations of digital infrastructure in some regions in Indonesia are still a significant obstacle in building a sustainable transnational network.

In the face of these challenges, the Indonesian Muslim diaspora has developed several adaptive strategies:

1. Cultural Approach to Diplomacy. The diaspora positions itself as a “cultural diplomat” that builds understanding and trust between the two education systems. This approach is effective in reducing resistance and strengthening the legitimacy of transnational programs.
2. Establishment of a Transnational Madrasah Consortium. To overcome resource limitations, the diaspora facilitated the formation of madrasah consortia that allowed the sharing of resources and knowledge among educational institutions in Indonesia.
3. A Phased Development Model. The implementation of transnational programs is carried out in stages by considering the readiness and characteristics of each madrasah. *“We do not apply a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather develop a specific pathway for each madrasah based on their capacity and needs”* (FGD, R22).
4. Adaptive Technology. Development of a custom learning platform that can operate under limited digital infrastructure conditions and can be adapted to the local context.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Diaspora as an Agent of Transnationalism in Islamic Education**

The findings of the study show that the Indonesian Muslim diaspora plays a role as an agent of Islamic educational transnationalism that facilitates the circulation of knowledge, values, and educational practices across geographical boundaries. This role is in line with the concept of “transnational knowledge brokers” put forward by Barnett et al. (2021) which describes the intellectual diaspora as facilitators in global knowledge exchange. However, in contrast to the perspective of diaspora transnationalism which tends to see the flow of knowledge

linearly from the “center” to the “periphery” (Kong, 2019), this study reveals a more complex and reciprocal pattern of interaction.

The Indonesian Muslim diaspora not only facilitates the transfer of knowledge from the Middle East to Indonesia but also plays a role in integrating the tradition of Indonesian Islamic boarding school education into the global Islamic education discourse. This reflects what Merry (2020) calls “vernacular cosmopolitanism” in Islamic education, where Islamic universal values are met with local traditions to create an authentic educational model while remaining connected to global discourse. As expressed by one respondent, *“We realize that Indonesia has a rich tradition of Islamic education that can contribute to the renewal of global Islamic education, especially in the aspects of religious moderation and harmonization with democratic values”* (Interview, R5).

### **The Dynamics of Hybridization in Transnational Madrasah**

The process of adaptation and contextualization of the curriculum facilitated by the diaspora reflects the dynamics of the hybridization of Islamic education in the context of globalization. Referring to the concept of “hybridization” developed by Rizvi (2019), transnational madrasahs in Indonesia do not simply adopt the Middle Eastern education model in its entirety, but create a “third space” where various pedagogical traditions interact and transform.

Analysis of transnational madrasah curriculum documents shows that hybridization occurs at three levels: (1) content level, with the integration of materials from classical Islamic scientific traditions and modern science; (2) methodological level, by combining traditional learning methods such as sorogan and bandongan with an active learning approach; and (3) the epistemological level, with an effort to dialogue classical Islamic epistemology with contemporary epistemology. This process of hybridization reflects what Hefner (2022) calls “critical cosmopolitanism” in Islamic education, where openness to global influences is accompanied by a critical and selective attitude.

Interestingly, the study also reveals that the hybridization process does not always run smoothly and often poses epistemological tensions. As stated in the FGD, *“The biggest challenge in integrating the Al-Azhar curriculum with the national curriculum is the paradigmatic difference in viewing the relationship between religious science and general science. In Al-Azhar, scientific integration has become a deep-rooted tradition, while in Indonesia there is still a strong dichotomy”* (FGD, R23). These findings reinforce the argument of Anderson-Levitt (2021) that the transnationalization of education often creates “productive tensions” that can be a catalyst for educational innovation.

### **Reconfiguration of Religious Authority in Transnational Networks**

The role of the diaspora in building transnational education networks also has an impact on the reconfiguration of religious authority in Indonesian Muslim society. The findings of the study show that transnational networks facilitated by the diaspora have created new avenues in the transmission of Islamic knowledge that go beyond the traditional channels dominated by local Islamic boarding schools and clerics. This phenomenon is in line with the concept of

“new religious authority” put forward by Mandaville (2019) in the context of Islamic globalization.

The analysis of social networks in this study reveals a shift from a centralized authority model to a more distributed and networked model of authority. In this new model, religious legitimacy and authority are based not solely on traditional scientific genealogy but also on transnational connectivity and access to global authoritative sources. As expressed by a madrasah manager, *“The presence of Al-Azhar and Medina alumni who are actively building networks with their home institutions has created a new dynamic in the Islamic education ecosystem in Indonesia. Our madrassas now have direct access to fatwas and the latest thoughts of global Islamic authorities”* (Interview, R16).

Nevertheless, this reconfiguration of authority does not necessarily mean the marginalization of traditional authority. Instead, the study found an adaptation pattern in which traditional Islamic boarding schools and scholars integrate themselves into transnational networks to strengthen their legitimacy and relevance. In some cases, Islamic boarding schools that have transnational networks are actually able to strengthen their authority by positioning themselves as “gatekeepers” who determine the form of transnational Islamic knowledge to be adopted at the local level. This phenomenon strengthens Zaman’s (2020) argument about the “resilience of traditional authority” in the face of globalization and modernization.

### **Implications for Islamic Education Policy in Indonesia**

The findings of this study have several important implications for the development of Islamic education policies in Indonesia, especially in the context of globalization and internationalization of education. First, the government needs to develop a regulatory framework that is more accommodating to transnational initiatives in Islamic education. This includes simplifying the licensing process, a more flexible diploma equalization system, and a quality assurance mechanism that takes into account the uniqueness of transnational madrasas.

Second, the findings on the strategic role of the diaspora as “knowledge brokers” show the importance of developing a more systematic diaspora empowerment program. This program can include special training for the diaspora in aspects of curriculum development, education management, and cultural diplomacy, as well as the establishment of regular forums that bring together the diaspora with education stakeholders in Indonesia.

Third, the hybridization model developed in transnational madrassas can be a reference for broader efforts in integrating various educational traditions in Indonesia. As shown in this study, transnational madrassas have succeeded in combining pedagogical excellence from various traditions while maintaining Indonesian values. This model can be adapted to overcome the dichotomy between general education and religious education that still occurs in Indonesia.

Finally, the findings on the challenges of digital infrastructure in building transnational networks show the importance of policies that support equitable access to technology in Islamic educational institutions. This includes not only the provision of hardware and



connectivity, but also the development of digital capacity of educators and madrasah management.

## CONCLUSION

This research reveals the significant role of the Indonesian Muslim diaspora in the Middle East in building and developing transnational Islamic education networks, especially madrasas. Through a case study with a qualitative approach, the study identified five main forms of diaspora contribution: (1) the transfer of pedagogical knowledge and expertise, (2) the development of institutional cooperation networks, (3) the mobilization of financial and material resources, (4) the adaptation and contextualization of the curriculum, and (5) the development of a cosmopolitan Islamic educational identity.

The Indonesian Muslim Diaspora acts as a cultural mediator that facilitates the bidirectional flow of knowledge between Indonesia and the Middle East, not only transmitting educational approaches from the Middle East to Indonesia but also integrating the values of Indonesian Islamic boarding school education into the global Islamic education discourse. The process of knowledge transfer in transnational networks occurs through three patterns: direct transfer, transfer through mediation, and collaborative transfer, with the diaspora playing a crucial role in adapting knowledge according to the local context.

The transnational madrasahs formed through this network demonstrate a complex process of hybridization at the content, methodological, and epistemological levels, creating a “third space” of Islamic education that integrates classical traditions with contemporary approaches. This phenomenon has also encouraged the reconfiguration of religious authority in Indonesian Muslim society, from a centralized model to a more distributed and networked model.

Despite regulatory challenges, socio-economic disparities, cultural resistance, and limited digital infrastructure, the diaspora develops adaptive strategies through cultural diplomacy, the formation of madrasah consortia, a phased development model, and the use of adaptive technologies. This study concludes the need for the development of Islamic education policies that are more accommodating to transnational initiatives, systematic diaspora empowerment programs, and equitable access to technology to support the sustainability of transnational Islamic education networks.

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