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How Does Indonesia View the Prospect of Normalization with Israel?

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Brief Analysis

Jakarta's domestic politics make normalization unlikely despite years of positive signals, but the United States should nevertheless urge it to consider incremental, mutually beneficial steps toward rapprochement with Jerusalem.

On October 29, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will briefly visit Jakarta for discussions with Indonesian president Joko Widodo—popularly known as Jokowi—and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi. Topping Pompeo's agenda will undoubtedly be the U.S. effort to organize Asian allies around resisting China's increasing assertiveness in and beyond the region. But Jakarta is also relevant to another Trump administration foreign policy priority, one that has taken on an increasingly high profile in the run-up to the U.S. election—normalization with Israel. Indonesia is one of thirty countries worldwide that do not recognize the state of Israel, and one of three in Southeast Asia. But unlike Malaysia, whose leaders have espoused virulent anti-Semitism, and tiny Brunei, Indonesia has a history of positive (albeit inconsistent) signals toward Israel, raising hopes that movement toward normalization may be possible even if it is not imminent.

GRADUAL OPENING

Indonesian sentiment toward Israel is far from warm, with only 9 percent of the populace viewing Jerusalem's foreign influence positively according to a 2017 BBC poll—fewer than in Turkey or Pakistan. This frostiness is partly a legacy of Indonesia's modern history. The country's first president, Sukarno, adopted a zealously anti-colonial foreign policy, joining with Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser and others to found the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 and barring Israel from the 1962 Asian Games at the behest of Arab allies. His successor, Suharto, reoriented Indonesian foreign policy, and the country has since become more democratic and a closer partner with the United States and the broader West. Yet its estrangement from Israel has lingered.

In parallel, however, Indonesia has made overtures in recent decades that gave Israel hope for potential rapprochement. The first significant breakthrough occurred in 1993 after the signing of the Oslo Accords, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin visited Suharto at his home in Jakarta. The next year, Abdurrahman Wahid, then chairman of the moderate Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and later president of Indonesia, traveled to Jerusalem to witness the signing of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. He visited Israel again in 1997, and advocated Arab-Jewish rapprochement until his death.

More recently, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono embraced the two-state solution for the first time in 2012, raising the possibility that Jakarta could normalize in the context of Israeli-Palestinian peace. Later, Jusuf Kalla gently pushed the envelope on engagement with Israel while serving as vice president. In 2014, he declared that Indonesia “can't be a mediator if we don't know Israel... We must be close with both Israel and Palestine.” And in 2018, he conversed with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. That same year, NU chairman Yahya Staquf—who will host Secretary Pompeo this week—traveled to Israel and also met with Netanyahu.

Such political interactions and interfaith dialogues—often with the involvement of Australia's Jewish community—have become relatively routine over the years and are reported openly in the Indonesian press. Occasionally, these overtures are more formal: in 2008, Israel's Magen David Adom medical organization and its Indonesian counterpart signed a cooperation agreement in Tel Aviv that was witnessed by the deputy chairman of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second-largest Islamic organization.

The two countries have also enjoyed a limited economic relationship, notwithstanding their lack of diplomatic ties. In 2018, bilateral trade amounted to approximately \$100 million despite significant Indonesian restrictions on direct commerce with Israel. Similarly, a steady stream of Israeli tourists visit Indonesia annually despite restrictions on visas, which they must obtain via Singapore. Tens of thousands of Indonesian Muslims and Christians likewise visit Israel's holy places every year, and these numbers may increase with the advent of shorter, cheaper air links via the United Arab Emirates. The two governments have also reportedly engaged in quiet security cooperation over the years, and the Israeli ambassador to Singapore is often regarded as an unofficial envoy to Jakarta.

Yet all of these positive signals have failed to produce consistent movement toward normalization. In 2012, Israel reportedly agreed to the opening of an Indonesian consulate in Ramallah, with the understanding that the diplomat heading it would also serve as a de facto representative to Israel. However, the plan apparently foundered when Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Liberman insisted on the principle of reciprocity. As a result, Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa was refused a visa to visit the West Bank in 2012 because he would not make a parallel visit to Jerusalem. The same rationale was given this past March when Israel denied Foreign Minister Marsudi a visa to visit Ramallah, where she hoped to inaugurate an honorary consulate.

Another telling incident came in 2016, when Netanyahu told a visiting group of Indonesian journalists that the “reasons preventing [rapprochement] are no longer relevant” and urged Jakarta to consider opening bilateral

relations. In response, an Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman rebuffed Netanyahu's request, reiterated the country's support for Palestinian statehood, and rebuked the journalists for visiting Israel in the first place.

INDONESIAN REACTIONS TO ISRAEL-UAE DEAL

Despite its reluctance to initiate diplomatic relations with Israel, Jakarta's reaction to the [recent Emirati and Bahraini normalization agreements](#) has been muted. This stands in contrast to sentiments expressed by certain other prominent regional figures—for example, former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad declared that the agreements would pit Muslim countries against one another. Indonesia's restraint is likely due in part to Jakarta and Jokowi's close relationship with the UAE, whose de facto leader, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed, chairs the steering committee for the construction of Indonesia's planned new capital in East Kalimantan. Jakarta has also undoubtedly noted the quiet but positive reception the agreements received in Saudi Arabia, which arguably enjoys greater influence in Indonesia than any other Arab state.

Nevertheless, domestic political considerations will likely keep Indonesia from following the UAE, Bahrain, [and Sudan's normalization path](#) anytime soon. Some domestic Islamic groups have criticized Jokowi for being insufficiently conservative, and his caution regarding the religious right was heightened by the conviction of Jakarta mayor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama—an ethnically Chinese Christian and one of his political allies—on charges of blasphemy in 2017. When Jokowi was seeking reelection in 2019, he needed a new vice president to replace Jusuf Kalla, who was term-limited from serving in the position again. The man he chose was conservative Muslim cleric and former NU supreme leader Maruf Amin, who testified against Purnama, though he later expressed regret for doing so.

Ultimately, Jokowi and other Indonesian politicians may regard the cost of bucking popular anti-Israel sentiment as high—ironically, perhaps even higher than in many Arab countries because Indonesia is a democracy. At the same time, Jakarta likely regards the geopolitical cost of public opposition to Israel as relatively low, especially because it can reap some benefits of cooperation with Jerusalem without recognizing Israel officially. These factors have given rise to a counterintuitive phenomenon: Indonesia and other states outside the Middle East are often more intransigent in their opposition to normalization than Israel's former Arab adversaries.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Normalization will not top Secretary Pompeo's agenda in Jakarta, nor should it. The United States regards Indonesia as a “pillar of a free and open Indo-Pacific,” according to Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell. This makes it vital to what the Trump administration regards as its foremost foreign policy priority, countering China's increasing assertiveness.

Even so, there are good reasons to believe that normalization would strengthen Indonesia. Economically, the country's trade with Israel is many times smaller than Thailand and Vietnam's, despite the fact that Indonesia's GDP is two to three times that of its neighbors. In the security sphere, Israel offers expertise not only against longstanding threats such as terrorism, but also in areas where Indonesia faces emerging threats ranging from cyberattacks to littoral security.

Clear interests aside, normalization likely remains a distant prospect and may not happen in a single stroke. More realistic may be incremental steps such as easing economic and tourist restrictions, which could be less difficult for Indonesian politicians to justify on pragmatic grounds. Deeper engagement could also occur in a multilateral format; as Indonesia builds closer security ties with U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific, Israel (and, perhaps, the UAE) could provide valuable air, naval, and intelligence support. Yet neither Jakarta nor Jerusalem should lose sight of the bigger picture—in a world where threats are increasingly global and large authoritarian states are increasingly inclined to project power, moderate, democratic states have much to gain and little to lose by banding together.

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