

Recognizing Israel Aligns with Indonesia's Interests, Ambitions, & Constitution

By William Tuchrello and
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In Indonesia's successful campaign for a UN Security Council nonpermanent membership, it expressed its desire to be a global "bridge-builder" and partner for peace in world affairs. 2019 brings Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority state and third-largest democracy heading to national elections in the Spring, an opportunity to expand its Mideast non-aligned foreign policy.

Mideast scholar and practitioner, Richard Haass suggests "In the case of Israel and the Palestinians, there is an argument for diplomatic efforts that would aim to keep the situation from deteriorating and to keep alive diplomatic prospects for a more propitious moment or, better yet, to bring such a moment closer" (2017). This aspiration aligns with Indonesia's long-held foreign policy of non-alignment while fostering social justice. Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla explained, "We can't be a mediator if we don't know Israel. We must be close with both Israel and Palestine." Currently, Indonesia and Israel have no formal diplomatic relations as Indonesia has with Palestine. Indonesia's reluctance to formally engage in diplomacy with Israel until the completion of a two-state solution is costly.

Following the April 2019 Indonesian presidential election, there is an opportunity for the next administration to expand Indonesia's long-term goal of becoming a major leader in world affairs by fostering an Indonesian-Israeli-Palestinian dialogue toward a two-state solution.

Indonesia does not have an internationally recognized voice in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process (IPPP), nor is the country perceived as a serious international player. A two-state solution cannot be negotiated with only one of the parties, because of required boundary demarcations and treaty-compliance evaluations. Furthermore, global leadership and bridge-building requires operating in multi-religious, multicultural settings. It also requires an equalized understanding of both the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives.

Palestinian President Abbas's unreceptive reaction to the Trump Administration's role as IPPP mediator as well as the slow or ineffective progress of the Quartet, Paris Peace Initiative, Arab Peace Plan, and other proposed peace processes, indicates a need for an "honest broker" for a two-state solution.

As evidenced by data from the Notre Dame Peace Accords Matrix scores, Indonesia is arguably skilled at negotiating long-term peace treaties within the ASEAN bloc: The Comprehensive Peace Agreement between Indonesia and Portugal on East Timor earned a 94 percent implementation score, and the Indonesia-Free Aceh Movement MoU earned an 87 percent implementation score. These agreements continue to hold. Jakarta's mediation in the Mindanao conflicts and in multilateral fora has often been effective.

Although Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations will involve a range of stakeholder countries, with its proven track record of regional peace accords, Indonesia can potentially help get the two-state solution back on track.

William Tuchrello and Niruban Balachandran, career diplomat and World Bank project manager, respectively, explain that "Indonesia's reluctance to formally engage in diplomacy with Israel until the completion of a two-state solution is costly."

Overcoming Domestic Challenges

Indonesia has created an undemocratic blanket ban on all Israeli citizens' direct travel and commerce. Thus, Indonesia's non-aligned reputation as a bridge-builder and peacemaker on the global stage is weakened. Yet, Indonesians must help address the Palestinians' humanitarian suffering for both religious solidarity and the Realpolitik of aligning its foreign policy to its core constitutional ethics. Indonesia can no longer claim that lacking formal diplomatic relations with Israel is due to its 1945 Constitution preamble against "colonialism." This claim ignores that the constitution was originally written for a historical Dutch East Indies colonial-era context; neither the UN nor key multilateral organizations have defined Gaza or the West Bank as "colonies". Moreover, today Jakarta already has formal diplomatic relations with other states accused of colonization including China (Tibet), Turkey (Cyprus), Russia (Crimea and Georgia), and India (Kashmir). Incidentally, all have diplomatic relations with Israel. There are also no constitutional constraints on an Indonesian-Israeli-Palestinian dialogue to discuss issues of mutual concern.

Indonesia's foreign policy has historically been underpinned by concepts of *bebas aktif* (independent, active), pragmatic equidistance, dynamic equilibrium, rowing between two reefs, and non-alignment. M. Hatta, Indonesia's first vice president and key architect of Indonesia's foreign policy, emphasized that diplomacy and pragmatism were more effective in international negotiations. A recommitment to these concepts can help Jakarta overcome domestic objections that interacting with Israelis is anti-Palestinian or a betrayal of Organization of the Islamic Conference members.

In contrast to Indonesia, 113 of 193 UN member states have diplomatic relations with both Israel and Palestine, including 7 ASEAN neighbors, 54 postcolonial Non-Aligned Movement states, including key states such as China, India and Russia that opposed Israel's attendance at the anti-colonial 1955 Bandung Conference, and 14 Muslim-majority OIC states. Recently, reflecting on Bandung, Foreign Minister Retno L. P. Marsudi noted that Bandung should become a place for cultivating world tolerance and peace owing to its track record of uniting Asian and African countries. Although most Indonesians have never met an Israeli, there is urgency for Jakarta to have a voice in an ensuing peace process as other major G20 states such as Brazil, Australia, and Russia are considering a transfer of their embassies to Jerusalem.

Foreign Policy Options for Jakarta

Indonesia can be a bridge-building mediator for a dialogue toward a long-term peace agreement, with the establishment of treaty-compliance mechanisms. For example, Indonesia could be proactive and consider opening an embassy in West Jerusalem, in return for Israel's acceptance of Indonesia's opening of an East Jerusalem Palestine mission. Alternatively, an Indonesian Track 1.5 mediation group, comprised of both governmental and non-governmental leaders, such as religious and civil society figures, might be a peacebuilding mediator. Indonesia could bring Israel into its South-South Triangular Cooperation Program to provide technical assistance to Palestinians.

If any dialogue participant feels that the other is not honoring its commitments, it can utilize at least one of the following diplomatic instruments: summon each other's mission chief of party, execute a demarche, negotiate to compromise, introduce a UN resolution, temporarily downgrade relations, and/or trigger international multiparty arbitration. Hence, Indonesia's diplomatic outreach to Israel would be a sign of goodwill toward the peace process, and would be a pragmatic strategic move to improve the negotiation terms and outcomes for both the Palestinians and Israelis.

In sum, the next Indonesian presidential administration should expand its non-aligned Mideast foreign policy, then decisively establish diplomatic relations with both the Israelis and Palestinians to help mediate among a range of stakeholder countries. As FM Marsudi said at the December Bali Democracy Forum, "What the world needs is an inclusive democracy. Democracy that unites, not divides... in this connection, inclusive participation from all stakeholders is vital." It is incumbent upon Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority state and third-largest democracy, to rise to the occasion.

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