



Photo: Muslims burn the Israeli flag in Palu City, Indonesia, May 21, 2021. Credit: Opan Bustan/Opn Images/Cover Ima via Reuters Connect

Israel-Indonesia: Nurturing People-to-People Ties without Diplomatic Relations

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Indonesia, which has the largest Muslim population and is the world's third largest democracy, is an important and growing Southeast Asian power. Indonesia stresses that diplomatic relations with Israel cannot exist before an independent Palestinian state is created with its capital in East Jerusalem. This position is based on Indonesia's constitution, which obligates opposition to colonialism. The commitment by Indonesia's Muslim majority to the Palestinian cause, primarily out of religious feelings, further solidifies the country's stance on this issue. Indonesian society thus takes a negative, and even hostile, view of Israel, grounded in the rejection of the Israeli narrative on the conflict and the absence of bridges between Israeli and Indonesian society. Nurturing people-to-people relations/ties between non-governmental entities on both sides is therefore of increasing importance, with an emphasis from the Israeli perspective on educated Indonesian Muslim opinion makers. Though these ties are not a channel toward diplomatic relations, they can help improve Israel's image and cultivate some empathy toward it.

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Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country, the third largest democracy, and home to the world's largest Muslim population; it is an important Southeast Asian actor and has an economy headed for a high global rating. Nonetheless, it largely remains an amorphous entity for the majority in Israeli society, partly due to the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries. While Israel awaits the day when Indonesia will be prepared to establish formal ties, Jakarta's position has thus been unequivocal and uncompromising: no diplomatic relations with Israel before the realization of the two-state solution and the establishment of a Palestinian state based within the June 4, 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Meanwhile, as it has done for decades, Indonesia continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to the Palestinian cause in the international and Islamic theaters, inevitably accompanied by an anti-Israel tone.

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The National and Religious Dimension

Wide circles within the huge Muslim population in Indonesia, as part of the affiliation with the *umma*—the general community of Muslim believers—have a strong emotional identification with the Palestinian people, and regard the Palestinian cause as a global Muslim struggle. This is especially prominent on the question of Jerusalem/al-Quds, with an emphasis on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. This situation seems to restrict the Indonesian government's decision making on the question of relations with Israel, out of a realization that any softening of its position is liable to exact a high price in Indonesia's internal theater.

Beyond this, the state itself endorses a national approach, without Islamic symbols, that since 1967 has increasingly demonstrated its commitment to the Palestinian cause and its view on the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. This commitment, which pervades all public political discourse, is based mainly on the state's historic commitment to anti-colonialism. The principle is enshrined in the preamble to the 1945 founding Indonesian [constitution](#), which opens, "With independence being the right of every nation, colonialism must be eliminated from the face of the earth as it is contrary to the dictates of human nature and justice." The historic roots of this attitude are echoed in the 1945-1949 Indonesian war of independence against the Netherlands, and were also anchored in Indonesia's key role in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s. In accordance with this attitude, Indonesian support for the Palestinians is often couched in terms of justice, legitimate rights, and freedom.

A Look at Israel: Two Test Cases—Individual, but Instructive

Following the events in the spring of 2021 in East Jerusalem and the fighting between Israel and Hamas, Indonesian intellectual Zuhairi Misrawi published an article entitled "[Mengapa Israel Salah dan Kalah?](#)" ("Why Did Israel Err, and Why was it Defeated?"). The article, which was replete with anti-Israel rhetoric, treats the Gaza Strip and the West Bank as a single entity, accuses Israel of brutality (*kebiadaban*) and apartheid, and also, to no one's surprise, describes Israel as a colonial (*penjajah*) country. The statements and arguments are highly slanted, including a reference to the asymmetry in the number of fatalities and injured, with no comment on Iron Dome and the defense of the Israeli home front. The fact that Hamas launches rockets from the midst of the civilian population, stations rocket launchers there, and uses civilians as human shields is totally ignored.

This decidedly one-sided presentation alleges that Israel used powerful and sophisticated deadly weapons indiscriminately in crude violation of international law with the continual excuse of fighting against Hamas. The writer lists what he regards as Hamas's achievements, including strengthened popularity and political power among the Palestinians, growing sympathy in the Arab world for the Palestinian cause, and definition of a red line for Israel on Jerusalem. He refers separately to Hamas's success in launching over 4,000 rockets, mainly at Israeli cities.

There is nothing new in this, certainly not for observers of events in Indonesia, where a negative image of Israel prevails among a significant part of the dominant Muslim majority. A great many members of the mainstream movement, which holds moderate Islamic views and supports the democratic process, share it. However, important here is that the writer is a member of Nahdatul Ulama (NU)—the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, regarded as a reliable cornerstone of the country's strong and massive civil Muslim society. This organization is also an important partner of the regime in promoting democracy, combating religious extremism, fostering interfaith tolerance, furthering understanding of the need to resolve conflicts peacefully, and [exporting the advantages of Indonesia's moderate Islam](#) to Muslim societies worldwide as a response to the growing religious extremism in the Middle East, while advancing a global interfaith dialogue.

The NU is identified with the pluralistic and humanitarian legacy of Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009), the organization's charismatic leader for many years, who served as Indonesia's first president in the democratic era (1999-2001). He also was noteworthy in his friendly attitude toward Judaism, his belief in the historic affinity between Judaism and Islam, his visits to Israel before and after his term as president, and especially as the first and last Indonesian leader so far to try (unsuccessfully) to reverse his country's policy toward Israel through a

plan for consolidating official trade relations between the two countries.

At the same time, it is becoming clear that in the Indonesian discourse on the Palestinian question, different voices are emerging—not in substance, but in rhetoric and tone. In a quite rare event, probably made possible by the COVID-19 pandemic, I was invited to speak at a webinar entitled “Normalization of Relations between Arab Countries and Israel: Political Interests & the Status of Palestine,” organized by the Students Association of the Department of International Relations (KOMAH) at Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII). Located in the center of Java Island, known as a center for institutions of higher education, this university has deep roots in Indonesia's national history. Issuing [an invitation to an Israeli](#) to speak in the heart of Indonesian academia is no small matter, especially on such a sensitive issue. It is difficult to separate the subject of normalization of relations, certainly from an Indonesian perspective, from the Palestinian issue.

The advance text for discussion highlighted the challenge involved; inter alia it stated that it would be interesting to discuss whether the normalization of relations between Arab countries and Israel is a shift in political interests, or “there is another conspiracy behind this normalization, and most importantly what is the current condition of Palestine.” The unique opportunity provided was used to explain to the Indonesian students in their home country why Indonesia should reconsider its position on diplomatic relations with Israel. The opportunity was also utilized to illuminate issues of which they were completely unaware, namely, geostrategic data and current and potential threats to Israel that make the slogan “returning Israel to the 1967 borders” more complex than their perspective might ordinarily deem.

It soon became clear that the other participant in the webinar, Mohamad Rezky Utama, a lecturer in the host department, in effect met the challenge. It was obvious that he was aware of the complexity of the conflict

in our region and the map of threats to Israel within the geostrategic context, including topographic aspects. His remarks about the Golden Age in Muslim-Jewish relations in Spain and his clear statements that the Jews in Israel had deep historic roots in the country were impressive. He also chose to tell the students that the situation of the Arab population in Israel had improved, and that its representatives constituted part of the political system. At the same time, he underscored the Palestinians' right to an independent state, and insisted on the need for his country to continue providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinians, while taking care that it reaches the right hands.

Both Mohamad Rezky Utama and Zuhairi Misrawi are part of the wider circles of young educated Muslims in Indonesia, many of whom are prominent advocates of religious tolerance, pluralism, democracy, gender equality, interfaith dialogue, and peaceful resolution of conflicts in their country. When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they clearly support the strong state commitment to the idea of establishing an independent Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem living in peace next to Israel. But at the same time a distinction can be noticed as regards Israel's image and the tone of rhetoric, evident in the article by Zuhairi Misrawi cited above, compared with Utama's talk in the webinar. It appears that Misrawi's antagonistic approach toward Israel in this specific article reflects pervasive opinions in wider segments of dominant Muslim majority, whereas Utama seems to represent a minority view in his "soft" attitude toward Israel and his openness to the Israeli narrative.

The most prominent hint of the extent of Utama's empathy toward Israel is probably rooted in his participation in a [visit to Israel](#) by an Indonesian delegation of religious and educational figures organized by the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC) under the title of "In the Footsteps of Gus Dur" (an Indonesian term of respect for Abdurrahman Wahid). Utama himself drew a straight line

between his remarks at the webinar to this visit, which also included the Palestinian Authority (PA) territories. The delegation members were able to hold intimate meetings with Israelis, including Arabs in Israel; Palestinians; and Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious figures. He told his students, Indonesians, that the visit had changed his view of the region. The tour of the Golan Heights and the fact that the visit took place during one of the escalation periods in the south, including rocket fire into Israeli territory, especially increased his understanding of Israel's geostrategic situation, including topographical aspects and the potential threats.

Yet notwithstanding the apparent strong link between Mohamad Rezky Utama's approach and the impact of the visit to Israel, the added value of such visits is more complex in the case of Zuhairi Misrawi. Misrawi too [visited Israel in 2006](#), allegedly at an invitation of the nascent Israeli government at the time, under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, "to provide a second opinion on Israel's policy towards Palestine." Moreover, unlike other Muslim scholars, he [supported](#) the establishment of relations between Indonesia and Israel then, hinting that since Israel is the only superpower in the Middle East, establishing relations with it "could pave the way for Indonesia as the biggest Muslim country to capitalize on its leverage over the ongoing conflict, which has cost millions of innocent lives." More than a decade has been passed since these words were [published](#). Therefore—and this is a conjecture only—perhaps Indonesian scholars who look at Israel now, both its politics and public opinion, get an impression that the endorsement of the idea of the two-state solution has weakened. In other words, in an Indonesian perspective, it may now be harder to bridge the gap between the vision of a peaceful solution, including establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and reality. Nevertheless, the importance of people-to-people ties between Israel and Indonesia should not be underestimated or ignored.

People-to-People Ties So Far

Ties between people in terms of interaction between non-governmental elements from various countries also take place when diplomatic relations exist. As such, they can be integrated in [public diplomacy](#) aimed at furthering a variety of state interests by appealing to foreign audiences, and in effect become [an additional and supplementary tool in diplomacy](#). In the case of Israeli-Indonesian relations, people-to-people ties are likely to be of special importance because of the absence of diplomatic relations and formal bridges between Israeli and Indonesian society. In the current situation, such ties are expressed to a large extent through occasional visits to Israel by Indonesian delegations; notable are [initiatives of the Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council \(AIJAC\)](#), an important organization of Australian Jewry, not as initiatives by Israel or Indonesia.

AIJAC is a strongly pro-Israel body that cares deeply about Middle Eastern issues, and Israel in particular, and seeks to promote Israel's interest among the Australian public, in part through media and journalism activity. Due to Australia's proximity to Indonesia, AIJAC also takes an interest in the Indonesian archipelago. Thus its initiatives have brought to Israel various players from Indonesian civil society, such as religious figures, journalists, academics, and educators, rather than representatives of government ministries or senior officials. All this occurs without any involvement by the Indonesian state, but certainly with its knowledge. Moreover, these visits are not covered by the Indonesian media, except for a few cases in which they are criticized, usually in response to the participants meeting with the Israeli elite, including the [President of Israel](#), and even with the [Prime Minister](#). In contrast to visits to Israel by Indonesian Muslims and Christians focusing on the holy places, these visits provide the participants with close and systematic knowledge, rare in the Indonesian context, of Israel as a country and society. This includes awareness of the security challenges

and Israeli politics, with a visit to the Knesset and a meeting with Knesset members, the question of Israel's Arab sector, and the issue of Jerusalem. It appears that for the Muslim participants, prayer at al-Aqsa Mosque constitutes a supreme religious experience. Additionally, and this is very important from an Indonesian perspective, the visits include the PA territories, involving meetings with PA officials, religious figures, journalists, and members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

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Elements of people-to-people ties also come from cooperative efforts involving civil society that are not of an official state character. One example is a specific cooperative venture in agriculture—a private initiative that brought a [delegation](#) of Indonesian students to Israel for advanced agricultural training. Another specific effort a decade ago, in medicine, produced a [cooperative agreement](#) on emergency medical services between Magen David Adom and Muhammadiyah, an Islamic organization that is a basic element of the dominant Muslim civil society in Indonesia, together with the NU, and is involved in a wide range of civil spheres. At that time, senior officials of the Indonesian health system and community organizations also received training in emergency medical services and emergency medicine in Israel at Magen David Adom workshops. From the Indonesian perspective, such cooperation is perceived as an opportunity to promote interfaith dialogue.

In addition, academic activity that includes elements of ties between people from both countries is underway. Although there are no official relations between academic institutions, an interesting academic interaction is being formed that brings people together and contributes to the building of bridges

of understanding. A unique and important breakthrough in [Indonesia studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem](#) has occurred in recent years, including instruction in the Indonesian language. Indonesian academics are also involved in this. In cooperation with an Indonesian scholar, I wrote a chapter on Israel-Indonesia relations for a book on relations between Israel and Asia. This book will be published as a project of the University of Haifa, which regards joint research by an Israeli scholar and an Indonesian scholar as a matter of importance.

The Indonesian delegations and groups who visit Israel are not seeking to express a desire to promote diplomatic relations. Some wish to further Jewish-Muslim understanding and Israeli-Palestinian understanding, and to convey an Indonesian commitment to help promote the establishment of an independent Palestinian state by fostering a process of reconciliation and peace. The impression is that as a country, Indonesia has no interest in creating a corresponding experience of an encounter for Israelis with Indonesian society. Most Israelis visiting Indonesia, which involves a rather involved procedure, do so as part of tourist trips in the ordinary sense of this concept. Any attempt at a comparison, for example between the current situation and “[ping pong diplomacy](#)”—sports competitions between the table tennis teams of the United States and China in the early 1970s, which paved the way for US President Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 after many years of estrangement, and the instituting of diplomatic relations in the late 1970s—is unfounded.

An Exceptional Indonesian Voice from an Unexpected Direction

Against this background, of particular interest is an article published in early 2020 by Ary Aprianto, a diplomat from the Indonesian Foreign Affairs Ministry, who specializes in issues pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Emphasizing that the opinions expressed are his alone, the

article was published in the *Jakarta Globe*, a highly regarded English-language Indonesian newspaper, under the headline “How Indonesia Can Help Promote Dialogues between Ordinary Israelis and Palestinians.” Early in the article, Aprianto argues that Israel’s actions show that peace in “Palestine” is not imminent. In his opinion, Indonesia should therefore consider other options for promoting a peace process in the Middle East. One of these options is dialogue outside the centers of power. In his view, the absence of such dialogue in relations between Israelis and Palestinians has aggravated the conflict and the difficulty in solving it. More responsibility should therefore be delegated to local residents in creating conditions that support peace. Intermediate level leaders from outside the political establishment and local communities should be part of an overall peace strategy. According to him, there is nothing new in this idea, since the Oslo Accords, for example, encouraged dialogues between non-governmental players on both sides. Indonesia has the means and proven experience in helping to improve ties between people in Israel and “Palestine.” This requires time and long-term planning, but most of the necessary elements are already at hand, thanks to the aid programs for the Palestinians to which Indonesia contributes.

He therefore believes that people-to-people ties should be placed at the forefront, in contrast to the previous peace processes controlled by the United States, which involved primarily Palestinian and Israeli political elites. The author acknowledges that it is not easy for Indonesians to communicate with Israelis, due to Indonesia’s lack of official diplomatic relations with Israel. In his view, the more practical solution is therefore to work through networks of non-governmental players in Indonesia, many of which are capable of leading programs of people-to-people ties. He argues that “the trickiest part” would be “managing the sentiments” of certain elements of Indonesian society, since it is likely that such programs

will also include visits of Israeli citizens to Indonesia. The opposition to this can be reduced by providing proper information about the importance of such programs for Indonesia. The inclusion of Islamic organizations can help avoid a negative response from within.

Aprianto adds that it is now also important to educate the Indonesian public about the facts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; while the “Israeli occupation” and violence against Palestinians are a fact, the existence of people on both sides who want peace is also a fact. It is now the time for many Indonesians to learn that perhaps a significant part of their feelings about the conflict are no longer valid. Islam, he notes, is not the only religion in “Palestine,” and the Middle East and the Arab world are changing. For years, a number of countries with an Arab majority have maintained diplomatic relations with Israel, and ties between it and its Arab neighbors are becoming friendlier, even if only because of growing hostility between Arab countries and Iran. At the end of his article, Aprianto emphasizes that the Indonesian constitution dictates both opposition to colonialism and the diplomacy of peace. All of the relevant parties should be engaged in any effort to achieve peace. The perception of Indonesian foreign policy as “free and active” (*bebas dan aktif*, in Indonesian—a perception that was formulated by the country’s founders) requires creativity. Facilitating dialogues between ordinary Israelis and Palestinians, he argues, affords an example of creative diplomacy. If this is done properly, Indonesia will create a basis for a more important role for it in promoting a peace process in the Middle East.

Conclusion

The article by the Indonesian diplomat was written not long before the normalization of relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries, late in the term of US President Trump. This development may support the Indonesian writer’s arguments, although the Indonesian state continues to adhere to an

uncompromising stance on the question of diplomatic relations with Israel, with no sign of change. Nevertheless, attention should be paid to the final section of the article, in which Aprianto hints at Indonesia’s clear interest to play a more important role in settling conflicts in the region, with an emphasis on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This Indonesia interest also seems to reflect its hope that lowering the level of violence in the Middle East will lessen the force of the shockwaves of religious extremism headed in Indonesia’s direction, and that its involvement for supporting conflict resolution will improve its international standing.

Encouragement and expansion of people-to-people ties between Israel and Indonesia are in Israel's interest.

It appears that there is a certain degree of understanding in Indonesia that the lack of diplomatic relations with Israel will make it difficult for Indonesia to fulfill its ambition of playing an important role in promoting a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the current situation, it is therefore possible that some in Indonesia realize that the little that can and should be done lies in person-to-person ties, even though if this is practiced on a larger scale, it might arouse a negative response among the Muslim majority, and certainly in the circles of political Islam.

Finally, encouragement and expansion of people-to-people ties between Israel and Indonesia are in Israel’s interest. This is so especially due to the lack of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the almost complete alienation from the Israeli narrative in Indonesian society, and Israel’s highly negative image, primarily because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An effort in this matter should concentrate on an appeal to educated Indonesian Muslims, especially those who are opinion makers, such as academics, journalists, religious figures, and educators.

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A range of organizational systems, institutions, and NGOs from the Israeli side can be enlisted in this effort, e.g., institutions of higher education and academic research institutes. Their great potential is far from fully utilized; there is quite a bit of curiosity among Indonesian academics about Israeli higher education. Entities interested in promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding can also contribute; this matter attracts much attention from extensive circles in moderate mainstream Muslim movement in Indonesia. Entities in Israel that have already demonstrated a degree of involvement in the matter, including notably the Israel-Asia Center (IAC), which seeks to further people-to-people ties between Israel and Asian countries, can also provide useful assistance. This includes a [current program](#) aimed at organizing encounters between suitable parties in Israeli and Indonesian society for the sake of cooperation, in a search of solutions for a variety of challenging issues, such as health, food security, and education. Likewise noteworthy are the [Israel-Indonesia Chamber of Commerce](#), which acts as a subordinate office of the Israel-Asia Chamber of Commerce and the [Israel Council on Foreign Relations \(ICFR\)](#),

which operates under the auspices of the World Jewish Congress.

To this can be added initiatives aimed at encouraging communications on social networks for the purpose of reaching a large audience of young Indonesians who are major consumers of such communications. This array of activities is likely to some extent to lower the barriers of alienation between Israeli and Indonesian society, and temper Israel's negative image among large sections of the Indonesian public. However, the effects of increasing people-to-people ties on softening Indonesia's position on diplomatic relations with Israel are likely to be limited as long as a real peace process on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not move forward.

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