



Beyond the Pesantren: Reconfiguring Islamic Authority and Grassroots Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Aceh

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ABSTRACT

Two decades after the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding, scholarship on peace in Aceh remains divided between elite-centred accounts of political settlement and normative accounts of ulama as moral guardians, leaving unexplained how religious authority actually operates in the everyday maintenance of peace. This article asks how dayah-based authority has been extended beyond the dayah after the conflict, through what mechanisms it sustains grassroots peace, and what limits the resulting peace carries. It employs a critical interpretive synthesis of sixteen peer-reviewed empirical studies on dayah, ulama, and religious authority in Aceh published between 2011 and 2025, read against contextual studies of the peace process and theoretical work on religious authority and everyday peace. The synthesis yields three findings. First, dayah authority has been dispersed into four sites beyond the institution: associational networks, village-level problem-solving, state-linked arenas, and the careers of dayah graduates and women leaders. Second, this dispersed authority sustains everyday peace through three mechanisms: converting religious bonds into collective action, arbitrating social problems, and conditionally mediating state programmes. Third, the same mechanisms produce what the article terms bounded peace, cohesive within the community that recognises dayah authority but exclusionary towards rival Muslim currents and religious minorities. Bounded peace is proposed as a synthetic construct explaining why religious authority appears at once as a peacebuilding resource and a source of intolerance. The article contributes to Islamic Studies by reframing religious peacebuilding as a reconfiguration of authority rather than a repertoire of peace activities.

Keywords: Dayah, Religious Authority, Everyday Peace, Bounded Peace, Post-Conflict Aceh

ABSTRAK

Dua dekade setelah MoU Helsinki 2005, kajian tentang perdamaian Aceh masih terbelah antara penjelasan yang berpusat pada penyelesaian politik di tingkat elite dan penjelasan normatif yang memosisikan ulama sebagai penjaga moral, sehingga cara kerja otoritas keagamaan dalam memelihara perdamaian sehari-hari belum terjelaskan. Artikel ini menelaah bagaimana otoritas yang berakar di dayah meluas ke luar dayah pascakonflik, melalui mekanisme apa otoritas itu menopang perdamaian akar rumput, dan batas-batas apa yang melekat pada perdamaian yang dihasilkannya. Penelitian ini menggunakan sintesis interpretatif kritis terhadap enam belas studi empiris bertelaah sejawat tentang dayah, ulama, dan otoritas keagamaan di Aceh yang terbit pada 2011–2025, dibaca bersama kajian kontekstual tentang proses damai serta teori otoritas keagamaan dan perdamaian sehari-hari. Sintesis ini menghasilkan tiga temuan. Pertama, otoritas dayah tersebar ke empat situs di luar institusi: jaringan asosiasi, penyelesaian masalah di tingkat gampong, arena yang terkait dengan negara, serta karier alumni dayah dan pemimpin perempuan. Kedua, otoritas yang tersebar ini menopang perdamaian sehari-hari melalui tiga mekanisme: mengubah ikatan keagamaan menjadi aksi kolektif, menengahi persoalan sosial, dan memediasi program negara secara bersyarat. Ketiga, mekanisme yang sama menghasilkan apa yang disebut artikel ini sebagai perdamaian terbatas (*bounded peace*), yakni kohesif di dalam komunitas yang mengakui otoritas dayah tetapi eksklusif terhadap arus Muslim pesaing dan minoritas agama. Konsep ini diajukan sebagai konstruk sintesis yang menjelaskan mengapa otoritas keagamaan tampil sekaligus sebagai sumber daya perdamaian dan sumber intoleransi. Kontribusinya bagi Studi Islam adalah membongkar ulang pembangunan perdamaian berbasis agama sebagai rekonfigurasi otoritas, bukan sekadar repertoar kegiatan damai.

Kata Kunci: Dayah, Otoritas Keagamaan, Perdamaian Sehari-hari, Perdamaian Berbatas, Aceh Pascakonflik

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Memorandum of Understanding signed in Helsinki on 15 August 2005 closed nearly three decades of armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) and the Indonesian state, and within a few years the province was being cited as a rare case of a separatist war ended through political participation and autonomy arrangements (Stange & Patock, 2010). The settlement was reached under the pressure of the December 2004 tsunami and was followed by one of the largest reconstruction efforts ever mounted (Lopes Cardozo et al., 2022). Yet peace in Aceh has never been only what was signed in Helsinki. It is also what is reproduced, or quietly eroded, in villages, mosques, study circles, and disputes over who may speak for Islam. At this everyday level the question of religious authority becomes unavoidable.

Religion occupies a curious place in this story. Aceh's public identity is saturated with Islam, yet the movement that fought the state was, as Aspinall (2007) shows, essentially secular-nationalist, and its leaders increasingly downplayed Islamic symbols precisely because Islam was something the Acehnese shared with the rest of Indonesia. The state, for its part, promoted the formal implementation of sharia partly to draw popular support away from GAM, in a project formulated largely by official ulama (Ichwan, 2011). Religion thus entered the conflict and its settlement less as a cause of violence than as a contested resource. At the centre of that contest stand the *teungku dayah*, scholars trained in and leading the *dayah*, Aceh's counterpart to the Javanese *pesantren*. Their authority has long rested on the institution, but it has never been confined to it, and the post-conflict period has multiplied the arenas in which it is exercised. This article is concerned with that movement beyond the dayah and with what it means for peace.

Scholarship on the Aceh peace process has been dominated by questions of political settlement: the negotiation itself, the reintegration of combatants, and GAM's transformation into the Aceh Party (*Partai Aceh*), which within a few years held the governorship, nearly half the seats in the provincial parliament, and many district executive posts (Stange & Patock, 2010). This emphasis is understandable, but it reproduces a tendency that the local turn in peace studies has criticised, namely the treatment of peace as the product of elite agreements and institutional design rather than something ordinary people make and remake (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Mac Ginty's (2014) notion of everyday peace, the routinised practices through which individuals and groups navigate life in deeply divided societies, offers an alternative lens that directs attention to bottom-up agency and to the social practices that make coexistence possible below the level of formal peacebuilding. The Aceh literature has absorbed this turn only partially, and least of all with regard to religious actors.

A second body of work, rooted in Islamic Studies and the anthropology of Islam, examines religious authority in post-New Order and post-conflict Aceh. Ichwan (2011) shows that the Consultative Assembly of Ulama (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama*, MPU) became the pivot of sharia implementation and that its authority was contested. Feener (2012) reads state sharia as a future-oriented project of social transformation rather than a merely reactive measure, which implies that the state sought to reshape not only law but also the channels through which religious guidance reaches society. Srimulyani (2013) demonstrates that change in Acehnese Islamic schooling was driven as much by government policy and local politics as by educational considerations, a finding extended by Basri et al. (2023), who trace how post-conflict regional regulations transformed the funding, curriculum, and governance of the dayah. Parallel work has shifted attention from institutional certification to the recognition of authority by communities. Kloos and Künkler (2016) call for religious authority to be studied from the bottom up, and Kloos (2016) follows two female teachers in Aceh whose religious careers were built through negotiation rather than conferred by office.

Recent research on the dayah ulama has sharpened these questions. Syafieh and Nur (2022) show that the Aceh Dayah Ulama Association (*Himpunan Ulama Dayah Aceh*, HUDA) functions as a network through which traditionalist scholars reproduce a genealogy of learning, defend the hegemony of *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah* (Aswaja) against Wahhabi-Salafi currents, and bargain with government over

religious policy. Muntasir et al. (2025) map the power of dayah ulama across its levels, spaces, and forms, locating part of its legitimacy in popular belief in the ulama's *keramat* and in fear of *temeureuka*, the misfortune believed to befall those who wrong a teacher. Rasyidin (2021) documents how communities across several districts continue to turn to ulama to resolve social problems. On the side of peace research, the sociology of religion has argued that religious groups contribute to peace through the socially strategic spaces they occupy within civil society, while stressing that the civil society–state nexus both enables and constrains them (Brewer et al., 2010). Studies of Muslim peace actors add that much of their work is carried out by religious leaders and individuals rather than formal organisations, and that their local legitimacy is precisely what externally designed peacebuilding lacks (Abu-Nimer & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2008). In Aceh, this perspective has produced studies of ulama as agents of reconciliation (Sahlan et al., 2019), of *teungku dayah* mobilising a village against the drug trade (Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2020), and of women dayah leaders exercising peacebuilding agency within patriarchal and politically constrained settings (Lopes Cardozo et al., 2022).

Taken together, this literature establishes three points with reasonable confidence. The dayah ulama retain considerable social and political legitimacy. The state has sought, through sharia institutions and the governance of dayah education, to channel and partly bureaucratise that legitimacy. At the village level, the ulama remain actors to whom communities turn when order is threatened (Ichwan, 2011; Rasyidin, 2021; Basri et al., 2023; Muntasir et al., 2025).

What remains unclear is how these strands connect. Studies of authority rarely ask what authority does for peace, and studies of peace rarely examine how the authority they rely upon is constituted. Two debates follow from this disconnection. The first concerns trajectory. Syafieh et al. (2022) start from the widely held view that Wahhabi-Salafi currents have eroded the authority of dayah ulama, yet their evidence shows that this authority remains strong enough to shape communal rejection of Salafi teaching; whether dayah authority is declining or relocating is therefore an open question. The second concerns effect. The agency and religious social capital that allowed *teungku dayah* to mobilise a village against drug dealers (Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2020) reappear, in another setting, in a mobilisation that culminated in an attack on a Muhammadiyah mosque in Samalanga (Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2022). Zulkarnaen et al. (2023) complicate the picture further by showing that dayah ulama accept the state's narrative of religious moderation largely on condition that it accords with sharia and Acehese custom.

These debates persist partly because of how existing studies are designed. Research on the peace process concentrates on parties and elites. Research on ulama and reconciliation tends to describe what ulama ought to do rather than how their authority operates (Sahlan et al., 2019). Research on dayah authority is usually confined to a single site, organisation, or issue, and studies that do reveal grassroots agency, such as Lopes Cardozo et al. (2022), were not designed to theorise the reconfiguration of authority as such. The result is a literature in which the peace-sustaining and the exclusionary faces of dayah authority are documented in separate studies and explained, where they are explained at all, by separate causes. This matters for Islamic Studies because it leaves the field oscillating between two images of the ulama, as guardians of social harmony and as sources of intolerance, without an account of why the same authority produces both.

This article addresses the gap by shifting the unit of analysis. Rather than asking what role ulama play in peace, it asks how dayah authority has been reconfigured after the conflict and how that reconfiguration itself functions as an infrastructure of peace. Two concepts organise the argument. *Dispersed dayah authority* refers to the relocation of *teungku* authority from the dayah as an institution into associational networks, village problem-solving, state-linked arenas, and the careers of dayah graduates. *Bounded peace* refers to the kind of peace this dispersed authority sustains: cohesive and self-regulating within the community that recognises it, but exclusionary at its edges towards religious others and rival Muslim currents.

The novelty of the article is accordingly threefold. Analytically, it moves from roles to reconfiguration. Conceptually, it proposes bounded peace as a synthetic construct that places the integrative and the exclusionary effects of religious authority within a single mechanism instead of attributing them to different actors or different kinds of Islam. Methodologically, it reads together, through critical interpretive synthesis, studies that have hitherto been read apart, so that the contradictions between them become evidence rather than noise. In this respect the article differs from existing work on sharia and authority in Aceh (Ichwan, 2011; Feener, 2012; Kloos, 2016): its concern is not primarily how the state and everyday Islam shape one another, but what the resulting configuration of authority means for the durability and the limits of peace.

The analysis draws on three bodies of theory. From the study of Islamic authority it takes the view that authority is not a property held by an institution but a relationship that must be continually recognised, and that such recognition frequently comes from communities rather than through formal certification (Kloos & Künkler, 2016). This allows authority to be followed wherever it is recognised, including far from the *dayah*. From critical peace studies it takes the concept of everyday peace (Mac Ginty, 2014) and the local turn's commitment to taking local actors' own resources seriously (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). From the sociology and politics of religion it takes two tools for explaining ambivalence: Brewer et al.'s (2010) attention to the civil society–state nexus that mediates religious peacemaking, and Philpott's (2007) argument that the political conduct of religious actors depends on their degree of differentiation from the state and on their political theology. Combined, these perspectives yield three analytical questions: where *dayah* authority is recognised, what practices that recognition enables, and where recognition ends.

Accordingly, the article asks three research questions. First, through which sites and practices has *dayah* authority been extended beyond the *dayah* in post-Helsinki Aceh? Second, through what mechanisms does this dispersed authority sustain grassroots peace? Third, what boundaries and ambivalences does authority-based peace produce? Its objective is to develop an evidence-based account of religious peacebuilding in Aceh that explains, rather than merely registers, its double face. The central argument is that the *dayah*'s contribution to peace after Helsinki lies less in formal peace processes than in the dispersal of *dayah* authority into everyday infrastructures of order, and that because this authority is anchored in the defence of Aswaja orthodoxy, the peace it sustains is bounded. In making this case, the article offers Islamic Studies a way of analysing religious peacebuilding as a reconfiguration of authority rather than as a repertoire of peace activities.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative critical interpretive synthesis (CIS). CIS was developed for reviews whose aim is not to aggregate findings but to construct a critical analysis of a complex and heterogeneous body of literature; it proceeds through iterative questioning, purposive sampling, and the generation of a synthetic construct capable of accounting for the evidence as a whole (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). The approach suits the present problem for two reasons. The literature on *dayah* authority and peace in Aceh is methodologically diverse, combining ethnography, interview-based case studies, documentary analysis, and designs that mix interviews with questionnaires, which makes aggregative review inappropriate. More importantly, the gap identified above consists precisely in the fact that relevant evidence is scattered across studies that were not designed to speak to one another. CIS treats such scattering, and the contradictions it contains, as material for interpretation.

The unit of analysis is the reported configuration of *dayah*-related religious authority in post-conflict Aceh, meaning the sites in which such authority is exercised, the practices it enables, and the limits it encounters, as documented in peer-reviewed empirical research. Literature was identified through Google Scholar, the SINTA and Garuda portals for Indonesian journals, and the websites of international publishers, using combinations of the terms *dayah*, *teungku dayah*, *ulama dayah*, Aceh, authority, peace,

reconciliation, conflict, and politics, in English and Indonesian. Reference lists of retrieved articles were followed backwards, and citing articles were followed forwards. The bibliographic data and DOI of every candidate item were checked against the publisher's page or DOI-linked records, and items whose DOI could not be confirmed were excluded.

Four inclusion criteria were applied: publication in a peer-reviewed journal with a verifiable DOI; an empirical focus, whether ethnographic, interview-based, or documentary, on ulama, dayah, or religious authority in Aceh; relevance to the post-conflict period or to its immediate institutional antecedents; and publication between 2007 and 2025. Studies were excluded if they addressed dayah pedagogy or curriculum without reference to authority or social order, if they were purely doctrinal or prescriptive, or if they were theses, conference abstracts, or grey literature. In keeping with CIS, sampling was purposive rather than exhaustive, and items were added until further studies no longer altered the emerging categories. The final analytic corpus comprises sixteen studies published between 2011 and 2025 (Ichwan, 2011; Feener, 2012; Srimulyani, 2013; Kloos, 2016; Sahlan et al., 2019; Ichwan et al., 2020; Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2020; Rasyidin, 2021; Usman et al., 2021; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2022; Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2022; Syafieh & Nur, 2022; Syafieh et al., 2022; Basri et al., 2023; Zulkarnaen et al., 2023; Muntasir et al., 2025). Two studies of the peace process (Aspinall, 2007; Stange & Patock, 2010) served as contextual sources, and seven theoretical and methodological works informed the coding frame without being treated as data.

Following Dixon-Woods et al. (2006), appraisal prioritised relevance and credibility over conformity to a fixed checklist. Each study was assessed for whether its design was clearly stated, whether its data supported its interpretations, and how directly it addressed authority or social order. No study was excluded on grounds of quality alone, but the interpretive weight given to a claim reflected the directness of its evidence; claims derived from prolonged fieldwork, for example, carried more weight than claims derived from questionnaire responses. For every study the following were extracted: setting, design, type of actors, site of authority, practices described, reported effects on social order, and reported tensions or exclusions.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. In the first, extracted material was coded deductively against the three analytical questions derived from the theoretical framework, namely site, mechanism, and boundary, and inductively for categories the framework had not anticipated. In the second, studies were compared through reciprocal translation, in which concepts from one study were used to interpret findings in another, and through refutational reading, in which apparently contradictory findings, such as those on anti-drug mobilisation and on sectarian mobilisation, were examined for a common underlying mechanism. In the third, the resulting categories were integrated into a synthetic argument from which the constructs of dispersed dayah authority and bounded peace emerged.

Trustworthiness was pursued in three ways. An audit trail linked every analytical claim to specific studies. Disconfirming evidence was actively sought, which is why the corpus deliberately includes studies reporting intolerance and conditional acceptance alongside those reporting cohesion. Interpretations were also checked against the contextual literature on the peace process to avoid attributing to religious authority outcomes better explained by the political settlement. Because the study relies exclusively on published sources, it involved no human participants and required no ethical clearance. The analysis was also conducted with awareness that the synthesiser's own position within Islamic Studies in Aceh shapes which tensions appear salient; the systematic search for disconfirming evidence was intended partly as a check on this reflexive bias. Its principal limitation is that it inherits the sampling choices and silences of the studies it synthesises, a point to which the conclusion returns.

III. RESULTS

The results are organised according to the three research questions. Table 1 summarises how the sixteen studies in the analytic corpus map onto the three analytical dimensions; the subsections that follow set out the evidence for each.

Table 1. Mapping of the analytic corpus onto the three analytical dimensions

Dimension (RQ)	Studies in the corpus	Core evidence synthesised
Sites of dispersed authority (RQ1)	Ichwan (2011); Feener (2012); Srimulyani (2013); Kloos (2016); Nirzalin & Febriandi (2020); Rasyidin (2021); Usman et al. (2021); Lopes Cardozo et al. (2022); Syafieh & Nur (2022); Syafieh et al. (2022); Basri et al. (2023); Muntasir et al. (2025)	Authority exercised through associational networks, village problem-solving, state-linked arenas, and the careers of dayah graduates and women leaders
Mechanisms of everyday peace (RQ2)	Sahlan et al. (2019); Nirzalin & Febriandi (2020); Rasyidin (2021); Lopes Cardozo et al. (2022); Zulkarnaen et al. (2023); Muntasir et al. (2025)	Religious bonds converted into collective action; ulama as arbiters of social problems; conditional mediation of state programmes
Boundaries and ambivalence (RQ3)	Kloos (2016); Ichwan et al. (2020); Lopes Cardozo et al. (2022); Nirzalin & Febriandi (2022); Syafieh & Nur (2022); Syafieh et al. (2022); Zulkarnaen et al. (2023)	Cohesion within the Aswaja community; exclusion of rival Muslim currents and religious minorities; conditional and gendered limits of recognition

Source: Author's synthesis of the analytic corpus ($n = 16$).

Sites of Dispersed Dayah Authority

The corpus documents four sites through which dayah authority is exercised beyond the dayah. The first is associational. Syafieh and Nur (2022) show that HUDA links dayah scholars across the province, draws on their shared scholarly genealogy as a basis for collective identity, and uses this network both to defend traditionalist doctrine and to negotiate with government over the direction of religious policy. Muntasir et al. (2025) open their study with a grand meeting in November 2021 that brought together nearly six hundred ulama from twenty-three districts, an event that illustrates the capacity of dayah networks to assemble authority at a provincial scale. In neither case is the dayah the immediate site of action. It is the source of credentials that are then pooled and mobilised elsewhere.

The second site is the village (*gampong*). Rasyidin's (2021) study in North Aceh, Pidie, Aceh Besar, South Aceh, and East Aceh finds that communities continue to regard ulama as central to resolving social problems and that the symbolic world through which Acehnese express their responses to such problems has been shaped by ulama discourse. The most detailed evidence comes from Nirzalin and Febriandi (2020), whose live-in fieldwork in Ujong Pacu, Lhokseumawe, shows *teungku* dayah leading a collective movement against the local drug trade, a problem with no connection to the dayah curriculum. Authority here is exercised not by teaching but by convening, sanctioning, and mobilising neighbours.

The third site is the state. After the conflict, the relationship between dayah and government was formalised through regional regulations, dedicated funding, and a provincial agency responsible for dayah education, which together transformed the curriculum, facilities, human resources, and quality assurance of the institutions (Basri et al., 2023). This formalisation extends a longer pattern in which change in Acehnese Islamic schooling followed political rather than purely educational logics (Srimulyani, 2013). The state has also created rival sites of religious authority. Ichwan (2011) shows that the MPU became the principal official voice of sharia and that its authority was contested, while Feener (2012) shows how state sharia institutions pursued social transformation through state-directed *da'wa*. Muntasir et al. (2025) nonetheless find that dayah institutions, religious organisational networks, and the MPU together provide space in which dayah ulama build their identity as holders of public religious authority. The state arena is thus both a competitor and a conduit.

The fourth site is biographical. Usman et al. (2021) show that *teungku* identity is formed not only through years of study but also through teaching junior students, serving communities by teaching and leading prayers, commemorating the founders of the dayah, and collectively resisting ideological currents regarded as alien to Aceh. Graduates carry authority out of the dayah as a disposition and as a web of obligations. Women's careers reveal the same pattern under greater constraint. Lopes Cardozo et al. (2022) describe a woman leader in Central Aceh who founded the first dayah in her village despite being asked,

by a respected local man, how a woman dared to do so, and Kloos (2016) follows two female teachers in different parts of the province whose authority was built over the course of their careers.

The four sites are not isolated from one another. The corpus shows them feeding into each other: HUDA's associational strength is used to bargain with provincial government (Syafieh & Nur, 2022); state funding and regulation sustain the *dayah* that produce new *teungku* (Basri et al., 2023); and those *teungku*, through the obligations of community service described by Usman et al. (2021), become the figures to whom villages turn (Rasyidin, 2021). Dispersal, in other words, takes the form of a circuit rather than a scattering.

Read together, these studies qualify the thesis of decline. Syafieh et al. (2022) find that, despite the challenge posed by Wahhabi-Salafi groups, *dayah* ulama remain influential enough to shape communal responses to them. What the corpus records is not the erosion of *dayah* authority but its relocation across multiple sites, only one of which is the *dayah* itself.

Mechanisms of Everyday Peace

Across these sites, the corpus points to three mechanisms through which dispersed *dayah* authority contributes to everyday peace, understood here as the prevention, containment, or resolution of conflict in ordinary social life. The first converts religious bonds into collective action. In Ujong Pacu, the anti-drug movement succeeded because *teungku* *dayah* were able to activate social capital that bound the community through religious ties and to sustain the motivation that kept the movement going (Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2020). The *teungku* did not build new institutions; they turned existing moral ties into coordinated action against a form of disorder that threatened the village.

The second mechanism is arbitration. Rasyidin (2021) shows that communities turn to ulama when facing social problems because ulama discourse supplies the shared frame through which problems are understood and responses articulated. Muntasir et al. (2025) help to explain why such arbitration carries weight: belief in the ulama's *keramat* and fear of *temeureuka* give their judgements a form of invisible power that operates alongside the visible power of office and organisation. Sahlan et al. (2019) note that the roles of ulama changed after the conflict and that their capacity to exercise authority was questioned, yet they argue that the trust ulama command made them natural agents of reconciliation. The wider corpus suggests that this trust is spent less in formal reconciliation than in the arbitration of everyday matters.

The third mechanism is conditional mediation between state programmes and local society. Zulkarnaen et al. (2023) find that most *dayah* ulama do not reject the national narrative of religious moderation but accept it on the condition that it accords with sharia and Acehese customary regulations, and that their interpretations vary enough to reveal a degree of fragmentation. By mediating national discourse in this way, *dayah* ulama make state programmes locally legible while reserving the right to define their limits. A quieter form of mediation appears in the work of women *dayah* leaders, who, operating within patriarchal institutional norms and a post-conflict order dominated by former GAM elites, nonetheless find ways to craft their own narratives and roles through education (Lopes Cardozo et al., 2022).

What unites the three mechanisms is that none of them was designed as peacebuilding. They are ordinary exercises of religious authority whose peace-sustaining effects arise as a by-product of recognition.

Boundaries and Ambivalence

Read against a second group of studies, the same evidence reveals where authority-based peace stops. The sharpest boundary runs within the Muslim community. Nirzalin and Febriandi (2022) analyse the attack on a Muhammadiyah mosque in Samalanga by actors mobilised under the banner of Aswaja. Their data indicate that the state did not coordinate the violence and kept its distance from those involved, and that the attack did not stem from a political agreement among elites; the mobilisation drew instead on a religious

ideology that frames the protection of faith against rival currents as an obligation. The contrast with Ujong Pacu is instructive. In both cases religious bonds were converted into collective action. What differed was the object defined as a threat.

A second boundary is doctrinal. HUDA's defence of Aswaja hegemony is framed explicitly against Wahhabi-Salafi currents (Syafieh & Nur, 2022), and Syafieh et al. (2022) take communal rejection of Salafi understanding as evidence of the continuing authority of *dayah ulama*. Order within the community is thus secured partly by drawing a line around it. A third boundary concerns non-Muslims. Ichwan et al. (2020) argue that Aceh has gradually developed its own notion of civic belonging, grounded in sharia and in a soft religious ethno-nationalism, that departs from national citizenship and bears on the rights of minorities. *Dayah* authority is not the sole author of this configuration, but given its weight in defining religious legitimacy in the province, it is implicated in it.

Two further features qualify these boundaries. They are conditional: Zulkarnaen et al. (2023) observe that conservative and exclusive attitudes among *dayah ulama* are negotiable and tend to fade when religious interests are not perceived to be under threat. They are also gendered: the careers traced by Kloos (2016) and Lopes Cardozo et al. (2022) show that women's recognition as religious authorities has to be negotiated against expectations that male *teungku* do not face. In sum, the corpus depicts a peace that is real but bounded, cohesive within the community that recognises *dayah* authority, conditional at its margins, and exclusionary where that community perceives its faith to be endangered.

IV. DISCUSSION

From Institution to Infrastructure

The first finding is that *dayah* authority has not declined so much as moved. It is exercised in associational networks, village problem-solving, state-linked arenas, and the careers of graduates, with the *dayah* functioning less as the place where authority is used than as the node where it is certified and from which it circulates. This supports the proposition of Kloos and Künkler (2016) that authority must be studied from the bottom up, through the recognition communities extend, rather than from the top down, through the credentials institutions confer. The Aceh evidence adds a spatial dimension to that proposition. What travels beyond the *dayah* is not the institution but the recognition attached to those it has formed, which is why authority can be mobilised in a fishing village's campaign against drug dealers or in a provincial assembly of six hundred *ulama* with equal ease.

The finding also qualifies the story of state centralisation told by Ichwan (2011) and Feener (2012). Both show the state attempting to make sharia, and the religious authority attached to it, an object of official management through the MPU and state-directed *da'wa*. The synthesis suggests that these efforts did not displace *dayah* authority but multiplied its arenas. State funding, regulation, and agencies for *dayah* education (Basri et al., 2023) became conduits through which *dayah ulama* entered public institutions, and the MPU itself became one of the spaces in which their authority is built (Muntasir et al., 2025). The difference between the thesis of decline and the reading proposed here is largely one of measurement. Studies that register decline tend to measure authority by institutional control or doctrinal hegemony, whereas a relocation reading follows authority wherever it is recognised. The contribution to Islamic Studies is methodological as much as substantive: analyses of traditional authority should be site-agnostic, following recognition rather than institutions. In this sense, going beyond the *pesantren* is an analytical stance before it is an empirical claim.

Everyday Peace as Authority Work

The second finding is that dispersed *dayah* authority sustains everyday peace through collective action, arbitration, and conditional mediation, none of which was designed as peacebuilding. This extends Mac Ginty's (2014) account of everyday peace in a specific direction. Mac Ginty describes the practices

through which people navigate division and treats them as potential building blocks of wider peace formation. The Aceh evidence suggests that such practices are not always dispersed or spontaneous; they can be organised by authority. When villagers in Ujong Pacu acted together against the drug trade, the practice of everyday peace was structured by the recognition they extended to *teungku dayah* (Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2020). Religious authority, in other words, is not merely one resource among others on which everyday peace may draw. It can be the infrastructure through which everyday peace is organised.

This reading also refines Brewer et al.'s (2010) model of socially strategic spaces. Their framework implies that religious groups occupy particular spaces within civil society from which they contribute to peace. *Dayah ulama* occupy several at once, moving between associational, institutional, and village settings, and it is this mobility, rather than their position in any single space, that makes their authority effective. The finding likewise confirms and specifies Abu-Nimer and Kadayifci-Orellana's (2008) observation that Muslim peace actors often work as religious leaders rather than through formal organisations. In Aceh, the legitimacy on which such work depends is not a stable asset but the product of continuous recognition. The same evidence challenges the normative framing in which *ulama* are expected to lead reconciliation (Sahlan et al., 2019). The peace work documented in the corpus lies in the arbitration of everyday problems rather than in formal reconciliation, a division of labour that makes sense once it is recalled that the formal political settlement was largely handed to former combatants and their party (Stange & Patock, 2010). The resulting contribution is a theory of the religious infrastructure of everyday peace, which the local turn has called for without specifying (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013).

Dispersal also opens room for authorities that the classical *dayah* hierarchy did not anticipate. The women leaders described by Lopes Cardozo et al. (2022) and the female teachers followed by Kloos (2016) acquire authority partly by founding institutions and building careers outside the established centres of male scholarship. This suggests that reconfiguration involves pluralisation as well as relocation: once authority is exercised in many sites, the question of who may exercise it is reopened, even if the answer remains constrained. Here the Aceh evidence converges with Kloos and Künkler's (2016) argument that bottom-up recognition can create forms of religious authority that formal certification would not. For the analysis of peace, the implication is that the actors of everyday religious peacebuilding are not fixed in advance by institutional rank.

Bounded Peace and the Ambivalence of Authority

The third finding is that the mechanisms which sustain peace also generate exclusion. The religious bonds that made anti-drug mobilisation possible (Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2020) are the same kind of bonds that made sectarian mobilisation against a Muhammadiyah mosque possible (Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2022). The refutational reading adopted in this study shows that these are not two phenomena requiring two explanations. They are two outputs of a single mechanism: recognition-based authority converting shared religious ties into collective action against whatever the recognising community defines as a threat. When the threat is drug trafficking, the result looks like peacebuilding; when it is a rival Muslim current, the result looks like intolerance.

Philpott's (2007) framework helps to explain why the boundary falls where it does. He argues that the political conduct of religious actors depends on their differentiation from the state and on their political theology. In post-conflict Aceh, differentiation is low: sharia is institutionalised in state bodies, and *dayah* are funded and regulated by provincial government (Ichwan, 2011; Basri et al., 2023). The political theology that prevails among *dayah* networks centres on defending Aswaja orthodoxy (Syafieh & Nur, 2022). Philpott's framework would predict that such actors use their proximity to the state to protect orthodoxy rather than to promote pluralism, and the evidence is broadly consistent with that prediction. Yet the Samalanga case adds a qualification: the state did not orchestrate the violence and kept its distance (Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2022). Low differentiation, it appears, creates a setting in which religious ideology can act with the moral cover of the state without its direction. This is also where Brewer et al.'s (2010)

emphasis on the civil society–state nexus proves apt, since the nexus in Aceh does not simply constrain religious actors but lends their boundary-making a quasi-official legitimacy.

The finding departs in one important respect from the literature on everyday peace. Mac Ginty (2014) theorises everyday peace in deeply divided societies, where its core practices involve navigating relations across communal lines. Bounded peace works differently. It is peace understood primarily as order within a community, maintained partly by defining who stands outside it. The conditionality reported by Zulkarnaen et al. (2023), in which exclusive attitudes recede when religious interests are not threatened, shows that the boundary is elastic and responsive to perceived threat. At the civic level, the configuration Ichwan et al. (2020) describe, in which belonging is grounded in sharia and religious ethno-nationalism, is bounded peace writ large. The theoretical contribution of the construct is to resolve the oscillation, noted in the introduction, between images of the ulama as guardians of harmony and as sources of intolerance. Both images are accurate, because both describe outputs of authority whose peace-sustaining reach coincides with the boundaries of the community that recognises it.

It may be objected that bounded peace is merely intolerance described more gently. The distinction is nonetheless worth preserving, for two reasons. Analytically, the construct registers that the goods produced within the boundary are real: collective action against the drug trade, the arbitration of disputes, and the local translation of state programmes all reduce conflict for those inside the community, and a concept of intolerance alone would render them invisible. Normatively, separating the mechanism from its evaluation allows the question of inclusion to be posed as a question about the scope of recognition, which can in principle be widened, rather than as a verdict on dayah authority as such. Bounded peace is therefore a descriptive and explanatory construct, not an apology for the exclusions it names.

Implications for Islamic Studies

Several implications follow for the field. For the study of Islamic authority, the findings suggest that questions of who holds authority and how it is recognised should be joined to the question of what authority does for social order. Authority is not only contested and negotiated; it is productive, and what it produces includes peace and its limits. For the study of religion and peacebuilding, the findings caution against treating religion as a reservoir of peace values waiting to be mobilised. Whether religious authority sustains inclusive or bounded peace depends on the political theology that defines its community and on that community's relation to the state.

For research on Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, which often evaluates pesantren and dayah by what happens inside them, from curricula to programmes of religious moderation, the Aceh case suggests that the most consequential social effects of these institutions may lie outside their walls, in the authority their graduates and networks carry into villages and public institutions. Comparatively, the construct of bounded peace generates a testable proposition for other Muslim societies emerging from conflict, such as those in which Abu-Nimer and Kadayifci-Orellana (2008) studied Muslim peace actors: where traditional religious authority is strong and differentiated only weakly from the state, the peace it sustains will tend to be bounded by the community of recognition. For practitioners, the implication is that engaging ulama in peace programmes requires attention not only to their capacity to mobilise but also to how they define threats, since it is this definition that determines whether mobilisation builds or bounds peace.

V. CONCLUSION

This article asked how dayah authority has been reconfigured in post-Helsinki Aceh and what that reconfiguration means for grassroots peace. The synthesis answers the first research question by showing that dayah authority has been dispersed rather than diminished. It is exercised through associational networks, village-level problem-solving, state-linked arenas, and the careers of dayah graduates and women

leaders, with the *dayah* serving as the node where authority is certified rather than the only place where it is used. In answer to the second question, dispersed authority sustains everyday peace through three mechanisms, namely converting religious bonds into collective action, arbitrating social problems, and conditionally mediating state programmes, none of which was designed as peacebuilding. In answer to the third, the same mechanisms produce a bounded peace, cohesive within the community that recognises *dayah* authority, conditional at its margins, and exclusionary towards rival Muslim currents, religious minorities, and, in more subtle ways, women's claims to authority.

The novelty of the article lies in shifting the analysis from the roles of *ulama* to the reconfiguration of their authority, and in proposing bounded peace as a synthetic construct that places integrative and exclusionary effects within a single mechanism. Theoretically, the article contributes a religious infrastructure to the concept of everyday peace, qualifies accounts of state centralisation of Islamic authority by showing how state arenas became conduits for *dayah* authority, and specifies how low differentiation and a political theology of orthodoxy shape the ambivalence of religious actors. Practically, it suggests that policies seeking to involve *ulama* in conflict prevention in Aceh should focus not only on mobilising their influence but also on widening the definition of the community their authority protects.

The study has clear limitations. As a synthesis of published research, it inherits the sampling choices of its sources, which concentrate on northern and coastal districts, on male *ulama*, and on traditionalist networks, with comparatively little evidence from the Gayo highlands or from the perspectives of minorities themselves. It relies on studies written in English and Indonesian and on the author's interpretation of findings that were produced for other purposes. Future research should test the construct of bounded peace through multi-sited ethnography that follows *dayah* authority across villages, associations, and state bodies; should include the perspectives of Muhammadiyah, Salafi, and non-Muslim communities on whom its boundaries fall; and should compare Aceh with other post-conflict Muslim societies in which traditional religious authority remains strong.

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