

Israel–Indonesia Relations: Expectations Versus Reality

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If the rising expectations for a breakthrough in Israel–Indonesia relations are realized, it would be possible to harness Indonesia’s potential contribution to “the day after” in the Gaza Strip, particularly in advancing processes of deradicalization and combating religious extremism there. However, before that, it is worth recognizing Indonesia’s longstanding commitment to promoting the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, as well as the internal stability considerations that limit its ability to soften its policy toward Israel in the absence of progress toward a political solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

In the spirit of elation and the sense of a historic moment on the morning of October 13—when the Israeli hostages were released from Hamas captivity, and President Trump, whose contribution to that outcome had been considerable, arrived for a visit to Israel—reports also emerged that Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto might soon visit, adding to the feeling that a new era was dawning. About three weeks earlier, Prabowo—the president of the country that is home to the world’s largest Muslim population—had astonished observers [in his speech](#) before the UN General Assembly when he declared, with care, determination, and without animosity, that he sought a peaceful resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict that would establish an independent Palestinian state and should also guarantee Israel’s safety and security. Moreover, he asserted that “the two descendants of Abraham must live in reconciliation, peace, and harmony.” Subsequently, Prabowo emerged as a genuine partner in the American effort to bring the war in the Gaza Strip to an end.

But on that same day, October 13, [Indonesia was quick to deny that such a visit was planned](#). Hence, it is necessary to return to the ground of reality and highlight several aspects, some well-known and others less so, concerning Israel–Indonesia relations. The Indonesian president aspires to a political resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and his position is rooted in his country’s longstanding commitment to the Palestinian cause and to the idea of an independent Palestinian state based on a two-state solution—a principle that seems to enjoy an extremely broad public consensus in Indonesia. From this stems the consistent position that diplomatic relations with Israel will not be established before the creation of an independent Palestinian state. In Indonesian political discourse, this position is reinforced by reference to the opening line of the preamble of [Indonesia’s 1945 Constitution, which declares](#): “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.” Thus, in keeping with Indonesia’s long-standing position, the Indonesian president repeatedly

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affirmed that once Israel recognizes the independence of a Palestinian state, Indonesia will immediately recognize the State of Israel. Prabowo leaves no doubt that, for him as well, the foundation for establishing a Palestinian state lies in the two-state solution and nothing else.

Indeed, it cannot be ruled out that if substantial progress is made toward a political solution to the conflict, one that aims at the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, Indonesia might show greater flexibility in establishing relations with Israel. It may also be assumed that normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the guardian of Islam's holy sites, [could provide momentum for changing Indonesian policy](#), as it would ease domestic fears of a public backlash heavily charged with Islamic sentiments. Nevertheless, an independent Indonesian initiative is also possible; that is, a policy change toward Israel without a preceding Saudi move. It should be emphasized that the Indonesian president, throughout his energetic engagement in the global arena, has consistently highlighted one of Indonesia's founding [foreign policy principles, formulated in its early days—"independent and active"](#) (*bebas dan aktif*)—which also expresses the recognition to adjust proactively to regional and global changes and to navigate wisely and in a balanced manner among the leading powers on the world stage. In other words, if the current president concludes that a policy change toward Israel could serve Indonesia's significant national interests, he is likely to pursue normalization of relations with it.

Domestic considerations are a further and quite critical factor influencing Indonesia's room to maneuver in shaping its policy toward Israel. As in many other countries, Indonesian foreign policy is affected by internal dynamics, especially on the Israeli issue. Within the Indonesian public, there are apparently widespread negative, even hostile, perceptions of Israel, and at present, the public in this country is almost entirely unfamiliar with the Israeli narrative. Moreover, among Indonesia's dominant Muslim majority, identification with what is defined as the Palestinian struggle also resonates with deep pan-Islamic sentiments of solidarity. Therefore, there seems to be a political understanding in Indonesia that any deviation from its long-standing policy toward Israel, absent progress toward the goal of establishing an independent Palestinian state, could exact a high domestic price. This is particularly true today; even though the fighting in the Gaza Strip has recently ceased, the heightened anti-Israel sentiment that has characterized the public atmosphere over the past two years may persist.

If that were not enough, the weight of the domestic factor may have recently increased from a completely different direction. Toward the end of August, Indonesia experienced fairly widespread protests, mainly in the capital and other major cities. These demonstrations lasted for about two weeks, led primarily by students and social activists, but not only them. At their core, the protests expressed [a deep sense of economic distress](#) among broad sectors of the population, along with alienation from the privileged political elites. It appears that this time, unlike the government's reaction to [a previous wave of student-led protests](#) a few months earlier, the regime is more aware of the political challenge posed by such loud voices of dissent emerging from civil society and is making some effort to respond to them. Of course, inequality and social injustice are not unique to Indonesia, but it is notable that in this young democracy, people, especially young people, are willing to take to the streets and call for reform. Seemingly, these developments are unrelated to the issue of relations with Israel, yet they may have sharpened the government's understanding that steps perceived by broad

audiences as a renunciation of Indonesia's deep and longstanding commitment to the Palestinian cause could spark mass protests.

This is not mere speculation. In the days following the cessation of hostilities in Gaza, while Indonesia expressed support for advancing the American plan to end the war, the Indonesian minister of justice announced that the government would not issue entry visas for Israeli athletes to participate in the World Artistic Gymnastics Championships. His statement came just over a week before the event's opening in the capital, Jakarta. The decision was justified by opposition from several bodies, including the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and the local government of the capital. It was further explained that the decision was consistent with Indonesia's policy of not establishing relations with Israel [until Israel recognizes](#) the full independence and sovereignty of a Palestinian state. The governor of Jakarta argued that allowing Israeli athletes to participate could provoke public outrage while tensions in Gaza remained high. Indonesia maintained its refusal even in the face of an appeal filed by Israeli sports authorities to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), claiming that the refusal violated the Olympic ideal and the Olympic Charter, which explicitly prohibits all forms of discrimination. Yet all efforts failed: the world championship opened on October 19 without Israel's participation.

It should be recalled that in the first half of 2023, Indonesia, as a result of pressure from senior politicians in the then-ruling party, refused to allow the Israeli national team to participate in the FIFA U-20 World Cup. At the time, it was President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) himself who made an effort to prevent his country from being stripped of the right to host the games. He urged that [sports and politics should not be mixed](#) and stressed that Israel's participation had nothing to do with Indonesia's strong, firm support for the Palestinian cause. Even football fans expressed anger that their country lost the right to host the tournament because politics had been injected into sports. Only about two months before that saga, an Israeli athlete had, for the first time, stood on the podium in Jakarta wearing a team uniform that left no doubt as to his national identity. It appears that the heightened anti-Israel sentiments among the Indonesian public over the past two years due to the war in Gaza had a considerable influence on the recent decision not to grant visas to Israeli athletes. Nevertheless, given the expectations that the Indonesian president might be willing to take groundbreaking steps toward Israel even before political progress has been achieved on the Palestinian issue, one might wonder why Israeli gymnasts were not permitted to participate in the competitions, if only as a trial balloon on a marginal issue to test the degree of public resistance to a policy change toward Israel.

The Indonesian president's statements and diplomatic initiatives regarding the American effort to end the war in the Gaza Strip seem to reflect several central components: a growing activism in foreign policy aimed at strengthening Indonesia's international standing, including the president's own stature among world leaders; a deep interest in advancing relations and cooperation with President Trump's administration; an ongoing and even intensifying interest in political involvement in the Middle East in general and in promoting a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular; and Indonesia's assessment that it can contribute to combating religious extremism in the region whose shockwaves also reach its own territory.

Indonesia is frequently mentioned in the context of “the day after” in the Gaza Strip, particularly regarding its potential contribution to an international peacekeeping force there. Yet without diminishing the importance of this aspect, Indonesia’s truly distinctive contribution seems to lie elsewhere—primarily in its robust Muslim civil society, which is highly organized and [has already demonstrated a willingness](#) to combat religious extremism within the Muslim world by promoting the values of moderate Islam, with explicit encouragement from the government as part of [a “soft power” diplomacy strategy](#). Nonetheless, Indonesia is likely to find it difficult to realize this potential without establishing some form of official relationship and direct cooperation with Israel. One can only hope that political developments will make this possible—for the benefit of all parties involved.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg