



# Indonesia and the Palestinian Cause

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## ► Key Takeaways

- Indonesia's support for the Palestinian cause can be traced back to the founding principles of both Indonesian nationhood and foreign policy under Sukarno (1945-1967).
- Authoritarian leader Suharto (1967-1998) adopted a policy of deliberate ambiguity regarding Israel.
- Since the country's democratic transition, successive governments have maintained a strong pro-Palestinian rhetoric, even though relations with Israel have varied.
- Incumbent president, Prabowo Subianto (2024-), might seek to normalize relations with Israel in a bid to join the OECD. Such a move, however, could prove politically costly given the Indonesian public's overwhelming support for Palestine.

## Introduction

During his inaugural presidential speech on October 20, 2024, Indonesia's incumbent president, Prabowo Subianto, iterated certain principles central to the philosophical foundation of the Indonesian nation. He noted Indonesia's longstanding foreign policy of non-alignment or "*bebas dan aktif*" (free and active) and its aversion to military pacts.<sup>1</sup> He recalled Indonesia's history under Dutch colonial rule, declaring that Indonesia is "anti-oppression because we have been oppressed (...) anti-apartheid because we have experienced apartheid."<sup>2</sup> Continuing, Prabowo declared, "That is why we have a principle: We must stand in solidarity; we must defend the oppressed peoples of the world. Therefore, we support the independence of the Palestinian people."<sup>3</sup>

Indonesia – the world's largest Muslim-majority country<sup>4</sup> – has recognised the State of Palestine since 1988 and has hosted a Palestinian embassy in Jakarta since 1990.<sup>5</sup> In his speech, Prabowo linked Indonesia's support for the Palestinian cause to *bebas dan aktif*, Muslim solidarity, his country's colonial past, and its humanitarian spirit. He acknowledged the aid sent to Gaza by the administration of his presidential predecessor, Joko Widodo, also known as "Jokowi" (2014-2024), as well as the efforts of Indonesian doctors and nurses stationed in Rafah, working alongside their Emirati colleagues.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its longstanding support for Palestinian statehood and a two-state solution, Indonesia's diplomatic position has evolved since its independence. In this article, we provide an account of that evolution, commencing with a discussion of the founding principles of Indonesian nationhood and foreign policy, as developed under the presidency of Sukarno (1945-1967), which were affirmed at the Bandung Conference (1955). We then analyze President Suharto's (1967-1994) deliberately ambiguous relationship with Israel, before addressing the positions of subsequent presidents since the country's democratic transition, which commenced in 1998. We argue that it is unclear whether recent ambitions to normalise relations with Israel could become a reality.

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1. Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents & Translation, "Remarks of President Prabowo Subianto before the Plenary Session of the People's Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the President-Elect and Vice President-Elect of 2024-2029 Term of Office, October 20, 2024", October 20, 2024, available at: <https://setkab.go.id>.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. "Muslim Population by Country", *World Population Review*, available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com>.

5. A. Llewellyn, "'We Cry for Palestine': Indonesian Homemakers Mobilise Support for 'Family'", *Al Jazeera*, December 26, 2023, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com).

6. Ibid.

## The genesis of Indonesian support for the Palestinian cause

Indonesia's first president, Sukarno (1945-1967), took a strong stance against Israel's displacement of the Palestinian people. Having lived under Dutch colonial rule himself, Sukarno was vehemently anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, and left-leaning. He refused to establish diplomatic relations with Israel and distrusted US development aid, which he saw as a ruse to limit Indonesia's independence.<sup>7</sup> Sukarno vetoed the participation of Israel in the Bandung Conference (1955)<sup>8</sup> and prohibited the Indonesian national football team from playing against Israel in a World Cup qualification match in 1958.<sup>9</sup> When Indonesia hosted the Asian Games in 1962, he refused to grant Israeli athletes entry visas.<sup>10</sup>

Sukarno's stance *vis-à-vis* Israel was, in part, informed by the introduction to Indonesia's 1945 Constitution, which states that "independence is the right of all nations and, therefore, colonialism in the world must be abolished because it is not in accordance with humanity and justice".<sup>11</sup> Until today, both the Indonesian people and government still "[see] Palestinian statehood as mandated by [their] own constitution".<sup>12</sup>

Indonesia's stance was also informed by its *bebas dan aktif* foreign policy. First articulated by Indonesia's inaugural vice president and Prime Minister, Mohammad Hatta, in a speech delivered on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1948, it is a quality of policy rather than a policy or strategy *per se*. National interests are defined independently (*bebas*) and then pragmatically promoted (*aktif*), in accordance with Indonesia's needs at the time.<sup>13</sup> *Bebas dan aktif* has been a foreign policy objective of every Indonesian president and, in part, explains Indonesia's proud history of collaborating with the United Nations (UN) institutions.<sup>14</sup> As such, Indonesia rejects foreign intervention and seeks to advance world peace and development through multilateral diplomacy and without prejudice to the principles of state sovereignty and national integrity.<sup>15</sup>

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7. F. B. Weinstein, *Indonesian Foreign Policy and the Dilemma of Dependence: From Sukarno to Soeharto*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976, p. 19.

8. J. Nugroho, "How Gaza Occupies Indonesia's Identity Wars", *The Interpreter*, May 25, 2021, available at: [www.lowyinstitute.org](http://www.lowyinstitute.org).

9. N. Karmini, "Indonesia's Stance on Israel Overshadows World Soccer Event", Associated Press, March 29, 2023, available at: <https://apnews.com>.

10. J. Nugroho, "How Gaza Occupies Indonesia's Identity Wars", op. cit.

11. "Bahwa sesungguhnya kemerdekaan itu ialah hak segala bangsa dan oleh sebab itu, maka penjajahan diatas dunia harus dihapuskan, karena tidak sesuai dengan perikemanusiaan dan perkeadilan." [That independence is the right of all nations and therefore colonialism in the world must be abolished, as it is incompatible with humanity and justice.]

12. S. Y. Lai, "Indonesia Pledges to Triple UNRWA Contributions, Strengthen Global Solidarity with Palestine", *Arab News*, December 12, 2023, available at: [www.arabnews.com](http://www.arabnews.com).

13. D. Weatherbee, *Indonesia in ASEAN: Vision and Reality*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2013, p. 11.

14. These include UN peacekeeping missions, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). See: "UN Entities in Indonesia", *United Nations Indonesia*, 2025, available at: <https://indonesia.un.org>.

15. M. Sabir, *Politik Bebas Aktif: Tantangan dan kesempatan*, Jakarta: Haji Masagung, 1987.

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## The Bandung Conference was foundational to Indonesia's diplomatic stance in support of the Palestinian cause

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The Sukarno administration affirmed its *bebas dan aktif* outlook during the Bandung Conference in 1955, a seminal event that led to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961.<sup>16</sup> Frustrated with the remaining vestiges of European imperialism and the persistent dependence of newly independent nations on their former colonisers, the delegations of 29 countries met in Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss the right of peoples to self-determination.<sup>17</sup> For Indonesia, the conference was a historic occasion where, among other things, it pledged to secure the liberation of '[its] Palestinian brothers [and sisters]'.<sup>18</sup>

In the conference's Final Communiqué, however, the Palestinian question was only briefly mentioned in the section entitled "E. Other Problems". The words *self-determination*, *human rights*, *colonialism*, and/or *racialism*, which appear elsewhere in the Communiqué, were not employed in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>19</sup> This was primarily the result of Israel – whose participation had been vetoed by Sukarno – lobbying Burma (Myanmar), India, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to reject the use of anti-colonial language in the Communiqué. The Bandung Conference was therefore not necessarily instrumental in advancing the plight of the Palestinian people, but it remains seminal to Indonesia's support of the Palestinian cause.<sup>20</sup>

## Suharto and the politics of deliberate ambiguity

Sukarno's successor and Indonesia's longest-serving president, General Suharto (1967-1998), took a more pragmatic approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Having unseated his predecessor, not through a military coup, but a gradual takeover over several years that involved military action, political manoeuvring, and a controversial legal decree (the Order of the March 11, 1966), Suharto went on to rule Indonesia for 32 years.

Unlike his predecessor, Suharto more readily engaged with the United States and the "old established forces" that Sukarno had shunned.<sup>21</sup> His Israel policy was also deliberately ambiguous. Suharto's transactional approach to the West and, by extension, Israel, was perhaps best captured in his administration's decision to abstain from voting at a meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) regarding the potential suspension of

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16. N. Samour, "Palestine at Bandung: The Longwinded Start of a Reimagined International Law", in: L. Eslava, M. Fakhri and V. Nesiah (eds.), *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 613.

17. Ibid., p. 603.

18. Interview with HE Santo Darmosumarto, December 1, 2021.

19. Ibid., p. 604.

20. Ibid.

21. F. B. Weinstein, *Indonesian Foreign Policy and the Dilemma of Dependence*, op. cit.

Egypt's membership after Egypt and Israel signed the 1978 Camp David peace agreement.<sup>22</sup> Indonesia's abstention, of course, suggested tacit approval of Egypt's position.<sup>23</sup>

That abstention was a sign of things to come. In October 1979, Indonesia entered into a clandestine transaction with Israel, brokered by the United States,<sup>24</sup> whereby it purchased 14 A-4E Skyhawk fighter jets and two TA-4H Skyhawks from Israel.<sup>25</sup> The United States' involvement stemmed from the fact that Israel had originally purchased those jets from the United States before deciding to update its own fleet.<sup>26</sup> Indonesia dispatched seven groups of air force technicians to Israel for 20 months, where they learned to maintain the jets. Ten Indonesian air force pilots were then sent to Israel to learn how to fly the jets. Operation Alpha, as it was known, was so clandestine that the pilots themselves did not know they were going to Israel until they arrived in Singapore, from where they boarded a commercial flight to Tel Aviv. On May 20, 1980, after completing their mission, the pilots returned to Indonesia via a US airbase in Arizona, where they posed for photographs in front of American jets to maintain the façade that Indonesia had purchased the jets from the United States.<sup>27</sup> In 1982, Indonesia purchased an additional 16 A-4E Skyhawks from Israel.<sup>28</sup>

Suharto, however, never recognised the State of Israel. Rather, he began to take greater interest in Islamic affairs – a response to growing criticism by Islamic groups of his New Order administration's poor religious credentials. In 1988, he recognised the State of Palestine and, in 1990, he greenlit a Palestinian embassy in Jakarta. The idea of a PLO administrative office had been discussed since 1972, but an official Palestinian embassy was not established until 18 years later.<sup>29</sup>

In another ambiguous display, Suharto welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in October 1993, just three weeks after Yasser Arafat, the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, visited Jakarta. His visit required various Indonesian politicians to issue a series of statements downplaying the possibility of a bilateral relationship with Israel,<sup>30</sup> again emphasising how politically unsavoury a normalisation of diplomatic relations with Israel would be for certain sections of the Indonesian public.

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22. G. Barton and C. Rubenstein, "Indonesia and Israel: A Relationship in Waiting", *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1/2, 2005, p. 163.

23. Ibid.

24. G. C. Wilson, "U.S. Is Fronting Israel Sale of Jets to Indonesia", *The Washington Post*, October 5, 1979, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

25. "A-4 Skyhawk Production History", *The Skyhawk Association*, November 9, 2016, available at: <https://skyhawk.org>.

26. G. C. Wilson, "U.S. Is Fronting Israel Sale of Jets to Indonesia", op. cit.

27. S. Ginting, "Menyusup ke Israel", *Republika*, April 14, 2015, available at: [www.republika.co.id](http://www.republika.co.id), and D. A. Tifada, "Operasi Alpha: Misi Rahasia Presiden Soeharto Beli Pesawat Tempur Bekas Israel", *VOI*, March 29, 2023, available at: <https://voi.id>.

28. "A-4 Skyhawk Production History", op. cit.

29. G. Barton and C. Rubenstein, "Indonesia and Israel", op. cit., pp. 162-163.

30. Ibid., pp. 164-165.

## Indonesia and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since its democratic transition

Despite his deliberate ambiguity on the issue, Suharto never visited Israel. This was not the case, however, for Indonesia's first democratically elected president, **Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001)**. In 1994, before his election to the country's highest office, and while serving as Chairman (*rais 'aam*) of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (the Awakening of the Ulama), the country and world's largest Islamic organisation, Wahid visited the Jewish state in a personal capacity to witness the Israel-Jordan peace accord ceremony on October 25, 1994.<sup>31</sup> While his visit upset many in Indonesia, he was elected to a third five-year term as NU chairman only weeks after he returned from Israel. He also returned to Israel in October 1997 to speak at the Peres Peace Center.<sup>32</sup>

In 2001, Wahid addressed an international business conference in Bali where he declared that Indonesia should instigate business and economic relations with Israel. After a slew of scandals, however, Wahid was ultimately impeached by the national legislature.<sup>33</sup> Wahid did not visit Israel in his capacity as president – his aides ultimately persuaded him that doing so would be politically inexpedient – but he did return in subsequent years as a private citizen.<sup>34</sup>

### Yudhoyono frequently reaffirmed Indonesia's support for the Palestinian people

While Wahid did not emphasize Indonesia's anti-colonialist rhetoric regarding the Palestinian cause, his successor, **Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004)**, did. In 2004, however, Megawati lost the presidential election to former military general **Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014)**. Throughout his presidency, Yudhoyono frequently reaffirmed Indonesia's support for the Palestinian people and their right to self-determination. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, at the second meeting of the Conference on Cooperation Among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development (CEAPAD), Yudhoyono recalled the Bandung Conference and called for the independence of the Palestinian people:

*"We look forward to the universal recognition of Palestine as an independent and sovereign state, and as a full member State of the United Nations. We can make this happen if we redouble our efforts to support them in nation and state-building".<sup>35</sup>*

Several months later, on July 20, 2014, Yudhoyono welcomed the head of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, to the State Palace in Jakarta. The two discussed the then-ongoing conflict in Gaza, and Yudhoyono again reaffirmed "Indonesia's strong

31. N. Samour, "Palestine at Bandung", op. cit., p. 165.

32. Ibid., p. 167.

33. "Indonesia: Abdurrahman Wahid's Human Rights Legacy", Human Rights Watch, July 27, 2001, available at: [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).

34. G. Barton and C. Rubenstein, "Indonesia and Israel", op. cit., p. 168.

35. S. B. Yudhoyono, "Opening Speech President of the Republic of Indonesia the Conference Ceapad, 1 March 2014, Jakarta", Kementerian Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, March 1, 2014, available at: [www.setneg.go.id](http://www.setneg.go.id).

commitment towards the realisation of an independent, sovereign and viable Palestinian state, based on the two-state solution”.<sup>36</sup>

President **Joko Widodo (2014-2024)**, alias Jokowi, adopted a similar tack. Since Hamas’ attacks on October 7, 2023, Jokowi has repeatedly denounced them and called for an immediate ceasefire. On October 10, 2023, Jokowi issued a statement in which he condemned the attacks and called on Indonesia’s foreign ministry to take immediate steps to protect those Indonesian citizens in conflict zones. Emphatically, Jokowi noted that “the root of the conflict, namely Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories, must come to an immediate end, in accordance with the parameters already agreed to by the UN.”<sup>37</sup>

On October 19, 2023, Jokowi again denounced Israeli attacks on Gaza, including that on the Al-Ahli (Baptist) Hospital, which he described as a violation of international humanitarian law. Together with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Jokowi declared that Indonesia was sending a “strong message to the world” to stop the violence and reiterated that the root of the conflict, namely the Israeli occupation of Palestine, needed to be resolved.<sup>38</sup> Jokowi denounced the attacks on multiple occasions and, on November 13, 2023, at a press conference with then-United States President Joe Biden, urged the United States to do more to bring about a ceasefire, which, Jokowi insisted, was “a must for the sake of humanity.”<sup>39</sup>

On November 5, 2023, before Jokowi met with Biden, almost 2 million Indonesians protested the attacks peacefully in the streets of the nation’s capital, Jakarta. The protest was initiated by Indonesia’s peak Islamic body, the Indonesian Council of Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI),<sup>40</sup> which has been the government’s official partner in administering Islamic affairs since 2014.<sup>41</sup> The protestors themselves, however, comprised an interfaith coalition and operated under the moniker *Aliansi Rakyat Indonesia Bela Palestina* (Indonesian People’s Alliance to Defend Palestine). Notable Indonesian political figures also attended, including then-Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, who addressed the crowd, Speaker of the House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*) Puan Maharani, and then-presidential candidate and former governor of Jakarta, Anies Baswedan. While Indonesia’s politicians are typically adept at politicising the Palestine issue to curry favour with Indonesia’s Muslim majority,

36. “President SBY Reaffirms Indonesia’s Support to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas”, Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, July 21, 2014, available at: <https://setkab.go.id>.

37. Sekretariat Presiden, “Pernyataan Presiden Jokowi Terkait Situasi Terkini Konflik Palestina-Israel, 10 Oktober 2023”, YouTube, October 10, 2023, available at: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

38. Sekretariat Presiden, “Pernyataan Presiden Joko Widodo Terkait Tindak Kekerasan di Gaza, Riyadh, 19 Oktober 2023”, YouTube, October 19, 2023, available at: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

39. S. Strangio, “Indonesia’s Jokowi Urges Biden to ‘Do More’ to Halt Gaza Atrocities”, *The Diplomat*, November 14, 2023, available at: <https://thediplomat.com>.

40. A. Arshad, “Indonesians Join Peaceful Rally in Jakarta in Solidarity with Palestine”, *The Straits Times*, November 5, 2023, available at: [www.straitstimes.com](http://www.straitstimes.com).

41. *Peraturan Presiden Nomor 154 Tahun 2014* [Presidential Regulation No. 154 of 2014] was issued by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Minister of Law and Human Rights, Amir Syamsudin, on October 17, 2014. Article 2 of the regulation declares MUI to be the “government’s partner” (*mitra pemerintah*) in administering Islamic affairs.

the protest was conspicuously interfaith and motivated, primarily, by the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Gaza.<sup>42</sup>

On November 21, 2023, Marsudi joined a delegation of foreign ministers that pushed for a ceasefire. That ministerial committee, which comprised foreign ministers from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Palestine, as well as the Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Hussein Ibrahim Taha, visited China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, and also met with Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov.<sup>43</sup> On December 11, 2023, Indonesia, which has a strong affinity with the United Nations, having served as a very active non-permanent member of the Security Council during the 2019-20 term,<sup>44</sup> presented the draft resolution "Demand for Ceasefire in Gaza" before the United Nations General Assembly. The resolution sought to effect an immediate ceasefire.<sup>45</sup>

For much of 2024, Jokowi repeatedly condemned Israeli attacks.<sup>46</sup> On October 10, 2024, however, the attacks were closer to home for Indonesia, as Israel broadened its scope of attack to include parts of southern Lebanon. As part of its assault on the region, it targeted a United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) post in Nakura in southern Lebanon, where Indonesia has more than 1,200 personnel deployed.<sup>47</sup> The attack left two Indonesian UNIFIL peacekeepers injured after they fell from an observation tower that was attacked by an Israeli tank.<sup>48</sup> On October 15, 2024, during an official visit to the autonomous Indonesian province of Aceh, Jokowi responded by again strongly condemning the attacks, emphasising that attacks on UN peacekeepers were unacceptable, and reiterating Indonesia's commitment to global peace.<sup>49</sup>

The Jokowi administration also increased the country's humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people—Indonesia has provided development aid since the 2008 conflict in Gaza.<sup>50</sup> On January 9, 2016, then-Vice President Jusuf Kalla inaugurated the

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42. M. Lane, "Millions on the Streets of Jakarta, Indonesia for Palestine", *Peoples Dispatch*, November 7, 2023, available at: <https://peoplesdispatch.org>.

43. "Delegation of Arab Top Diplomats Meets with Russia's Lavrov, Discusses War on Gaza", *The Jordan Times*, November 22, 2023, available at: <https://jordantimes.com>.

44. Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents & Translation, "Indonesia Concludes UNSC Presidency in August", Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, September 1, 2020, available at: <https://setkab.go.id>.

45. "Indonesia Urges UN General Assembly to Realize a Ceasefire in Gaza", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, December 12, 2023, available at: <https://kemlu.go.id>.

46. Antara, "President Joko Widodo Condemns Israeli Attack in Rafah", *The Jakarta Globe*, June 1, 2024, available at: <https://jakartaglobe.id>.

47. "Indonesia Confirms Two of Its Peacekeepers Wounded in Israeli Fire", *Middle East Eye*, October 11, 2024, available at: [www.middleeasteye.net](http://www.middleeasteye.net).

48. "Indonesia President Condemns Israel Attacks on Peacekeepers in Lebanon", *Middle East Monitor*, October 16, 2024, available at: [www.middleeastmonitor.com](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com).

49. Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents & Translation, "Indonesia Condemns Israeli Attacks on Gaza, Lebanon, UN Peacekeepers", Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, October 15, 2023, available at: <https://setkab.go.id>.

50. "Indonesian Philanthropy Organization Sends Aid Packages to Palestine", *Indonesia Window*, November 2, 2023, available at: <https://indonesiawindow.com>.

Indonesian Hospital (*Rumah Sakit Indonesia*) in Beit Laha, a city of some 90,000 people in Northern Gaza.<sup>51</sup> The hospital was primarily built through the efforts of Indonesia's Medical Emergency Rescue Committee (MER-C), an Indonesian non-governmental organisation established in 1999 by a group of medical students from the University of Indonesia.<sup>52</sup> MER-C's mission is to deliver medical aid to the "most vulnerable people", regardless of their immutable characteristics. The hospital itself, which cost US\$8 million to build, was funded by the donations of Indonesian citizens. MER-C spearheaded the donation drive, in collaboration with organisations including the Indonesian Red Cross Society and Indonesia's second-largest Islamic social organization, Muhammadiyah.<sup>53</sup> Since late 2023, the hospital has been subjected to multiple Israeli military assaults. Notably, on November 20, 2023, Israeli tanks and snipers surrounded the hospital, before shelling it and killing 12 Palestinians.<sup>54</sup> On the evening of November 23, just hours before a humanitarian truce came into effect, Israeli forces bombed the hospital, targeting its main generator and raiding the hospital.<sup>55</sup> On October 18, 2024, Israeli forces conducted another assault on the hospital, hitting the hospital's upper floors. In response, MER-C personnel denied assertions that the hospital was harbouring Hamas fighters.<sup>56</sup> On December 24, 2024, Israeli forces forced the evacuation of the hospital, including its patients.<sup>57</sup> In January this year, the Gaza health ministry announced that repeated Israeli attacks had put Hospital Indonesia – as well as the other two public hospitals, Kamal Adwan and Beit Hanoon, in North Gaza – out of commission.<sup>58</sup>

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### The Jokowi administration increased Indonesia's humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people

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More recently, on January 18, 2024, Indonesia sent the hospital aid ship KRI Dr. Radjiman Wedyodiningrat 992 to Al Arish, the capital of North Sinai in Egypt, approximately 53 kilometres from Rafah in Gaza. The ship, including its 214 crew members and 40 military officers, transported 242 tonnes of aid, which included food, water, medicines, blankets, clothing, and other essentials.<sup>59</sup> It arrived on February 13,

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51. N. Benamara, "Indonesia Hospital Saves Lives in Gaza", *OPEC Fund*, April 1, 2016, available at: <https://opecfund.org>.

52. A. Llewellyn, "At Gaza's Indonesia Hospital, Medics Fight to Save Lives Amid Israel Raids", *Al Jazeera*, October 30, 2023, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

53. Ibid.

54. "Israel Targets Gaza's Indonesian Hospital: Here Is What's to Know", *Al Jazeera*, November 20, 2023, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

55. "Gaza's Indonesian Hospital in Ruins After Israeli Raid, Days-long Siege", *Al Jazeera*, November 25, 2023, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com) and "Israel Bombs Indonesian Hospital in Gaza Hours Before Truce", *Tempo English*, November 24, 2023, available at: <https://en.tempo.co>.

56. I. Debre, J. Frankel and L. Keath, "Still Wrecked from Past Israeli Raids, Hospitals in Northern Gaza Come under Attack Again", Associated Press, November 3, 2024, available at: <https://apnews.com>.

57. N. Al-Mughrabi, "Israeli Army Forces Patients out of North Gaza Hospital, Medics Say", Reuters, December 24, 2024, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

58. "Indonesian Hospital in North Gaza Is out of Service: Gaza Health Ministry", *Al Jazeera*, January 4, 2024, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

59. "Minister Sends Off Dr. Radjiman Warship with Aid for Gazans", *Antara*, January 18, 2024, available at: <https://en.antaranews.com>.

2024, and completed its mission on February 16, returning to Indonesia a day later.<sup>60</sup>

Indonesia's current head of state, Prabowo Subianto, served as Jokowi's defence minister during his second presidential term, after running two unsuccessful presidential campaigns against the latter. In that capacity, Prabowo endeavoured to normalise Indonesia-Israel relations.<sup>61</sup> This potential shift in foreign policy was primarily incentivised by an invitation from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on February 20, 2024, to enter into accession discussions. If successful, Indonesia would become the first Southeast Asian OECD member.<sup>62</sup> Membership in the OECD, however, is contingent on normalised relations with Israel, from which Indonesia has historically refrained. With the OECD carrot on the table, so to speak, Prabowo appears to be gradually changing Indonesia's stance. Notwithstanding the current continuing conflict in Gaza, on June 5, 2025, Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, Airlangga Hartarto, declared that Indonesia had submitted its

Initial Memorandum – a self-assessment of its own compliance with OECD instruments – to the OECD. This is the first step in its four-year roadmap to full membership.<sup>63</sup> OECD membership has ultimately proved irresistible to Prabowo, but normalizing relations with Israel will still require very delicate politicking at home.

## Indonesia's accession to the OECD is contingent on normalized relations with Israel

In terms of the broader Indonesian public, a 2017 Globe Scale survey – the most recent official survey of the Indonesian public on the question of Israel and Palestine – revealed that, notwithstanding an 11 percent decline in negative opinion since the same survey was conducted in 2014, 64 percent of Indonesians surveyed viewed Israel negatively (positive opinion remained stable, at around 9 percent).<sup>64</sup> That said, not all Indonesians would necessarily oppose the idea of Indonesia joining the OECD, and nuance does indeed exist, even among Indonesia's Muslim leadership.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, more than 30,000 Indonesians were visiting Israel annually.<sup>65</sup> The former head of Indonesia's intelligence agency, *Badan Intelijen Nasional*, Gen. (retired) Abdullah Mahmud Hendropriyono, also once famously

60. "Naval Ship Returns to Indonesia After Unloading Aid for Palestinians", *Antara*, February 17, 2024, available at: <https://en.antaranews.com>.

61. L. Harkov, "How Agriculture Led Indonesia's Defense Minister to Talk Normalization with Israel", *The Jerusalem Post*, January 11, 2022, available at: [www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com).

62. "OECD Makes Historic Decision to Open Accession Discussions with Indonesia", OECD, February 20, 2024, available at: [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org).

63. "Indonesia Fast-tracks OECD Bid as Part of Geopolitical Balancing Act", *Intellinews*, June 12, 2005, available at: [www.intellinews.com](http://www.intellinews.com).

64. "Sharp Drop in World Views of US, UK: Global Poll", *Globe Scan*, July 4, 2017, available at: <https://globescan.com>.

65. M. Lücking, "Travelling with the Idea of Taking Sides: Indonesian Pilgrimages to Jerusalem", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, vol. 175, no. 2/3, 2019, p. 201.

declared that Israel-Palestine relations were of no concern to Indonesia.<sup>66</sup> Even Yahya Cholil Staquf, current chairman of the Executive Board of *Nahdlatul Ulama* and former mentee of Abdurrahman Wahid, has met with Jewish leaders, his primary aim being to achieve peace and understanding with his counterparts.<sup>67</sup> As Utama has written, however, “[p]opular resistance to normalisation [in Indonesia] could manifest in widespread protests and civil unrest”,<sup>68</sup> and certain Indonesian politicians will exploit the issue to “exacerbate political polarisation within Indonesia” and to “leverage the issue to consolidate power” by “appealing to nationalist sentiments or religious convictions.”<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion: what can Indonesia do?

Since Israel’s response to the attacks of October 7, 2023, Indonesia has done what it can to effect a ceasefire. In January this year, Indonesia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Anis Matta rejected claims that Indonesia had agreed to accept Gaza refugees.<sup>70</sup> In April, however, Indonesia had a change of heart, with President Prabowo agreeing to provide temporary shelter to approximately 1,000 Gazans until they were in a position to return home.<sup>71</sup>

Until they are, and as long as the conflict continues, Indonesia will struggle to normalise relations with Israel. To secure OECD membership, however, it would need to do so. That said, if anyone has the political, military, and nationalist credentials to thread the proverbial needle – normalise relations with Israel without bringing about his own political demise – it might just be Prabowo. To do so, he would need to maintain the anti-colonial and humanitarian rhetoric at home, while arguing that normalised relations with Israel would better facilitate the establishment of a home state for Indonesia’s Palestinian brothers and sisters.

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70. “No Plans to Relocate Palestinians to Indonesia: Deputy Minister”, *Antara*, January 23, 2025, available at: <https://en.antaranews.com>.

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