

The Dilemma of Opening Indonesia-Israel Diplomatic Relations

By [Kenzie Ryvantya](#)

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An Israeli media outlet, The Jerusalem Post recently published [an online reportage](#) in September 2022 insisting that a "secret delegation" from Indonesia was scheduled to depart for Israel to engage in "secret visits". While this claim is unbelievable enough, the report further adds that relations between Israel and Indonesia have grown warmer in the last few months of 2021, notably in the realm of trade and tourism. Finally, the report mentions the possibility of normalisation of Indonesia-Israel ties, a view upheld by American officials.

This was certainly not the first time rumours pertaining to the opening of diplomatic relations between the two countries were circulated, and likely would not be the last. Such false claims have been widespread many times in the past by both Indonesian and foreign (especially Israeli) media, a move that Indonesia's [foreign ministry believes](#) is aimed to frame the issue for Israel's benefit. The question of whether Indonesia should or should not actually push the agenda forward has been subject to controversy.

High-level Israeli officials have kept the possibility open for decades. When Indonesia held chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1993, Israeli **Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin** visited Jakarta to meet President Soeharto in person. Reportedly, the visit was aimed to [promote opportunities of cooperation](#) with Israel and garner support in the Middle East peace process. Indonesian minister Mardiono later stated that Indonesia was not at all considering establishment of diplomatic relations, likely because the meeting itself sent mixed signals to outside observers.

Some high-ranking Indonesian officials have teased upon the idea as well. In 1999, **President Abdurrahman Wahid's** government planned to open "[economic and trade links](#)" with Israel as part of its commitment to interfaith tolerance. It was also hoped to boost

local economic recovery after Indonesia was hit hard by the 1997 Asian financial crisis. But as expected, this plan was met with intense domestic opposition. Protests by Muslim organisations, students, and members of parliament were widespread. His successors never publicly made such politically dangerous comments.

One argument in favour of opening diplomatic ties with Israel is Indonesia's wish to act as a mediator in resolving the Israel-Palestine situation. Indonesia has long supported a two-state solution where ideally both Israel and Palestine coexist as independent and sovereign nations. With formal ties in place, Indonesia's lobbying power on the international arena, especially among nations in the West, in theory should increase. However, the widespread belief that opening relations with Israel is mutually exclusive to supporting Palestinian independence undermines this otherwise rational argument.

The preamble of Indonesia's constitution explicitly expresses the Indonesian people's eternal support for the "independence of all nations" and the struggle against colonialism. While the face of world politics have drastically changed since the end of World War II up to the present day, the preamble remains unchanged ever since it was established in 1945. It remains a floating constant in a sea full of variables, sometimes presenting problems for Indonesian policymakers in regards to which nations can Indonesia recognise and befriend, and which it should maintain utmost caution in approaching.

It should also be noted that presently, Indonesia does not officially recognise Israel's existence as a legitimate, sovereign state. One major issue, Israel's ongoing oppressive occupation of Palestine, remains a crucial deciding factor whether Indonesia would push for a formal recognition and opening of diplomatic relations. The Indonesian government will measure domestic support from voters and Indonesia's international standing, mainly within the Muslim world. Evidently, both of these factors are unsupportive of furthering any sort of official ties with Israel.

As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, the ever-present voice of political Islam in the domestic sphere has influenced Indonesia's foreign policy in regards to the Middle East region. Religious mass organisations with grassroots support including the Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and the Indonesian Ulema Council will [harshly react](#) to any move entertaining the idea of establishing relations with or even just officially recognising Israel. These organisations form the "moderate Islam" support base for the current administration of **President Joko Widodo**, thus any action that may disappoint them will likely negatively impact the government's popular support.

Of course, there's also the potential of sparking radical Islamist sentiment within militant groups, pushing them to rise up against the government if they see its actions as undermining Islamic teachings and struggles of the global Muslim community.

Internationally, Indonesia is a well-regarded member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a grouping of over 50 states with a Muslim majority or significant minority population. In December 2017, Indonesia [urged OIC members](#) to "reconsider" their relationship with Israel to further support Palestinian independence efforts. Several OIC member-states have indeed normalised relations with Israel, a move [heavily criticised](#) as a betrayal to the creed of solidarity with Palestine. Later in May 2021, Indonesia led an OIC [condemnation](#) against Israel for its increased military attacks in the Gaza Strip that was framed by Israel as "self-defence".

Further back in history, Indonesia has used other platforms to criticise Israel's existence and actions. When Indonesia hosted the 1962 Asian Games, President Soekarno's government refused to issue visas to the Israeli delegation, thus *de facto* preventing them from competing in the Games. This was done to accommodate the wishes of Arab states seeking to internationally isolate Israel at the time and an expression of Indonesia's ardent anti-colonial spirit.

Thus, if Indonesia establishes ties with Israel today, it would certainly be viewed by the public as a hypocritical move and an upsetting inconsistency with its past actions and statements. Indonesia's credibility in the eyes of other countries within the Muslim world as a defender of Palestinian struggle will also be tarnished.

Taking a look back at *The Jerusalem Post's* peculiar report, if Israel's underlying motivation of spreading such rumours is to obtain recognition from the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation to strengthen its legitimacy, it is surely advisable that it throws away any and all expectations. The extremely high political cost imposed by domestic and international factors means that recognition and establishment of diplomatic relations is not a politically feasible option for Indonesia and thus will not even be considered at all by whichever government is in power.

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Kenzie Ryvantya is an undergraduate Political Science student at the University of Indonesia. His interests include Indonesian foreign and security policy, Southeast Asian studies, as well as global geopolitics.

Featured image: People was raising Indonesian and Palestinian flags at a rally on safe Al-Quds at the National Monument square in Jakarta (May 2018). (Indonesia Window)

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