

Indonesia And Israel: A Relationship In Waiting

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Indonesia has faced much the same obstructions in developing its nascent relationship with Israel as have all the other Muslim-majority nations of Asia. While not inherently antithetical to Israel, Indonesia clearly places a higher value on avoiding trouble with radical Islamist elements at home than it does on normalizing relations with far-away Israel. The precedent was established by founding President Sukarno, who brushed aside early Israeli overtures and eventually adopted a strong pro-Arab policy as part of an overarching anticolonialist worldview. Although under Suharto the formal policy toward Israel remained largely unchanged, around the margins the New Order regime found it useful to conduct unofficial dealings with Israel, most significantly in the area of military hardware. Since Suharto's demise in 1998, the idea of establishing ties with Israel has arisen periodically in political circles, most notably under the brief presidency of progressive Islamic leader Abdurrahman Wahid, but any concrete developments are likely dependent on progress in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Introduction

Indonesia and Israel became modern nations at approximately the same time. Indonesia declared independence on 17 August 1945 in the wake of the Japanese surrender, though it then had to battle the returning Dutch forces for a further four years. Over half a century later, however, Indonesia and Israel are yet to establish diplomatic relations. It might be thought that Indonesia's initial rejection of overtures from Israel had to do primarily with pan-Islamic sentiment. After all, the most vocal source of anti-Israeli sentiment in Indonesia in recent years has been radical Islamist groups for which virulent anti-Semitism has become virtually an article of faith.¹ In fact, antipathy, or at least ambivalence, toward Israel in the Republic of Indonesia during its first two decades had much more to do with the desire of its first president, Sukarno, to build relations with other former European colonies, including Arab nations, in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).²

When Suharto seized power from Sukarno in the mid-1960s and established a military-backed authoritarian regime, much of the mental baggage of the Sukarno era was jettisoned. Israel's remarkable resilience in the 1967 Six-Day War elicited admiration rather than antagonism from Jakarta. Few Indonesians strongly identified with Israel's enemies and even if they did not know much about Israel, many admired its feisty self-defense in the face of Arab aggression. Covert relations between Israel and Indonesia continued to develop over the next quarter of a century. But the Suharto regime was nothing if not pragmatic and was increasingly mindful of the potential for radical Islamist groups to make trouble. Moreover, in the decades that followed, the continued Israeli presence in the West Bank and the [Gaza](#) Strip provided the Islamists with a means of eliciting broader sympathy for their anti-Israeli stance.

The signing of the Oslo Declaration of Principles in September 1993 opened the way for Israel and Indonesia to move overtly toward normalizing relations. With the Israel-PLO agreement in place, first Arafat and then Rabin visited Jakarta and talked with Suharto. One year later Abdurrahman Wahid, the moderate leader of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the thirty-million-strong, traditionalist Islamic organization, and Djohan Effendi, a leading Islamic intellectual in interfaith dialogue and private speech writer for Suharto, visited [Jerusalem](#) at the invitation of Prime Minister Rabin to witness the signing of the peace accord with Jordan.

When Abdurrahman Wahid became president himself in 1999, he made normalizing Indonesian-Israeli relations a personal goal. His failure to win control of parliament, however, saw his term in office truncated and his ambitiously reformist presidency replaced by the "do-nothing" presidency of Megawati Sukarnoputri. Her replacement, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, was directly elected president in September 2004 after winning a massive 21 percent more votes than the lackluster incumbent. But despite his clear popular mandate, Yudhoyono faces the same problem as Wahid in securing the support of the parliament. His cautious nature and his reliance on two small radical Islamist parties means that any breakthrough in Indonesian-Israeli relations will likely have to be preceded by success in peace-building initiatives between Israel and the [Palestinian Authority](#).

The Sukarno Period (1945-1965)

To properly understand the issues besetting Indonesian-Israeli relations it is necessary to consider historical developments decades before either state came into being. As early as the 1920s, discussions on the question of Palestine in Indonesian Muslim social movements were marked by feelings of affinity for Arabs and of Islamic solidarity. The future of Palestine was a regular topic of discussion at the annual meetings of the Islamic organization Muhammadiyah that was formed in 1912 to propagate the modernist ideas of Muhammad Abduh, which today, together with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), is one of the two large mass-based organizations that dominate Islamic affairs in Indonesia. During World War II, there was criticism in the Indonesian Muslim community of the negative attitude that the British exhibited toward the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini. Given the many thousands of Indonesian scholars who studied in Egypt, Mecca, Medina, and other centers of learning in the Arab world, and the tens of thousands of ordinary Indonesians who made *haj* and *umroh* pilgrimages to the Saudi peninsula, it is not surprising that the future of Palestine has long been a concern of pious Indonesian Muslims.

During Indonesia's four-year armed struggle with its former Dutch colonial rulers, President Sukarno and the rest of the Indonesian leadership worked to develop relations with Arab countries even as these countries were engaged in their own struggle for independence. One of the first diplomatic missions dispatched by the Indonesian government was to the Middle East, and was headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Haji Agus Salim. The mission was a response to a resolution of the Arab League Foreign Ministers Council on 18 November 1946 recognizing Indonesia's independence. Agus Salim, who was proficient in Arabic, established diplomatic and consular relations with Egypt, and soon visited [Syria](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) as well to sign similar agreements. Such ties bore fruit in international forums; when Indonesia's independence struggle with the Netherlands was discussed at the United Nations, the Arab delegations supported Indonesia.

Sukarno's concept of the Indonesian nation found formal expression in the official state ideology of Pancasila (or "Five Precepts"), which stressed national unity and a theistic but nonsectarian secularism instead of an Islamist conception of an Islamic state. Sukarno, with the backing of some prominent Islamic leaders including Wahid Hasyim, father of Abdurrahman Wahid, resisted Islamist pressure to formulate the Indonesian constitution along explicitly Islamic lines. Today the adoption of Pancasila is widely seen as one of Sukarno's greatest achievements. Although Sukarno's championing of Pancasila reflected his revolutionary spirit at its most moderate and sensible, there was much else about his leadership that was far less unambiguously positive, and the left-right polarization of Indonesian society that raced out of control in the last five years of his presidency was to have tragic consequences. At the heart of this was the fact that Sukarno's brand of nationalism was among the more strident in the postcolonial transition period after World War II. Rejecting the notion of dominance by the Cold War rivals, Sukarno moved Indonesia toward a stance of nonalignment. Thus it was far more for reasons of postcolonial-rather than pan-Islamic-solidarity that Indonesia energetically supported the Arabs in their conflict with the new state of Israel, which Sukarno came to regard as a bridgehead of Western imperialism in the emerging Afro-Asian world.

Indonesia's early disposition toward the Jewish state was clearly not the result of any intentional or accidental diplomatic slight by Israel. In fact, Israeli state records indicate that the emergence of the largest Muslim country in the world was noted with interest in Jerusalem. In December 1949, President Chaim Weizmann and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion sent telegrams to President Sukarno and Foreign

Minister-later deputy premier-Muhammad Hatta congratulating them on the Treaty of Independence with the Netherlands. In January 1950, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett sent a telegram to his counterpart, Muhammad Hatta, informing him that Israel had decided to grant Indonesia full recognition. Hatta responded to both Sharett and Ben-Gurion with thanks, but did not offer reciprocal sentiments in regard to diplomatic recognition. Sensing Indonesia's evasiveness, Sharett wrote to Hatta suggesting that a goodwill mission be sent to Indonesia, to which Foreign Minister Hatta responded courteously in May 1950, but suggested that such a mission be postponed to a later time.³

Indonesian reluctance toward dealing with Israel grew more pronounced as Sukarno's government became more authoritarian and left-leaning in character. An early indication of Indonesia's pro-Arab, anti-Israeli policy surfaced in June 1952 when items in the Arab and Pakistani press quoting the Indonesian news agency, Antara, reported that the Indonesian government had no intention of recognizing Israel because the majority in Indonesia was Muslim and because of the support that Arab states had given Indonesia during its fight for independence.⁴

The situation deteriorated further. In February 1953, Reuven Barkat, head of the Political Department of the Histadrut-the peak body of Israeli labor unions-could still visit Indonesia and meet with a number of public figures. About the same time, the Indonesian ambassador-later foreign minister-to London, Subandrio, approached his Israeli counterpart, Eliahu Elath, telling him that his government had instructed him to take a private, unofficial visit to Israel to learn what Israel could contribute to the development of Asian countries generally, and Indonesia in particular, and to examine the background of the Arab-Israeli tensions. The visit was set for March 1953, but it never took place. The secretary-general of the Indonesian Socialist Party visited Israel in July 1953 as the guest of Barkat, but it proved to be the last of such contacts. In November 1953, Indonesia ceased granting entrance visas to Israeli citizens, initially to those with diplomatic passports and subsequently to all Israelis.⁵

In 1953, Sukarno began organizing a conference of Asian and African countries, which was eventually held in Bandung, West Java, in April 1955 without Israel's participation.⁶ Indonesia and Pakistan resolutely opposed Israel's participation and were able to convince the governments of Burma, India, and Ceylon, which had initially supported Israel's taking part, to change their positions. A second meeting of Colombo Plan states⁷ was held in New Delhi on 12-14 November 1956, at Indonesia's instigation, in response to the Suez Crisis. In Indonesia, the British-French attack prompted considerable anger toward Britain, France, and Israel and sympathy for Egypt, whose nationalization of the Suez Canal was supported by Indonesia. On 2 November, the Indonesian parliament unanimously condemned the attacks on Egypt and recommended breaking diplomatic ties with Britain and France. There was a flurry of anti-Israeli declarations by many Indonesian leaders during the Sukarno years, a practice that cut across party lines. The exception was the Socialist Party, which, while wanting to maintain contacts with Israel, carried little weight. Indonesia fully engaged in the clamor for anti-Israeli declarations in the United Nations and other international forums. Muslim solidarity was far from the only reason for Indonesian hostility; in fact, it appears to have resulted primarily from Indonesia's need to maintain Arab support on the issue of Western Guinea (Western Irian), an area Indonesia wanted to annex but that was still under Dutch rule. The Indonesian diplomat whom Israelis encountered admitted candidly that the number of Arab votes in the United Nations-ten at the time-far outnumbered Israel's one vote.⁸

The Suharto Period (1966-1998)

After Sukarno's effective removal from power in October 1965, General Suharto moved to put Indonesia's policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict on a more moderate course. By this time, however, support for the Arab cause and a disinclination to pursue formal relations with Israel had been broadly institutionalized in Indonesian foreign policy. The Indonesian government continued to express sympathy for the Arab position and make the now standard criticisms of Israel in diplomatic forums. Indonesia, however, called for a more pragmatic and moderate approach by the Arabs, a stance that clearly contrasted with the majority of Arab nations at the time.

This tendency first appeared in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War. The Israel Defense Forces' defeat of adversaries on all fronts is said to have impressed the higher echelons of the Indonesian army. Indonesia called for direct talks between Israel and its Arab neighbors to resolve the outstanding issues and suggested that the United Nations establish international supervision of Jerusalem to ensure freedom for all religions. Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik, both in public statements and informal contacts with Israeli representatives, said the Arabs should respect Israel's aspiration for territorial and national recognition. In private channels, he advised Israel to simply accept Indonesia's official pro-Arab statements as designed primarily for internal consumption, and explained that Arab propaganda about Israel had a pervasive effect on Indonesian public opinion. The subtle change in Indonesia's approach after Suharto came to power did not go unnoticed. In order to ease the concern of Arab countries and of radical Muslim circles in Indonesia itself, during Saudi King Faisal's visit to Indonesia in June 1970, President Suharto restated his unequivocal support for the lawful Arab "struggle" against "Israeli aggression." In 1972, Foreign Minister Malik toured a number of Arab countries and announced that Indonesia would not object to the PLO opening an office in Jakarta. In fact, such an office did not open until 1990; senior army officers were concerned that a PLO office would attract agitators and extreme Muslim groups, and the government may also have thought it would make it harder to conduct unofficial dealings with Israel, particularly in military matters. In contrast, neighboring Malaysia moved quickly to grant the PLO full diplomatic status. Yasser Arafat's first visit to Jakarta occurred only in July 1984. He was received warmly enough, although by this time Suharto had already visited [Iran](#) and various Arab states twice and significantly increased the number of Indonesian diplomatic offices in Arab countries.

Indonesia took a somewhat neutral stand on the 1978 Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. At a meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Fez in May 1979, Indonesia abstained-along with Malaysia and Bangladesh-on the vote to suspend Egypt's membership in the organization. In a pragmatic sense it seemed that, albeit passively, Indonesia supported the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord.⁹

Suharto kept a tight lid on Islamic political activity during most of his years in power. The main safety valve for Islamic political expression was one of two officially sanctioned opposition parties, the Islamic-oriented United Development Party (PPP). Neither opposition party was allowed sufficient autonomy to seriously challenge the stranglehold of Suharto's party apparatus, Golkar. The other safety valve was to adhere, at least officially, to a foreign policy with pan-Islamic and pro-Arab underpinnings and so to deprive Islamist radicals of a valuable line of criticism that might have enabled them to mobilize broad social support.

Suharto and his senior leadership were pragmatic about maintaining their firm grip on power, which was at all times based on ensuring the preeminence of the Indonesian armed forces. This imperative led to a series of back-channel transactions between the Indonesian army and Israel. Indeed, press reports surfaced that in September 1979 Indonesia signed an agreement to buy twenty-eight Skyhawk aircraft and eleven helicopters from the Israeli air force surplus. By 1982, Indonesia had admitted publicly that it had had dealings with Israel via a third party-the United States was not named but was clearly implied-while at the same time Indonesian diplomats continued to publicly denounce Israel's annexation of the [Golan Heights](#) and military foray into [Lebanon](#). Yet the door opened still wider when, in late 1983, restrictions on Indonesian passports for visits to Israel were scrapped.

In the late 1980s, Suharto decided strategically to show a greater appreciation of Islamic matters and essentially co-opt Muslim groups into a more cooperative relationship. He officially recognized the "state of Palestine," and the above-mentioned PLO office finally opened in Jakarta in 1990. The Suharto family began living a more Islamic lifestyle, including a Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in 1991 that was accompanied by extensive media coverage.¹⁰ By 1992, Indonesia was acting as chair of the NAM and the possibility of negative reaction from Arab states ruled out Jakarta normalizing relations with Israel. Nevertheless, some small but notable developments occurred: the granting of entry visas to Israelis was further relaxed, Indonesian journalists were permitted to visit Israel, postal and direct telephone connections were established, and there was a general softening in Indonesian statements at international forums.

In June 1993, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and his Indonesian counterpart Ali Alatas met informally at the UN Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. During their brief conversation, Peres said

Israel was interested in establishing open diplomatic relations with Indonesia. The Indonesian foreign minister reportedly responded that normalizing relations would become possible if there was progress in peace talks and the Arab-Israeli conflict was more or less resolved. Israel's ambassador to Singapore, Daniel Megido, followed up on the Peres-Alatas encounter with informal meetings of his own with colleagues in Jakarta from the Department of Foreign Affairs. Under questioning by the Indonesian press, Alatas was forced to deny any knowledge of such meetings and downplay the importance of his own chance encounter with Peres. Significantly, however, Indonesia's defense minister, Edi Sudrajat, said Indonesia would consider normalizing relations with Israel provided, of course, that the peace process went well and that Palestinian interests were not compromised. He added that if all the Arab states were to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, Indonesia would certainly do likewise.¹¹

The signing of the Declaration of Principles (DoP) between Israel and the PLO several months later in September 1993 appeared to open a new door in relations between Israel and Muslim Asia. After all, not only had China established full diplomatic relations with Israel eighteen months earlier, so too had India, home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations. Moreover, if there had earlier been signs that Suharto was at pains not to upset Arab nations during Indonesia's bid for the chairmanship of the NAM, having secured the chair he was clearly much more relaxed. Consequently, while Rabin's historic but low-key visit to Jakarta three weeks after a visit by Arafat was surprising, it was not wholly unexpected. Both leaders called on Suharto in his capacity as NAM chairman and both did so on their way back to the Middle East from a visit to Beijing. Suharto kept news of Rabin's visit secret until his plane was safely parked on the tarmac in Singapore four hours later, and Rabin's motorcade from the Halim military airport to Suharto's residence was a quiet affair without flashing lights and sirens, though the visit was later reported in the press.

It appeared as if privately Suharto was exploring the possibility of strengthening relations with Israel. As was typical of Suharto, however, the signals were ambiguous and contradictory. In the same month as Rabin's visit, Indonesian military commander General Faisal Tanjung was forced to deny claims that the Indonesian military had acquired Israeli hardware. In the following months, pressure from hardline Islamist groups led to protests against the visit of four senior journalists to Israel and the banning of the film *Schindler's List*. Then toward the end of 1994, the Indonesian Department of Foreign Affairs announced that Indonesia had begun to allow Israeli tourists to visit, only for the Indonesian director-general of tourism to deny such a policy shift several days later. But 1994 also saw the visit of a large delegation from the Israeli Chamber of Commerce and, separately, an official visit from the director of the Israel Customs Service to discuss trade arrangements. The Indonesian press had earlier reported that the value of Indonesian exports had grown from a negligible amount in 1991 to more than \$1.7 million in 1992.¹² Israeli trade delegations continued to visit Indonesia in 1995 and 1996, apparently with the blessings of the Suharto government. By this stage, several thousand Indonesians were traveling to Israel each year to visit Islamic and Christian holy sites with the full backing of the Indonesian government. At the United Nations 50th anniversary celebration in New York in October 1995, Prime Minister Rabin and President Suharto met for a second time and agreed on the need to move toward normalizing their countries' relations, beginning with improved trade ties.

Abdurrahman Wahid

Arguably the most significant development after Rabin's visit to Jakarta in October 1993 was the visit of Indonesia's most influential Islamic leader, Abdurrahman Wahid, to Jerusalem one year later. As leader of NU, Indonesia's—and the world's—largest Islamic mass organization, Abdurrahman's acceptance of an invitation from Shimon Peres to witness the peace accord ceremony between Israel and Jordan on 25 October 1994 was highly significant. Of course, the visit looks even more significant in light of Abdurrahman becoming Indonesia's first democratically elected president five years later. But even apart from Abdurrahman's public prominence, his relationship with Israel and with Judaism warrants attention for what it tells us about the development of Islamic thought in Indonesia and about the potential of Islam generally to contribute to building understanding and consolidating respect and tolerance between peoples.¹³

As we have seen, one of the key factors militating against developing relations between Israel and Muslim-majority nations in Asia, home to most of the world's Muslims, is the fear of agitation by conservative and reactionary Islamist groups protesting closer ties with a nation long demonized in their internal discourses. Consequently, the impression is given that Islam is a source of problems and that Muslim leaders will invariably play a spoiling role. The example of Abdurrahman Wahid is a valuable reminder that this need not be so.

Born in 1940, Abdurrahman Wahid is the eldest son of the much-admired nationalist leader Wahid Hasyim, an official national hero, leading light in NU, minister of religious affairs, and friend of Sukarno. Both of Wahid's grandfathers, Hasyim Asy'ari on his father's side and Bisri Syansuri on his mother's, were founders of NU and respected leaders of the nationalist movement. Although not quite as progressive as the remarkable Wahid Hasyim, both of the older men were regarded as innovative and enlightened *ulama*, or religious scholars, who pioneered new approaches to teaching in their East Java *pesantren* (residential *madrasah*, or traditional religious schools). After Abdurrahman Wahid graduated from his *pesantren* education in Central and East Java, he was sent to study at the venerable Al Azhar Islamic University in Cairo. Quickly tiring of the rote-learning approach he encountered at Al Azhar, Abdurrahman spent most of his time in Cairo reading Western literature in the American University library, watching French cinema, and engaging in long discussions in the city's coffee shops. It made for a great informal education but did nothing for his studies at Al Azhar. In 1966 he transferred to the University of Baghdad, then regarded as the best modern university in the Arab world, where he completed a four-year degree in Arabic literature and Islamic history.

While studying in Baghdad, Abdurrahman worked part-time as a translator cum letter-writer at a textile export company, side by side with an [Iraqi](#) Jew named Ramin. Abdurrahman knew very little about Judaism and Jewish history when he arrived in Baghdad, but after four years of daily conversations with Ramin he had developed a deep respect for Jewish religious thought and culture. Upon returning to Indonesia, Abdurrahman fell in love with the novels of the American Jewish writer Chaim Potok, seeing parallels with his own community in the conservative religious community described in works such as *My Name Is Asher Lev*.

Always an idiosyncratic and original thinker, Abdurrahman's personal engagement with Jewish thought caused him to react critically to the simplistic and prejudicial notions about Israel and the Jews that he encountered in Muslim society. Consequently, for the past thirty years he has made a point of speaking out against anti-Semitic thinking and ignorance about Israel and Judaism. And he has made numerous visits to Israel, the earliest taking place in 1980. It is not surprising, then, that he was quick to accept Peres's invitation to visit Israel in October 1994 and then in March 1997 to join the Board of Governors of the Shimon Peres Peace Center. Nor is it remarkable that criticism about being pro-Zionist by Amien Rais, his longtime nemesis and leader of Muhammadiyah, or negative comments by Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, did not stop Abdurrahman from traveling to Israel in October 1997 to speak at the Peres Peace Center.

What is remarkable is that despite the controversy that erupted after his October 1994 visit, Abdurrahman was elected to a third five-year term as executive chairman of NU just weeks after returning from Israel. Although in the 1980s Abdurrahman had enjoyed a reasonable working relationship with Suharto, since 1990 the relationship had turned increasingly antagonistic. Abdurrahman was particularly critical of Suharto's new ploy of co-opting and appeasing both social-conservative and radical Islamists and warned of the dangers of growing sectarian sentiment. But he was also generally critical of the Suharto regime's record of human rights abuses and rampant corruption. He made full use of the measure of protection conferred by his status as NU leader to boldly confront Suharto in a manner that few others dared attempt. So when Abdurrahman announced after returning from Israel that he had decided to reverse his previous decision to retire from leadership after a decade at the helm of NU, and that he was running for a third five-year term at the November five-yearly congress of NU, Suharto was infuriated. Abdurrahman justified his change of heart by explaining that he expected the next five years would see the end of the Suharto regime and that NU would be called upon to play a critical role in the difficult transition that followed. Suharto threw everything he could against Abdurrahman's bid for reelection; aside from attempting to buy votes for his chosen candidate and using the military to intimidate Abdurrahman's supporters, Suharto sponsored a virulent campaign against him in the press. But despite heated invective

against him that played heavily on his "Zionist sympathies," the over three hundred branch delegates voted decisively to reelect Abdurrahman. It appeared that socially conservative though it was, anti-Zionist arguments and naked anti-Semitism held little sway over the NU community.

It would be beyond this article's scope to detail the remarkable circumstances that saw Abdurrahman elected president by the parliamentary electoral college in October 1999, or to describe how his exaggerated reformist ambitions-reining in the military and tackling a corrupt business elite, maverick leadership style, and inability to convert moral capital into political capital-his party, PKB, held but 10 percent of the seats in parliament-saw his presidency end less than two years later. Suffice it to say that when he suddenly found himself president, Abdurrahman launched a bold program of translating his long-held reformist aspirations into reality, including working to promote relations with Israel.

Three days after becoming president, Abdurrahman traveled to Bali to fulfill a longstanding commitment to address an international business conference. There he took the opportunity to say that Indonesia should follow the lead of some Arab nations and establish commercial legations in Israel. Several weeks later he attended the convocation of the World Conference on Religion and Peace in Amman, Jordan, stopping by in the Persian Gulf to quietly explain his policy of engaging with Israel. While in Amman he spoke privately of his hope of flying to Jerusalem that week.¹⁴ He was talked out of visiting Israel only at the last moment, and did not get another opportunity to visit during his presidency. He did, however, receive various delegations from Israeli government agencies, including visits by the directors-general of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the Foreign Ministry, and from pro-Israeli groups such as the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC).

After being forced out of office Abdurrahman made some further visits to Israel, including one in June 2003 in which he joined Mikhail Gorbachev and F.W. de Klerk at a major international conference in Netanya and addressed an interfaith gathering in Jerusalem alongside Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron. His links have always been strongest with Shimon Peres and his Labor Party, but he also has friends in other parties, such as Likud's Dan Meridor. In his June 2003 visit he was glad to meet Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and, together with Gorbachev and de Klerk, enjoyed a frank and protracted late-night discussion with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in which they lobbied Sharon to engage Arafat in the peace process despite the acknowledged difficulties that entailed.¹⁵ The previous year he addressed the annual convention of the AJC in Washington and spoke to AIJAC groups in Melbourne and Sydney. In December 2003, Abdurrahman returned to Israel to participate in a symposium on the Middle East Peace initiative.

Conclusion

As has already been noted, like other Muslim-majority nations in Asia, Indonesia's initial reluctance about diplomatic relations with Israel arose out of solidarity with other former European colonies in the Arab world and a more pragmatic concern about the power of the Arab vote in the NAM. More recently it is fear of harsh responses from domestic Islamist groups that has restrained Indonesia from normalizing relations with Israel. Change in this area clearly depends on a successful conclusion to the peace process, since Muslim Asia is certain to follow the lead of the Arab countries when it comes to relations with Israel. Nevertheless, trade flows and people-to-people ties between Israel and Indonesia have steadily improved since the Oslo DoP was signed in 1993. The lesson to be drawn from the experience of Abdurrahman Wahid is that people-to-people links and in particular academic exchanges are much more important than is commonly realized. Liberal Islamic intellectuals such as Abdurrahman Wahid and Djohan Effendi might not be typical of mainstream Muslim society in Indonesia, but they do have broad influence and have helped develop hundreds of link-minded younger intellectuals and dozens of progressive Islamic NGOs. Building ties with such thinkers and civil society groups in Indonesia will not eliminate the influence of radical minorities or stop the circulation of anti-Semitic propaganda, but it will help counter those negative influences and foster genuine understanding and friendship.

Notes

1. For detailed discussions on radical Islamism in Indonesia, see Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Greg Barton, *Indonesia's Struggle: Jemaah Islamiyah and the Soul of Islam* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004).
2. The first half of this article draws extensively from Moshe Yegar, "The Republic of Indonesia," in Efraim Karsh and P. R. Kumar, eds., *Islam and Israel* (London: Routledge, forthcoming). A very useful commentary on the issues discussed in this article can be found in Leo Suryadinata, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy under Soeharto: Aspiring to International Leadership* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1996), Ch. 10.
3. Ya'acov Shimoni to director-general, 5 December 1949, ISA/MFA 2554/ A14; Walter Eytan to Australian minister in Tel Aviv, 28 December 1949, *ibid.*, 2391/36; memo on "Indonesia" by Asian Division to director-general, 13 March 1950, *ibid.*, 2391/32; Prime Minister Mohammed Hatta to David Ben-Gurion, 10 January 1950, *ibid.*, 232/20; Prime Minister Hatta to Foreign Minister Sharett, 13 January 1950, and Sharett to Hatta, 6 May 1950, *ibid.*, 2414/8; Sharett to Hatta, 22 March 1950, *ibid.*, 2559/7; *Documents of Foreign Policy of Israel*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Israel State Archives, 1986), pp. 481-82, 508-09. Official sources are cited in the prepublication manuscript by Yegar, "Republic of Indonesia."
4. Asia Division to director-general, 10 July 1952, ISA/MFA 2559/7; Ya'acov Shimoni, *Asia Today* (Tel Aviv: Izreel, 1961), p. 236 (Hebrew).
5. *Davar* (Tel Aviv), 10 February 1953; Asia Division memo on "Indonesia and Israel," 4 April 1954, ISA/MFA 2559/6; report on "Israel and Asia," No. 20, 1 September 1954, *ibid.*, 2561/7; and on "Israel and Asia," Asia Division, 13 October 1957, *ibid.*, 3093/23.
6. The gathering was the forerunner of what later became the Non-Aligned Movement in 1962.
7. The Colombo Plan organization was established in May 1950 after a meeting of Commonwealth foreign ministers in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and became fully operational in July 1951. It focuses on social and economic development in the emerging states of South and Southeast Asia.
8. Research Division memo on "Indonesian Statement Concerning Israel," 26 April 1956, and Asia Division to Israeli Legation in Bern, "Israel-Indonesia Relations," 20 June 1956, ISA/MFA 2559/7; director of Asia Division to Legation in Tokyo, "Conversation with the Representatives from Indonesia," 7 December 1957, *ibid.*, 3092/24; "Weekly Survey: Asia," No. 115, 23 August 1962, *ibid.*, 3416/9; Asian Division memo on "Israel in Asia," No. 11/67, November 1967, *ibid.*, 421/13; Russell H. Fifield, *The Diplomacy of Southeast Asia 1945-1958* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), pp. 116-18.
9. Michael Leifer, "The Islamic Factor in Indonesia's Foreign Policy," in Adeed Dawisha, ed., *Islam in Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 155.
10. "The Long Winding Road to Diplomacy," *Indonesian Business Weekly*, 4 March 1994, pp. 36-37; Leifer, "Islamic Factor," p. 156; Adam Schwarz, *A Nation in Waiting: Indonesia in the 1990s* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994).
11. *Sunday Times*, 27 June 1993; *Jakarta Post*, 28 June 1993.
12. Yegar, "Republic of Indonesia."
13. For a biographic study of Abdurrahman Wahid's life and thought, see Greg Barton, *Abdurrahman Wahid, Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President: A View from the Inside* (Sydney: University of Hawaii Press and UNSW Press, 2002). 14. Conversation between Abdurrahman Wahid and Greg Barton in Amman, November 1999. 15. Conversation between Abdurrahman Wahid and Greg Barton in Jerusalem, June 2003.