

Defending Palestine: typologies of agency among actors of the Indonesian Council of Ulama

Yanuardi Syukur

Universitas Khairun Ternate, Indonesia

e-mail: yanuardisyukur@gmail.com

Abstract

The role of religious actors in shaping transnational solidarity is often overlooked in state-centric analyses of international relations. This article addresses this gap by examining the typologies of agency among actors of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) in defending Palestine. Using a qualitative-interpretative approach, the research analyses MUI's fatwas, public statements, and actions, alongside ethnographic observations from the "Safari Ramadhan: Membasuh Luka Palestina" program. Drawing on Ortner's concept of power and project agency, Vorhölter's understanding of agency as socio-culturally mediated capacity, Talal Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition, and related debates in the anthropology of Islam, the findings reveal three interconnected typologies of agency: First, moral-theological agency enables MUI actors to transform political solidarity into a sacred obligation through the fatwa on *fard kifayah* (communal obligation). Second, relational-historical agency allows them to activate shared historical memory, anti-colonial narratives, and the symbolic centrality of Al-Aqsa to construct transnational solidarity. Third, practical-strategic agency enables them to navigate geopolitical uncertainty and materialise solidarity through humanitarian programs, grassroots mobilisation, digital activism, and boycotts. The study contributes to the anthropology of religion by showing how religious actors exercise multiple forms of agency in building transnational solidarity, situating their actions within a discursive tradition that defies simplistic secular-religious binaries.

Peran aktor keagamaan dalam membangun solidaritas lintas negara sering kali kurang diperhatikan dalam kajian hubungan internasional yang terlalu berfokus pada negara. Artikel ini mengisi celah tersebut dengan mengkaji bentuk-bentuk agensi para aktor Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) dalam membela Palestina. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-interpretatif, penelitian ini menganalisis fatwa, pernyataan publik, dan berbagai tindakan MUI, serta observasi etnografis dalam program “Safari Ramadhan: Membasuh Luka Palestina”. Kajian ini menggunakan pemikiran Ortner tentang power agency dan project agency, pandangan Vorhölter tentang agensi sebagai kemampuan bertindak yang dibentuk oleh konteks sosial dan budaya, gagasan Talal Asad tentang Islam sebagai tradisi diskursif, serta kajian dalam antropologi Islam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya tiga bentuk agensi yang saling berkaitan. Pertama, agensi moral-teologis, yaitu kemampuan aktor MUI mengubah solidaritas terhadap Palestina dari sekadar sikap politik menjadi kewajiban keagamaan melalui fatwa fardhu kifayah dan praktik keagamaan kolektif. Kedua, agensi relasional-historis, yaitu kemampuan aktor MUI menghidupkan kembali memori sejarah bersama, narasi anti-kolonial, dan simbol penting Al-Aqsa untuk membangun solidaritas lintas negara. Ketiga, agensi praktis-strategis, yaitu kemampuan aktor MUI menghadapi ketidakpastian geopolitik dan mewujudkan solidaritas melalui program kemanusiaan, mobilisasi masyarakat, aktivisme digital, dan boikot. Studi ini berkontribusi pada antropologi agama dengan menunjukkan bahwa aktor keagamaan dapat menjalankan berbagai bentuk agensi dalam membangun solidaritas transnasional. Tindakan mereka tidak dapat dipahami secara sederhana sebagai tindakan religius semata, tetapi juga sebagai bagian dari tradisi diskursif Islam yang berkaitan dengan sejarah, moralitas, kemanusiaan, dan strategi politik.

Keywords: *Palestinian solidarity, Religious agency, Indonesian council of ulama, Digital activism.*

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Introduction

The relationship between Indonesia and Palestine extends beyond formal diplomacy. Although the Indonesian state has consistently championed Palestinian independence since 1988, this political commitment is embedded in

a broader socio-religious context. As the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, the Palestinian issue resonates deeply, intertwining with national identity, anti-colonial history, and Islamic solidarity. Understanding this dynamic requires shifting from state-centric perspectives to examining the role of actors, particularly religious figures, in shaping and sustaining this commitment.

Since its founding in 1975, the Indonesian Council of Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) has served as the supreme religious authority in the country. Its role is not limited to issuing fatwas on worship; it actively engages in socio-political issues, positioning itself as a moral compass for the nation and its Muslim community. The existence of an ulama council has roots in the early arrival of Islam to the region (Hasyim, 2011). Sukarno established the Council of National Ulama in 1962, but it was under Suharto that the MUI was formally founded in 1975. Hasyim notes that one key factor was Suharto's idea of creating "a single forum" for Muslim organisations, a concept later articulated as *tenda besar* (big tent). This notion shaped the council's role as an intermediary institution that consolidates activities undertaken by other Muslim organisations.

Jamaa (2018) emphasises that ulamas serve as "decisive figures for the survival of Muslims." The MUI's ideological basis has evolved: initially grounded in Pancasila, it shifted to Islam during the reform era, a change that would never have happened under Suharto (Hasyim, 2011). Lindsey (2012) adds that the MUI is an advisory body that produces fatwas to guide the Islamic community and government. Nominally an independent NGO, the MUI has a complex, mutually dependent relationship with the state. Since 1998, regulatory changes have expanded its formal role, granting it quasi-legislative powers in halal certification, Islamic finance, and the hajj pilgrimage.

Within MUI, several actors have emerged as central voices. Prof. Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim, Head of Foreign Relations, is a key architect of the pro-Palestinian movement (Ibtimes.id, 2026). KH. M. Cholil Nafis, Vice Chairman, has mobilised mass action (Mui.or.id, 2023a). Chairman MUI KH. M. Anwar

Iskandar has urged the UN to recognise Palestine and called for *qunut nazilah* (supplication for God's protection from harm) (Mui.or.id, 2024; News.detik.com, 2026). KH. Marsudi Syuhud emphasised the humanitarian dimension (Mui.or.id, 2023a). Ambassador Bunyan Saptomo traced solidarity back to the 1930s (Minanews.net, 2024; Forumzakat.org, 2025). The leadership history reveals the agency of its actors: Hamka resigned in 1980 over a fatwa the government wanted revoked, and Ali Yafie played a role in Suharto's resignation (Hasyim, 2011).

Complementing MUI actors, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, through Minister Nasaruddin Umar, creates state-religion synergy (Kemenag.go.id, 2024; Ambon.antaranews.com, 2026). The "Safari Ramadhan: Membasuh Luka Palestina" program exemplifies concrete collaboration (Mui.or.id, 2025a). MUI actors' influence extends beyond national borders; Prof. Sudarnoto's leadership in the Asia-Pacific Conference for Palestine and Indonesia's designation as GCQP regional headquarters demonstrate their transnational role (Syukur, 2025; Mui.or.id, 2025c; 2025d).

State-centric International Relations studies on Indonesian-Palestinian solidarity overlook the cultural-religious drivers at civil-elite levels. This study fills this gap by examining the typologies of agency among actors of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) in defending Palestine, particularly how they transform religious authority, historical memory, and strategic action into forms of transnational solidarity. Theoretically, it deploys the anthropology of agency to transcend the secular-religious binary, applying Asad's discursive tradition to geopolitical action, rare in political anthropology. Empirically, participant observation during "Safari Ramadhan 2025" (author as translator) yields thick descriptions of MUI's internal dynamics, otherwise a black box. Practically, given Indonesia's Muslim-majority status and MUI's influence over foreign policy, boycotts, and humanitarian diplomacy, these agency typologies are essential. Ultimately, this study offers an analytical tool for policymakers and activists to understand the role of non-state actors in sustaining Palestine solidarity. This

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To analyse this phenomenon, this article employs the theoretical framework of agency developed in contemporary anthropology. Agency became prominent in anthropology from the 1980s, emerging from practice theory (Ortner, 1984; Vorhölter, 2024). Vorhölter notes that agency was initially imagined as a capacity to act within and resist oppressive structures. Ortner (2006) distinguishes between “power agency” and “project agency.” Crucially, Asad (1986) argues that Islam should be approached as a “discursive tradition” linking past authoritative practices to present concerns. Hafez (2018) warns against reifying the “religious subject” as the opposite of a “secular other,” situating Islamic movements within broader social power structures.

These insights are complemented by Nakamura (2020), who insists on integrating Islamic studies with anthropology; Jamaa (2018) on MUI fatwas; Hasyim (2011) on institutional history; Lindsey (2012) on regulatory authority; and Noormansyah et al., (2025) and Wibowo et al., (2024) on grassroots mobilisation. Noormansyah et al., show how Fatwa MUI 83/2023 transforms discourse into concrete actions, while Wibowo et al., (2024) reveal dominant public support for the fatwa. Hasyim notes the MUI's shift from serving the state to serving the people, and Jamaa emphasises its role as a “watchdog.” Nakamura critiques earlier anthropology for marginalising Islamic textual traditions, citing Gus Dur's warning that separating Indonesian from Islamic studies endangers objectivity. This framework enables a nuanced analysis of how MUI actors exercise multiple forms of agency in defending Palestine without reducing them to a stereotype of the “religious subject.”

The concept of agency has been central to anthropological theory since the 1980s, emerging out of practice theory as a corrective to structuralist and functionalist approaches that tended to downplay individual action (Ortner, 1984; Vorhölter, 2024). Ortner (2006) distinguishes between “power agency”, the

capacity to influence others, and “project agency”, the commitment to values and goals over time. She emphasises that agency is not merely about individual action but about “social formations” that act collectively.

Vorhölder (2024) broadens this understanding, by defining agency as “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act,” and notes that meanings of agency vary substantially across social, cultural, and historical contexts. She also cautions against reducing agency to liberal, voluntaristic notions of personal choice and autonomy, pointing instead to distributed, relational, and more-than-human forms of agency. This study draws on these insights to analyse how MUI actors exercise agency not only as individuals but as representatives of a collective institution, and how their agency is shaped by Islamic discursive traditions and geopolitical realities.

Asad’s (1986) foundational essay “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam” provides a critical framework for approaching Islam not as a static essence or set of beliefs, but as a “discursive tradition” that connects past authoritative practices to present concerns. Asad argues against essentialising Islam through binaries such as orthodox/popular or Islam/Christianity, advocating instead for an analysis that attends to the historically changing conditions under which Islamic discourses are produced and contested. This approach allows anthropologists to examine how Muslims draw on authoritative texts and traditions to address contemporary challenges. Hafez (2018) builds on this by warning against reifying the “religious subject” as the opposite of a “secular other,” a binary that distorts understanding of Islamic movements. She argues for situating Islamic movements within broader discussions of social power structures that frame the discursive divide between the secular and the religious. Nakamura (2020), reflecting on his own anthropological career in Indonesia, similarly emphasises that it is “impossible to separate completely Indonesian from Islamic studies” and criticises earlier anthropological works that marginalised Islamic textual traditions. This study applies these insights to analyse how MUI actors draw on

Islamic legal and theological concepts, such as *fard kifayah* and *ukhummah* (Islamic solidarity), while engaging with contemporary geopolitical issues, demonstrating that their agency cannot be reduced to a simple “religious” motivation but is embedded in a dynamic discursive tradition.

Understanding the agency of MUI actors also requires attention to the institution’s historical development and its relationship with the state. Hasyim (2011) traces the origins of MUI to the early 20th century, noting that its formal establishment in 1975 under Suharto was part of a state effort to create “a single forum” for Muslim organisations. Hasyim highlights the MUI’s evolving orientation from serving the state (*khadim al-bukumrah*) to serving the people (*khadim al-ummah*) in the post-Suharto reform era, a shift that has given its actors greater independence. Jamaa (2018) examines the historical development of MUI fatwas, noting that they constitute “an attempt to transform Islamic law in the contemporary era experienced by Muslims and the Indonesian nation.” He also emphasises that MUI serves as a “watchdog” to ensure that no laws contradict Islamic teachings. Lindsey (2012) explores the MUI’s expanding regulatory authority in the post-Suharto era, including its quasi-legislative powers in halal certification, Islamic finance, and the haj pilgrimage. These studies provide crucial context for understanding the institutional authority that MUI actors wield and the constraints within which they operate.

Finally, this study draws on Sahlin’s (2011, 2013) concept of “mutuality of being,” which explains how kinship relations extend beyond biological ties towards a “being together” in which the fate of one is intimately tied to the fate of another. Sahlin’s work challenges the notion that kinship is based solely on descent, arguing instead that it is a relationship of shared existence. Pitt-Rivers (2016) similarly explores how friendship relations can be “closer than brothers” precisely because they are based on choice and mutual feeling rather than obligation. These concepts are applied to understand how MUI actors construct existential mutuality with Palestine through narratives of shared history and

religious symbols, creating bonds that transcend national boundaries. This relational understanding of agency complements Ortner's emphasis on collective social formations and Asad's focus on discursive tradition.

Together, these theoretical threads provide a robust framework for analysing the three typologies of agency identified in this study: moral-theological agency (drawing on Asad, Hafez, and Nakamura), relational-historical agency (drawing on Sahlins and Pitt-Rivers), and practical-strategic agency (drawing on Ortner, Vorhölter, Hasyim, Jamaa, and Lindsey).

This research employs a qualitative-interpretative approach rooted in the anthropology of religion, using a case study design with actors of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) as the primary unit of analysis (Yin, 2018). Following Asad's (1986) approach to Islam as a discursive tradition, Nakamura's (2020) call to integrate Islamic studies with anthropology, and the institutional analyses of Jamaa (2018), Hasyim (2011), and Lindsey (2012), this study examines how MUI actors' statements, fatwas, and actions are embedded within Islamic discourses on justice, anti-colonialism, and transnational solidarity. The approach aligns with qualitative research as a goal-oriented investigation into social and cultural phenomena (Žikić, 2007).

Data were collected through document analysis, participant observation, and informal discussions. Document analysis focused on MUI fatwas, particularly Fatwa No. 83 of 2023 (Mui.or.id, 2023c), public statements by key MUI actors, and reports on humanitarian programmes. The author also participated in the "Safari Ramadhan: Healing the Wounds of Palestine" programme as a translator for six Palestinian scholars, providing direct insight into interactions between MUI actors and the public (Syukur, 2026; Baznas, 2025), with concrete evidence of grassroots mobilisation seen in the Rp 165 million donation collected by Masjid Al Akbar for Gaza (EditorIndonesia.com, 2025). Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with coding guided by concepts from Ortner (1984, 2006), Vorhölter (2024), Asad (1986), Hafez (2018),

Nakamura (2020), Jamaa (2018), Hasyim (2011), Lindsey (2012), Noormansyah et al., (2025), and Wibowo et al., (2024) to capture how MUI actors' agency is shaped by and contributes to an Islamic discursive tradition while transcending simplistic religious-secular oppositions. This systematic approach ensured rigorous examination of MUI actors' agency typologies.

Typologies of agency among MUI actors in defending Palestine

The ethnographic observations from the “Safari Ramadhan” programme, together with analysis of MUI's fatwas and public statements, show that MUI actors defend Palestine through three interconnected types of agency: moral-theological, relational-historical, and practical-strategic. These three types overlap and reinforce each other, demonstrating the complexity of how religious actors build transnational solidarity. Each type reflects a distinct way MUI actors translate Islamic teachings, historical memory, and strategic thinking into concrete action for Palestine.

Contemporary anthropology helps us understand these types of agency. Vorhölter (2024) explains that agency is not just about individual action but also about collective and relational forms of acting. Asad (1986) argues that Islamic actors operate within a living tradition that connects past teachings to present issues, while Hafez (2018) warns against separating “religious” from “secular” actors too strictly. Nakamura (2020) insists that studying Muslim societies requires understanding Islamic texts and scholarship, not just observing daily life. Jamaa (2018) and Hasyim (2011) show that MUI ulama carry both moral and intellectual responsibilities, and that the institution has shifted from serving the state to serving the people. Lindsey (2012) notes that MUI's authority over halal certification and Islamic finance gives its fatwas extra weight. Noormansyah et al., (2025) and Wibowo et al., (2024) provide evidence that Fatwa MUI 83/2023 has truly mobilised grassroots actions, turning abstract sentiment into concrete action, with most public discourse supporting the boycott call. The following

discussion shows that MUI actors exercise agency in ways that go beyond simple ideas of individual choice and beyond the easy division between religious and secular.

Moral-theological agency: building a collective moral subject

Moral-theological agency is the capacity of MUI actors to transform a political issue into a sacred obligation that binds the Indonesian Muslim community. This agency operates most powerfully through fatwas, the institution's most authoritative instrument, and through public rituals that mobilise collective moral consciousness.

Fatwa No. 83 of 2023 (Mui.or.id, 2023c) explicitly declares that supporting the Palestinian struggle against Israeli aggression is a collective obligation (*fard kifayah*). This is not a mere political endorsement; it elevates solidarity to the level of religious duty, demanding a response from every capable Muslim. Noormansyah et al., (2025) observe that the fatwa “solidifies these motivations by providing an explicit religious ruling... translating abstract sentiments into concrete calls to action.” Public response data further confirm its resonance: Wibowo et al., (2024) find that although opinions are divided, supporters of the fatwa remain statistically dominant among Indonesian Muslims. Analytically, this fatwa enacts what Ortner (2006) distinguishes as both “power agency,” binding the community through religious authority, and “project agency,” committing to Palestinian independence as a long-term collective endeavour. Moreover, it illustrates Asad's (1986) insight that Islamic tradition is not static but dynamically links scriptural sources to contemporary ethical imperatives.

KH. M. Cholil Nafis, Vice Chairman of MUI, articulates this agency through the Islamic concepts of *ka al-jasad al-wahid* (one body) and *ka al-bunyan al-wahid* (one structure): “Fellow Muslims are like one structure, required to strengthen and help one another” (Mui.or.id, 2023b). This rhetorical move constructs an imagined moral community in which Palestine's fate is shared fate.

The theological framework does not stand apart from political reality; rather, as Hafez (2018) cautions, it would be misleading to read this as a purely “religious” agency opposed to a secular one. KH. Cholil Nafis mobilises tradition precisely to address a contemporary geopolitical crisis, demonstrating the entanglement of moral, political, and religious dimensions.

KH. M. Anwar Iskandar, Chairman of MUI, further materialises moral-theological agency through ritual practice. During Ramadan, he called for *qunut nazilah* in mosques across Indonesia, urging “all imams throughout Indonesia” to pray for the safety of the Palestinian people and their independence (News.detik.com, 2026). This transforms individual worship into collective, transnational action, a form of agency that works through embodied practice and ritual solidarity, rather than through policy statements alone. As Asad (1986) would frame it, this is not merely about belief but about the formation of moral selves through shared ritual discipline.

KH. Marsudi Syuhud broadens the moral-theological frame by emphasising universal humanitarian values alongside Islamic identity. He stated: “whatever we do, from diplomacy to alleviating the burden of affected communities, even prayers and statements, can help ease their suffering” (Mui.or.id, 2023a). This fluid movement between religious and humanitarian registers challenges any rigid binary between the “religious subject” and the “secular actor” (Hafez, 2018). In Ortner’s (2006) terms, it reflects agency arising from intersecting “subject positions,” the actor acts not from a single identity but from multiple, overlapping moral commitments.

Secretary General of MUI, Dr. H. Amirsyah Tambunan reinforces this foundation with striking candor. On 7 October 2025, he publicly confronted internal dissent, stating:

There are people whispering in my ear, why is MUI too critical in defending Palestine? That’s a state official. I doubt their love for Palestine. In fact, there are not a few defenders of Israel in the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia (Kumparan.com, 2025).

Amirsyah further branded indifference to Palestinian suffering as “*pengkhianatan kemanusiaan*” (betrayal of humanity) and “*pengkhianatan konstitusi*” (betrayal of the constitution), explicitly linking the moral obligation to the preamble of the 1945 Constitution. This statement not only defends MUI’s stance against state-level criticism but also positions the council as the guardian of both Islamic principles and constitutional mandates. In doing so, Amirsyah enacts what Jamaa (2018) describes as the ulama’s role as a moral “watchdog,” while reflecting Hasyim’s (2011) observation that post-Reformasi MUI has shifted from serving the state to serving the *ummah* (Muslim community), a transformation that enables its actors to speak with greater independence on politically sensitive issues. Seen through the lens of agency, this is a deliberate, reflexive intervention that uses theological and constitutional authority to hold both the state and the public accountable to a shared moral project.

Relational-historical agency: building existential mutuality

Relational-historical agency is the capacity of MUI actors to activate shared historical memory and build bonds that transcend national boundaries. Through narratives of anti-colonial struggle, symbols like Al-Aqsa, and direct encounters, they construct what Sahlins (2011) terms “mutuality of being”, a sense of kinship in which the fate of one is intimately tied to the fate of another.

Ambassador Bunyan Saptomo, Head of the HLNKI Commission, anchors this agency in historical memory. He outlines the “three sufferings” of the Palestinian people: land confiscation, occupation, and genocide (Minanews.net, 2024). Crucially, he traces Indonesian solidarity back to the 1930s, when “a number of Indonesian youth fell in the struggle against the British colonialists in the 1930s and are recorded as martyrs in the effort to support Palestinian independence” (Forumzakat.org, 2025). This narrative constructs existential mutuality in which Indonesia’s and Palestine’s struggles are one and the same, against colonialism. Through this historical framing, Saptomo does not merely

recount facts; he weaves a shared origin story that positions both nations as fellow travellers in a common anti-colonial journey. Analytically, this is agency realised through the creation of a collective historical subject, where past sacrifice authorises present solidarity.

KH. Anwar Iskandar extends this historical arc to the postcolonial era. He urged the UN to fulfill its moral obligation, stating, “We are truly lost for words because of the humanitarian tragedy that has befallen the Palestinian people” (Mui.or.id, 2024). He reminds his audience that Palestine was the only participating country in the 1955 Asian-African Conference that had not yet achieved independence. The Conference thus becomes a symbol of existential mutuality among newly independent nations, a promise unfulfilled. This move connects past, present, and future in a single moral arc: the anti-colonial aspirations of 1955 demand completion in 2025. This is an agency that places the actor within history while simultaneously imagining a different future, a capacity Ortner (2006) identifies as central to meaningful social action.

The symbol of Al-Aqsa Mosque serves as a particularly potent vehicle for relational-historical agency. In March 2026, during Ramadan, MUI and activists from the Asia-Pacific region held a Focus Group Discussion condemning Israel's closure of Al-Aqsa for over ten days during the holy month. Oke Setiadi Affendi, a key figure in the Asia-Pacific Conference for Palestine, stated that the closure “is not merely a restriction of access, but a systematic attack on the symbol of monotheism, the legacy of the Prophets, the land of the Prophets, and the right of the community to worship in the third holiest site of Muslims” (Tribunnews.com, 2026). The forum called for Muslims worldwide to defend Al-Aqsa through prayer, economic boycott, diplomacy, and international pressure, urging Muslim leaders, especially Indonesia, to take diplomatic lead through collective fatwas. This demonstrates how Al-Aqsa functions as a living symbol, continuously reactivated to mobilise transnational solidarity. The mosque is not

merely a physical site but a nodal point in a shared sacred geography that binds Indonesian Muslims to Palestine across time and space.

The relational-historical agency of MUI actors was concretely realised in the “Safari Ramadhan” programme. Six Palestinian scholars visited 225 locations across six provinces, directly interacting with Indonesian communities (Baznas, 2025). Among them was Sheikh Dr. Ahed Abulatta, a Palestinian scholar and activist. Through his translator, Dr. Andy Hadiyanto, Secretary of HLNKI MUI Commission, Sheikh Ahed declared:

We, the people of Gaza, do not want to leave our land. If we compromise, Al-Aqsa Mosque will fall into the hands of the occupiers, and Islamic civilisation in Palestine will vanish (Editorindonesia.com, 2025).

In fieldnotes, the author recorded a sermon by Sheikh Hasan Abu Thoha at a Muhammadiyah boarding school: after detailing Palestine’s hardships, he noted that Indonesians have long defended Palestine because Indonesia itself experienced colonisation, and mentioned that a pulpit at Al-Aqsa Mosque was donated by an Indonesian (Syukur, 2026). These moments bring existential mutuality to life through direct encounter, a “being together” that transcends geographical distance. The physical presence of Palestinian scholars transforms abstract solidarity into felt kinship. This is relational agency realised through networks of social interaction, where shared emotion and mutual recognition solidify the bond. Asad (1986) would frame this as the formation of moral selves through embodied practice, where the discursive tradition is not merely read but lived.

The “Safari Ramadhan” programme also materialised existential mutuality through acts of giving. The programme raised over Rp 2 billion in donations, with MUI separately contributing nearly Rp 1.8 billion (Mui.or.id, 2025a). One concrete example was the congregation of Masjid Al Akbar in Jakarta Timur, which collected Rp 165 million over two weeks for Gaza, symbolically handed over to a Palestinian scholar during the programme (Editorindonesia.com, 2025).

The commitment to continue fundraising “until Palestine is independent” (Mui.or.id, 2025b) shows that this existential mutuality is not temporary but sustained. Sahlins (2011) would recognise these acts of giving as the very substance of mutuality, kinship realised through exchange. This long-term commitment reflects what Ortner (2006) identifies as agency in its fullest sense: sustained action oriented towards a project that transcends the individual moment.

Practical-Strategic Agency: Navigating Uncertainty and Building Concrete Solidarity

Practical-strategic agency is the capacity of MUI actors to act effectively in a complex geopolitical landscape and to materialise solidarity through concrete projects. This agency operates across five interconnected realms: navigating shifting international dynamics, coordinating boycott implementation, building institutional capacity, constructing physical infrastructure, and mobilising grassroots action.

First, MUI actors demonstrate practical-strategic agency through careful navigation of changing geopolitical realities while maintaining consistent support for Palestine. Prof. Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim, Head of Foreign Relations, exemplifies this in his response to the Abraham Accords, the normalisation of relations between Israel and several Arab states. He stated: “We must show empathy towards Palestine... Cooperation also does not have to be with Israel (Saptomo et al., 2022). This statement acknowledges shifting regional dynamics without endorsing them, charting a strategic path that maintains solidarity while avoiding harmful normalisation. This is not a reflex of “religious” identity but a calculated political judgement, a form of practical agency that operates within a tradition of reasoned debate (*ijtihad*/independent Islamic legal reasoning) central to Islamic discursive engagement with modern politics (Asad, 1986).

MUI's practical-strategic agency is further evident in its critical response to the US-led "Board of Peace" initiative. Prof. Sudarnoto led an MUI research team to assess its impact, finding that the initiative "has not yet shown benefit for the people of Gaza and Palestine" (Mui.or.id, 2026a). MUI explicitly rejected "pseudo-peace that is not based on justice" (Suaraislam.id, 2026). Rather than reacting emotionally, MUI conducted in-depth research before taking a position, a careful, evidence-based approach that Jamaa (2018) would recognise as consistent with the MUI's historical "watchdog" function, ensuring that foreign policy aligns with Islamic principles of justice. Notably, within MUI, there are nuanced differences in approach towards the Board of Peace. Actors from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) have tended to show greater support for President Prabowo's engagement with the initiative, while Muhammadiyah-aligned actors have adopted a more critical stance. However, internally, this difference is less about fundamental disagreement and more about how Indonesia should best play its global role to assist Palestine through all available options. All MUI actors are united in their consensus that the Indonesian government must demand that the Board of Peace pressure Israel to immediately recognise Palestine as an independent and sovereign state. Furthermore, they agree that Indonesia's involvement in the Board of Peace must be conducted with full integrity, guaranteeing that it will not result in continued Israeli colonisation of Palestine or further war crimes against the Palestinian people (Mui.or.id, 2026b). This internal consensus, despite differing tactical approaches, demonstrates the MUI's capacity to maintain strategic unity while accommodating diverse perspectives within its *tenda besar* (big tent) framework (Hasyim, 2011). When the proposal to send Indonesian peacekeeping troops to Gaza emerged, Prof. Sudarnoto warned that such a force could be part of an agenda to "subdue Gaza/Palestine" and disarm Hamas, potentially damaging Indonesia's reputation as a staunch defender of Palestine (Suaraaisyiyah.id, 2026). This critical reading demonstrates reflexive awareness, the capacity to evaluate complex situations and act to protect the long-

term interests of the Palestinian struggle (Ortner, 2006). Hasyim (2011) would note that this independence reflects the MUI's evolution towards serving the people (*khadam al-ummah*) rather than merely serving the state, a transformation that enables actors to speak critically on politically sensitive issues.

Second, the implementation of the boycott call, a key element of Fatwa MUI 83/2023, reveals a complex navigation between religious obligation and domestic economic realities. While the fatwa mandates boycotting products affiliated with Israel, its implementation required careful coordination between religious authority and state institutions to prevent unintended harm to Indonesia's domestic economy, particularly local workers employed by the very brands targeted for boycott. On 16 November 2023, Vice President of Indonesia, Prof. KH. Ma'ruf Amin, who also serves as a senior MUI figure, explicitly addressed this tension. He emphasised the need for a systematic approach, stating: "Indeed, the government or certain parties must also conduct the selection" of products truly affiliated with Israel, as MUI had not explicitly issued a list of pro-Israel companies. He explained that this selection process was necessary to prevent harm to companies that do not actually support Israel, noting that "the MUI doesn't say this company, this company. Later, it will [select] which companies are considered affiliated and provide assistance. Otherwise, it will spread everywhere. This is to prevent harm to many parties" (wapresri.go.id, 2023).

This statement reveals a crucial practical dimension: MUI actors recognise that indiscriminate boycotts could harm Indonesian workers and businesses, creating a moral dilemma where religious compliance might inadvertently violate Islamic principles of justice (*adl*) and avoiding harm (*darar*). The Vice President's emphasis on "various efforts" to stop Israel's "genocide" and "mass murder" further aligned state discourse with the fatwa's moral framing, while the careful approach to product selection, delegating verification to government bodies, prevented indiscriminate economic harm to local workers. This coordination

demonstrates what Ortner (2006) identifies as practical agency: the capacity to navigate and manipulate social structures to achieve goals while minimising unintended consequences. Here, the state acts as a buffer, absorbing the political-economic complexity of identifying “guilty” brands while MUI retains its moral authority by issuing the general imperative.

Elaborating further on this practical guidance, the MUI’s Fatwa Commission, through its Chairman Prof. KH. Asrorun Niam Sholeh, provided detailed ethical navigation that directly addressed the economic vulnerabilities of ordinary workers. On 21 November 2023, he emphasised that if a company is publicly known to support Israeli aggression, every level within that company bears corresponding responsibilities and obligations to take preventive measures so that support for the aggression does not continue (Mui.or.id, 2023d). Crucially, Kiai Niam’s guidance was differentiated by position and competency, reflecting a class-conscious understanding of economic power structures:

If he is a controlling shareholder, he bears greater responsibility than a worker. If he is a director, he has the authority to remind the controlling shareholder not to continue supporting Israeli aggression (Mui.or.id, 2023d).

This distinction is significant: it recognises that shareholders and directors, those with economic power and decision-making authority, bear primary moral responsibility, while ordinary workers, who lack such agency, are treated with greater leniency. For workers, Kiai Niam suggested that trade unions consolidate their strength to remind policy holders to cease support for Israel. If the company remains pro-Israel despite these efforts, he presented two practical options, explicitly acknowledging economic constraints:

The first option is to remain in that job but with a heart that continues to reject it, perhaps because of responsibilities that must be carried out, while there is no alternative employment. But if there is an opportunity to work elsewhere, take that job (Mui.or.id, 2023d).

This acknowledgment, “perhaps because of responsibilities that must be carried out, while there is no alternative employment”, is a striking recognition of economic necessity. It permits continued employment in a pro-Israel company when no viable alternative exists, provided the worker internally rejects the company’s stance. This is not a retreat from religious principle but a realistic accommodation of structural economic constraints. He further warned that if one has the opportunity to move but chooses to remain, this effectively condones Israeli aggression:

If one remains silent about the company’s activities in supporting Israeli aggression, this falls under the category of assisting or condoning acts of disobedience (Mui.or.id, 2023d).

This nuanced guidance, distinguishing between shareholders, directors, and workers; acknowledging economic constraints and the absence of alternative employment; providing a graded ethical response that moves from internal rejection to active resistance to seeking alternative employment; and warning against silent complicity when choice is possible, demonstrates a sophisticated practical-strategic agency that balances religious obligation with lived economic realities. It is a form of practical agency that operates through detailed casuistry within the Islamic legal tradition, providing concrete, actionable pathways for Muslims embedded in complex economic structures (Asad, 1986).

The MUI effectively navigates the ambivalence between the boycott imperative and capitalist realities by: (1) delegating product verification to the state to avoid indiscriminate harm; (2) placing primary moral responsibility on shareholders and directors rather than vulnerable workers; (3) explicitly permitting continued employment when no alternatives exist; and (4) only condemning those who have choice but choose complicity. This multi-layered approach ensures that religious compliance does not become a vehicle for economic injustice against the very Indonesian Muslims the fatwa seeks to mobilise. Jamaa (2018) would recognise this as the MUI’s fatwa-making function

at its most responsive, adapting general moral imperatives to specific, real-world situations where individual Muslims face genuine dilemmas between religious duty and economic survival, all while maintaining the institutional authority to provide clear ethical direction.

Third, MUI actors have been actively building institutional infrastructure for sustained humanitarian diplomacy. On 2 July 2025, MUI, in collaboration with BAZNAS RI and the International Relations Student Association (HIMAH) of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, held a training event titled “Humanitarian Diplomacy: Affirming *Wasathiyah* Commitment for Palestine” (Fisip.uinjkt.ac.id, 2025). The event, opened by Secretary General Dr. H. Amirsyah Tambunan and featuring presentations by Prof. Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim, Ambassador Bunyan Saptomo, and Ambassador Safira Machrusah, aimed to consolidate humanitarian values and the principle of *wasatiyya* (Islamic moderation) in diplomatic practice. Participants, mostly students, were equipped with skills in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, public diplomacy based on interfaith dialogue, and technical skills such as protocol and press release writing. This initiative represents a strategic investment in future advocates, demonstrating what Asad (1986) would recognise as the formation of a discursive tradition through institutional practice, sustaining the movement beyond the current leadership.

Fourth, beyond geopolitical navigation and institutional capacity, MUI actors materialise solidarity through physical infrastructure. The construction of the Indonesian Hospital in Hebron, initiated by MUI in 2021 with a budget of approximately Rp 100 billion (Mirror.mui.or.id, 2021), is a concrete investment in Palestinian well-being that goes beyond symbolic statements. This project shows that MUI actors do not merely speak of solidarity but realise it in tangible form, in infrastructure that serves the Palestinian people. Vorhölter (2024) would recognise this as distributed agency, where action involves collaboration between MUI, philanthropic organisations, and the city of Hebron, a plurality of agents

working towards a shared project. The Asia-Pacific Conference for Palestine, organised by MUI in November 2025, further demonstrates this institution-building capacity. The conference brought together 130 participants from 15 countries, resulting in the designation of Indonesia as the regional headquarters of the Global Coalition for Al-Quds and Palestine (GCQP) (Ibtimes.id, 2025; Syukur, 2025). As Asad (1986) might argue, such institution-building is a form of discursive practice that shapes the conditions for future action, embedding solidarity in durable organisational structures. Lindsey (2012) would note that this expanded authority reflects the influence MUI has accrued in the post-Suharto era, particularly through its quasi-legislative powers in halal certification and Islamic finance.

Finally, the practical-strategic agency of MUI actors extends into the everyday lives of Indonesian Muslims. Noormansyah et al., (2025) provide empirical evidence that Fatwa MUI 83/2023 “serves as a moral and religious directive, mobilising Indonesian Muslims to support Palestine through boycotts, charity, and social activism both individually and within communities.” They found that respondents’ motivations stem from both humanitarian and religious convictions, amplified by the fatwa’s ideological framework. The fatwa “transforms solidarity into concrete actions such as donations, boycotts, and digital activism” and “facilitates the globalisation of local actions, linking grassroots efforts to a broader international campaign for Palestinian rights” (Noormansyah et al., 2025). Wibowo et al., (2024) complement this by analysing public response to the fatwa using Discourse Network Analysis. Their findings reveal that while the public is divided into two clusters, supporters and opponents, actors and discourses supporting the fatwa are statistically more dominant, indicating strong public endorsement of the boycott call and the fatwa's moral authority. This empirical grounding shows that MUI actors’ agency is not confined to institutional pronouncements but extends into everyday

practices, from social media activism to consumer choices, and is broadly accepted in public discourse.

The “Safari Ramadhan” programme itself exemplifies this translation of institutional authority into grassroots action. The programme raised over Rp 2 billion in total, with specific contributions such as the Rp 165 million collected over two weeks by the congregation of Masjid Al Akbar in Jakarta Timur, symbolically handed over to a Palestinian scholar during the programme (Editorindonesia.com, 2025). Ustaz Abdul Jabbar, a representative of MUI Pusat, emphasised that the programme is “a concrete manifestation of the Indonesian nation's love for Palestine” (Editorindonesia.com, 2025). This integration of institutional authority with community-level fundraising demonstrates what Ortner (2006) identifies as “project agency”, sustained commitment to a collective endeavour that transcends individual moments. The Grand Action to Defend Palestine at Monas on November 5, 2023, announced by KH. M. Cholil Nafis (Mui.or.id, 2023a), and the call by KH. M. Anwar Iskandar for *qunut nazilah* during Ramadan (News.detik.com, 2026), further exemplify how MUI actors effectively mobilise masses through ritual and collective action. As Asad (1986) would argue, such ritual practices are central to the formation of moral selves within a discursive tradition, never purely “religious” but always also political, shaping collective commitment through embodied practice.

In sum, MUI actors’ practical-strategic agency is realised in five interconnected realms: geopolitical navigation that maintains strategic unity despite internal differences; coordinated implementation of boycott policies with state institutions, including detailed ethical guidance for Muslims in pro-Israel companies; investment in institutional capacity through training and education; construction of physical solidarity infrastructure such as the Indonesian Hospital in Hebron and transnational coalitions like the GCQP; and grassroots mobilisation that activates everyday practices, donations, boycotts, digital activism, and ritual participation, in the lives of ordinary Indonesian Muslims.

These five realms are not separate but mutually reinforcing, demonstrating that practical-strategic agency operates at multiple levels simultaneously: from high-level geopolitical calculation to individual consumer choices and workplace decisions, all integrated through the moral and institutional authority of MUI.

Conclusion

This study analysed the typologies of agency among actors of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) in defending Palestine through the theoretical framework of agency developed in contemporary anthropology. The findings reveal three interconnected typologies of agency exercised by MUI actors. First, moral-theological agency enables them to transform Palestinian solidarity into a sacred obligation through fatwas, public religious authority, and collective rituals. Second, relational-historical agency allows them to activate shared memories of anti-colonial struggle, the symbolic centrality of Al-Aqsa, and direct encounters with Palestinian scholars to construct existential mutuality between Indonesian Muslims and Palestine. Third, practical-strategic agency enables them to navigate geopolitical uncertainty, respond critically to international initiatives, coordinate boycott practices, build humanitarian infrastructure, and mobilise grassroots solidarity.

This study contributes to the anthropology of religion by showing that religious actors exercise multiple forms of agency in building transnational solidarity. Agency is demonstrated to operate not merely at the individual level but as a collective, socio-culturally mediated capacity. MUI actors operate within a discursive tradition that links past authoritative practices to present moral and political action, demonstrating that religious agency is not a retreat from politics but a way of engaging with it, blending moral, historical, and strategic dimensions. The MUI's historical role as a "watchdog," its evolution from serving the state to serving the people, and its quasi-legislative powers in the post-Suharto era have all enhanced the authority of its fatwas. Empirical evidence shows that the fatwa

serves as a significant mobilising force that drives collective action, transforms daily habits, and bridges local and global solidarity efforts, with supportive public discourse being statistically dominant.

This study is limited by its relatively short duration and focus on institutional discourse rather than grassroots reception. While ethnographic observations from the “Safari Ramadhan” programme provide valuable insights into how MUI actors interact with the public, a longer-term study would deepen understanding of how these actors’ agency is received and interpreted by Muslims at the grassroots level. Future research could explore how these forms of agency are responded to by diverse community groups, how they evolve amid changing geopolitics, and, through comparative studies with religious actors in other Muslim-majority countries, enrich understanding of the various forms of agency in building transnational solidarity.

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