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Ties with Israel: Indonesia Not Like Morocco

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SYNOPSIS

Morocco's recent partial normalisation of ties with Israel demonstrated that strategic gains could outweigh fears of nationalists and Islamist reprisals in Muslim-majority countries. In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, nationalists and Islamists remain opposed to the Jewish state.

COMMENTARY

ON 10 December 2020, Morocco agreed to establish partial diplomatic relations with Israel and became the sixth Arab League member to recognise the Jewish state. Morocco – the fourth country in the latest diplomatic rapprochement after United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Sudan – had previously rejected any formal relations with Israel as it had previously supported the two-state solution as its official position.

Morocco had been a strong supporter of the Palestinians. Based on the 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, 88% of surveyed Moroccans would oppose diplomatic recognition of Israel, and 70% viewed the Palestinian cause as the key concern for all Arabs. Additionally, Moroccan prime minister, Saad Dine El Otmani, a former foreign minister, described its pro-Palestine stance as “a red line” for Rabat. However, Morocco's recent agreement with Israel proved that this red line could be redrawn given the appropriate strategic benefits and diplomatic bargain.

The Western Sahara Factor

Apart from diplomatic relations and economic and cultural co-operation, the agreement also crucially includes US recognition of Morocco's claim over the disputed Western Sahara region. Morocco had been asserting its claim over Western Sahara

for more than 40 years, experiencing protracted conflicts with the Polisario Front who claims to be the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people in that region.

The Polisario Front argues that the Sahrawis have a right to self-determination and established the ostensibly independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic State (SADR). In November 2020, the 29-year-long ceasefire between SADR and Morocco broke down.

With its claim over Western Sahara recognised, Morocco stands to gain tremendously from its shift in foreign policy towards Israel. Western Sahara would provide Morocco with legitimate control over a large swathe of Atlantic coastline up to Mauritania that is also rich in natural resources including phosphate (a core resource in global food production) and shale gas.

It is also believed that the area has significant offshore oil and gas reserves. Also, having this control would boost Morocco's position as an economic gateway for sub-Saharan countries all the way to Europe. The shift in foreign policy is welcomed by Moroccan nationalists as they recognise the security and economic gains and view it as a national win.

Significantly some Islamists support the deal while those against are also split – some reject it based on their Islamist ideas about Israel while others reject the Western Saharan gain as they had viewed Western Sahara as part of Morocco all along. Beyond the significant territorial gain, the move also proves Morocco's willingness as a regional ally of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

Indonesia's Considerations

In contrast, for Indonesia, opening relations with Israel is out of the question for now as it remains a major foreign policy bugbear. While Indonesia values its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, this is unlikely to be a key determinant in whether it would follow in the steps of its Sunni Arab partners.

Rather, domestic political considerations weigh heavily on Indonesia's foreign policy considerations with nationalist and Islamist groups putting pressure on the government on domestic and foreign issues.

Various calls to establish relations between Indonesia and Israel had been made since the Sukarno era. Most recently, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his intention to open diplomatic relations with Indonesia in 2018, stressing that Indonesia is an important country for Israel.

Indonesian leaders – from Sukarno to Joko Widodo – had rejected these requests and had refused to consider diplomatic relations with Israel without full independence being granted for the Palestinian people. Unsurprisingly, Indonesian Islamist political parties and mass organisations support the government position and reject the establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel.

Anti-Israel Sentiment Still Strong

Both Indonesian nationalists and Islamists are firm and consistent supporters of

Palestinian statehood and champion the right of the Palestinians to obtain independence. This stance extends to the political elite including members of the House of Representatives who view Israel as an occupying force. They legitimise their support for the Palestinians using the Preamble to the country's 1945 Constitution (*Undang-Undang Dasar 1945*).

The constitution disavows colonialism as it is contrary to the principles of humanity and justice, while asserting that freedom is the right of all nations. As for the Indonesian Islamists, Israel is not only an illegitimate occupier of Palestinian land, but they are an enemy of Islam.

In 2017, when President Trump declared Jerusalem as Israel's capital, protests and demonstrations by nationalists and Islamists erupted across the country showing their rejection of this declaration.

The Indonesian government is acutely aware that a significant subset of the population holds these views on the Palestine issue and that their voices cannot be conveniently disregarded. Also, as a strong anti-colonial and nationalist outlook continues to shape how Indonesians perceive Israel's treatment of Palestinians especially in the national parliament, their views must be taken seriously before diplomatic ties can be established.

The Balance Sheet

For Indonesia, any ties with Israel, even against the backdrop of US diplomatic intervention, would likely require a deal that would grant strategic political, economic or military advantage which would not only appease nationalists but also be worth the trouble with Islamist groups.

Indeed, cooperation with the US and Israel could likely derive multiple benefits for Indonesia, especially in the military, economic, and technological aspects. While Indonesia's economy has long been dependent on the US market, Jakarta's more recent reliance on China — it is Indonesia's major import and export partner for the non-oil and gas sector — could do with greater diversification.

The Indonesian Air Force is aiming to upgrade its primary weapons defence system (Alutsista) especially their jet fighters, radars and missiles by 2024. Further, as Indonesia may not be able to prevent Chinese incursions in the Natuna Sea, Jakarta may need to strengthen its military relationship with the US to fend off Chinese intrusions.

Indonesia could also potentially benefit from contributions to and exchanges in the agricultural, dairy, medical, and energy sectors.

However, whatever Indonesia stands to gain must outweigh or at least address possible violent counter pressures from its population. Domestic radical Islamist elements will feature strongly in Indonesia's decision-making processes on issues pertaining to relations with Israel.

Anti-Israeli sentiments are also shared by many Indonesian leaders and anti-Israel

sentiment has been strongest among radical Islamist groups and from those who similarly believe that Israel, or more precisely Zionism, is the sworn enemy of the Islamic community.

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