UNVEILING INDONESIA’S KEY ROLE: Updates and Progress in Addressing Palestine-Israel Conflict

Interview with Bagus Hendraning Kobarsiyh

Bagus Hendraning Kobarsiyh is the Director of Middle-Eastern Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia (MoFA). With extensive experience in diplomatic service, he has undertaken various roles, including serving as the Head of Sub-Directorate IV in the Directorate of South and Central Asian Affairs at MoFA; Minister Counsellor for Political and Economic Affairs at the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Rabat, Morocco. His academic credentials include a Master’s in International Relations and a Bachelor’s in Political Science, both earned from the University of Indonesia.

Interviewed by Yopi Irianto Panut | yopi@fpcindonesia.org

Yopi Irianto Panut is a foreign policy analyst associated with Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI). He focuses on diverse research domains, including Indonesian foreign policy, regionalism, security issues, and trade and investment. Before joining FPCI, Yopi worked as an Assistant to the Trade Attaché at the Indonesian Embassy in the Hague, the Netherlands in 2022 and as a Research Assistant at Leiden University in 2021.

BACKGROUND

The following interview with Bagus Hendraning Kobarsiyh, Director for Middle-Eastern Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explores Indonesia’s policy and strategy concerning the Palestine-Israel conflict. The discussion is structured into three segments, encompassing humanitarian efforts, political aspects and contentious politics.

The segment on contentious politics specifically delves into how social movements play a crucial role in this conflict, even influencing the framing of policy-making. This underscores the significance of political opportunities, resource mobilization structures, and the dynamics of contention perspectives.

HUMANITARIAN

1. In light of the ongoing conflict with numerous casualties and extensive destruction in Palestine, could you provide the latest updates and enlighten us on the current situation on the ground?

The situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains highly volatile. The death toll in Gaza has surpassed 22,000 with 70% being women and children. The conflict has expanded beyond Gaza, creating heightened tensions throughout Palestine. This situation is an indescribable nightmare and the prospects for the survival of its residents are diminishing with each day that goes by.

Israel capitalizes on global attention directed at Gaza by implementing harsh policies in the West Bank, including the expansion of illegal settlements, provocations in holy places, and increased arrests, conflicts, and even killings. This has created a more complex and fragile situation on the ground, making the resolution of the conflict challenging.

I think the ongoing humanitarian crisis is not an unintended consequence of the conflict; rather, it is a deliberate outcome of Israel’s implemented policy. Those responsible for this approach view creating a humanitarian crisis for Palestinians as a legitimate tactic to exert pressure on Hamas. The intentional closure of crossings and the limited provision of aid, insufficient to meet the basic needs of civilians, can be likened to a deliberate strategy of causing starvation among the population.

What happened in Gaza now is three things. First, humanitarian catastrophe; shortages of food, fuel, water, and medicine. Second, the circle of disinformation that is full of Israeli propaganda (despite much resistance they face on the ground from Palestinians who remain resilient, preventing a swift Israeli conquest and resulting in a significant human and economic cost for Israel), for its restructuration and military deployment. Third, Gaza has become a “hell on earth”, especially for those “forcibly displaced persons”, as described by Indonesia’s Foreign Minister.

The plight of 1.5 million Gazans, living in difficult conditions, is exacerbated by the hope of Israel that these Gazans will never return, coupled with Egypt’s reluctance...
to allow entry for these people due to legal complications and economic concerns that further worsens their situation, despite unofficial medical treatment for Palestinians in Egyptian hospitals.

Moreover, the conflict has started to spill over into other regions. The Houthis targeting Israel-bound ships in the Persian Gulf adds another dimension, further complicating an already intricate situation. The multifaceted nature of the conflict demands a comprehensive and careful approach for any hope of resolution.

This Israeli abusive behavior triggers stronger resistance among the Palestinian population, as the tension is widening. Reports from Middle Eastern and Palestinian Ambassadors highlight the broader impact of Israeli policies, Palestinians currently focus more on the collective struggle and no longer domestically between Hamas and PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization).

2. As per the press release, H.E. Retno Marsudi mentioned Indonesia's intention to dispatch a floating hospital to Gaza. Can you provide the latest information on the progress and current status of this initiative?

Indonesia prepares its first hospital ship for Gaza, the Radjjiman Wedycdringrat fleet. It stands as a testament to Indonesia's commitment to making a meaningful impact in crises and preparedness for humanitarian missions. The cooperation to realize its first departure is dynamically progressing, with coordination efforts being carried out with the Indonesian Embassy in Cairo, Egyptian and Palestinian Ambassadors, and other ministries.

The ship is self-sustainable at sea for 30 days and is equipped to carry three helicopters, enhancing its efficiency in providing critical medical assistance and aid to those in need. Boasting a length of approximately 124 meters, and a displacement of 7,300 tons, can be navigated at a speed of 18 knots. The vessel has been readied for departure, meticulously prepared to comply with the regulations outlined in the Geneva Convention IV and the San Remo Manual on armed conflicts at sea.

However, despite the commendable commitment, the logistics of delivering aid to Gaza pose significant challenges. Firstly, Egypt, willing to facilitate aid through either land or sea routes, faces hurdles stemming from the utilization of a military installation during the previous delivery to Al-Arish Airport, this constraint impeded the possibility of overnight stays. Secondly, compounding the situation, the nearest Egyptian port vital for the operation is not fully operational, compelling the use of Port Said, located 300 km away from Rafah.

As of the current status, permissions for Indonesia’s hospital ship to enter Egyptian waters are pending, and waiting for clearance from the authority on the ground, mirroring similar circumstances for France and Italy about their respective ships. The bureaucratic processes are being closely scrutinized, emphasizing the collective determination of the nations involved to expedite the necessary approvals and ensure the timely arrival of humanitarian aid at its intended destination.

3. Indonesia is active in sending aid to Palestine both from KBRI and the IndonesiaAid. What are the differences between sending aid from KBRI and IndonesiaAid?

In the ongoing commitment to providing aid to Palestine, Indonesia is actively involved in sending support through both its Embassy (KBRI) and IndonesiaAid initiatives. The latest update highlights President Jokowi’s steadfast dedication, evident in the dispatch of 51.5 tonnes of aid. This comprehensive assistance includes vital supplies such as food, medical equipment, blankets, and tents, all reflecting Indonesia’s unwavering commitment to alleviating the severe humanitarian crisis in the region.

Indonesian Aid, facilitated by the International Development Cooperation Fund (LDKPI) utilising funds from Indonesia’s state budget (APBN), involves collaboration with various governmental bodies. The process of sending IndonesiaAid requires a series of meetings, approvals, and a clearly defined type of aid before it can be dispatched.

Aid to Palestine is delivered to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) through the Egyptian Red Crescent. Subsequently, UNRWA distributes assistance to the affected Palestinian communities, and this initiative receives full support from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Finance of Indonesia. This commitment is in line with Indonesia’s triple contribution pledge to UNRWA.

In terms of differences, a notable distinction lies in the flexibility of aid sent through KBRI. This channel allows for the reception of a diverse range of contributions from donors such as MER-C, International Humanitarian Alliance, and other national social enterprises such as Kita Bisa. However, to prevent complications, it is imperative to provide clear information to donors about the specific aid needed and identify goods that are prohibited by Israel from entering the region.

The Israeli government does not permit aid in the following form; gas cylinders, as it is perceived to have the potential use as weaponry. Electronic equipment is subject to specific limitations and solar panels are...
currently allowed, albeit in a highly restricted manner.

This proactive communication ensures a smoother process and minimizes potential obstacles in the delivery of much-needed assistance to the Palestinian people. The combination of efforts from KBRI and IndonesiaAid underscores Indonesia’s multifaceted approach to providing timely and impactful support to those affected by the ongoing crisis in Gaza.

POLITICS

4. Indonesia’s Foreign Minister was chosen as one of OIC’s special envoys alongside foreign ministers from some Islamic countries. What is their message and what is the effectiveness of such a measure?

The primary objective is to engage in shuttle diplomacy aimed at catalyzing international action to halt the conflict in Palestine and work towards achieving a comprehensive peace agreement. This diplomatic initiative places special emphasis on engaging with the veto-holding members, but also other relevant actors of the United Nations.

The envoys have three key goals to accomplish. Firstly, they aim to persuade the veto holders, appealing to the shared sense of humanity, to take concrete actions to put an end to the violence in Gaza. Secondly, their efforts are directed towards facilitating the optimal entry of aid into Gaza, addressing the urgent humanitarian needs of the affected population. Lastly, the envoys seek to address the root cause of the problem by advancing a two-state solution, recognizing that a lasting resolution requires addressing the trust deficit between Israel and the Arab world.

The diplomatic efforts led by the special envoys represent a proactive stance by Indonesia and its partners within the OIC, demonstrating a commitment to finding diplomatic solutions and promoting stability in the region. The success of these diplomatic endeavors hinges on the willingness of key stakeholders to engage in constructive dialogue and take tangible steps towards a sustainable and just resolution.

Despite the undeniable challenges, Indonesia’s commitment to finding workable solutions is showcased through its engagement in diplomatic efforts. The international community, especially the OIC special envoys, faces the tough task of navigating regional complexities and creating an environment that fosters trust-building.

In drawing parallels to historical diplomatic efforts, Indonesia cites the case of South Africa when apartheid was abolished in 1993. This historical context underscores Indonesia’s belief in the potential effectiveness of diplomatic engagement and dialogue to bring about positive change.

5. Is it possible for Hamas to sit and talk with Israel to realize a two-state solution?

The possibility of Hamas engaging in direct talks with Israel to realize a two-state solution faces significant challenges rooted in the existing lack of trust between the two parties. Despite recent gestures, such as the willingness to release hostages, the deep-seated distrust poses a formidable obstacle to meaningful negotiations.

Another factor influencing the situation is the perceived inadequacy of the United Nations (UN) in addressing the concerns of the Palestinian people. The legitimacy of the UN has come into question, with criticisms of its responsiveness and effectiveness. The swift coalition assembly against Saddam Hussein, in contrast to the perceived inaction regarding Israel’s oppression, has raised doubts about the UN’s ability to uphold justice impartially.

The recent bombing incident during the evacuation, leading to an uproar in Middle Eastern parliaments, further underscores the urgency of addressing these concerns. There is a genuine fear that diminishing faith in the UN among Arab countries could lead to norm-setting that undermines the institution’s credibility, potentially jeopardizing its role in resolving conflicts.

Moreover, the disillusionment among Palestinian youth, who feel deprived of political rights and development, contributes to a reluctance to engage in dialogues with Israel. The palpable frustration reflects the broader sentiment that such discussions may not yield tangible benefits or improvements in their political circumstances.

From another perspective, a significant challenge to the realization of a two-state solution is the apparent lack of good faith on the part of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his people. This scepticism is evident in his presentation of a Middle East map when delivering his speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), conspicuously omitting Palestine. This action speaks volumes about the current leadership’s reluctance to embrace a vision of coexistence through a two-state solution.

The exclusion of Palestine from Netanyahu’s depiction raises concerns about the Israeli government’s commitment to a fair and equitable resolution. The gesture not only reflects a lack of acknowledgement of the historical and cultural significance of Palestine but also signals a potential hurdle to any diplomatic initiatives seeking a peaceful coexistence through the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

In summary, the path to a two-state solution requires a crucial element of Hamas and the PLO reconciliation. I am convinced that achieving a two-state solution needs the active involvement of Hamas, emphasizing the imperative for internal Palestinian unity. This foundation is essential before overcoming deep-rooted trust issues, fostering
internal Palestinian unity, addressing the grievances of the disillusioned youth, and reevaluating the effectiveness and legitimacy of international institutions such as the UN. The complexities of these challenges necessitate a comprehensive and collaborative approach for any realistic progress toward a durable peace in the region.

6. What do you think are the most feasible solutions and alternatives for this ongoing conflict?

While recent efforts have shown positive signs, we need more steps to address the complexities of the situation. Firstly, establishing a caucus or task force outside the current UN framework can provide a platform for more targeted and concrete actions. This could be instrumental in circumventing bureaucratic hurdles and accelerating humanitarian policies.

Secondly, forging closer relationships with relevant groups, following the example of Qatar hosting Hamas and the Taliban, accompanied by its influential Al Jazeera media, presents an avenue to exert substantial influence. Such strategic alliances have the potential to apply effective pressure on the international community to expedite humanitarian initiatives.

Looking ahead, I see hope that Russia and China emerge as potential allies, given their receptiveness to the concerns of Islamic and Arab countries, albeit driven by their interests. Leveraging these diplomatic relationships could create opportunities for peace negotiations and facilitate aid delivery to those in need.

Arab and Muslim countries possess considerable leverage in influencing international actions. Noteworthy instances, such as Jordan's threat to cut diplomatic ties with Israel over specific incidents, demonstrate the potential impact of diplomatic pressure. The downgrading of relations with Israel, especially by Muslim countries with existing ties, could serve as a potent tool to press for the withdrawal of the Israeli military from Gaza.

In conclusion, the suggested steps aim to navigate the intricacies of the situation, leveraging diplomatic channels, and forming strategic alliances to expedite humanitarian efforts. The potential influence of countries like Russia and China, combined with the collective strength of Arab and Muslim nations, holds promise for advancing towards lasting peace and stability in the region.

CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

7. “After the October 7 attack, there was overwhelming support for Palestine in European capital cities and major cities in the United States, a response not witnessed during the previous Gaza War in 2014. What are examples of contentious politics undertaken by parties sympathetic to Palestine that could lead to these significant mobilizations?”

The Palestine-Israel issue extends beyond religious dimensions. We remember correctly when President Soekarno excluded Israel from the Asia-Africa Conference, and many national leaders, including non-Islamic figures such as Moh. Hatta, Mr. Sonarto, Ali Sastroamidjojo, and Syahrir, viewed Israel as a form of colonialism, and they are all nationalists.

The world realised that various incidents were not even Islam-related. You might have heard about the Munich Massacre, Sabra and Shatila, and the bombings in Tunisia. George Habas from the Socialist Front (PFLP) committed the Munich Massacre. Abu Dida is not a cleric and Hanan Ashrawi, a Coptic Christian vehemently opposes Zionism. The Al-Jazeera reporter shot dead earlier was also a Christian.

Some might think that diplomacy bears no fruit, but amazingly, 130 countries are already hosting Palestine embassies. Support for Palestine extends beyond Islamic activists; humanitarians, socialists, campus activists, epistemic communities, freedom writers, and even artists stand with Palestine. In the U.S., some Jews disassociate from Zionism, and activists face danger for opposing Zionist actions.

International voices, including Amnesty International, equate Zionism with racist apartheid, akin to the apartheid that happened before in South Africa. Another series of staunchest supporters of Palestine is Ireland in Europe, as they constantly pressure the British minister and urge EU leaders to call for a ceasefire, coupled with its focal movement of Trócaire that campaigns for the protection of Palestinian rights and for Israel to uphold the international law.

The world increasingly considers the Palestine-Israel conflict as a humanitarian, freedom, and decolonization issue. Israel's claim of self-defense loses legitimacy when considering the destruction of hospitals, schools, and other social infrastructure. While Hamas still engages in guerrilla warfare against Israel Defense Forces.
8. “There are civil societies in Israel that support settler agendas, but others, such as B’Tselem, Jewish Voice for Peace, and more, are pro-human rights. According to Kemlu’s analysis, what are the dynamics of contentious politics within Israel?”

While we lack formal research on this matter, informal discussions, particularly those echoed by Gus Dur (President Abdurrahman Wahid), shed light on the distinction between Jewish people and ardent Zionists. Within this context, there are emerging suggestions advocating for Indonesia to establish contact with such groups to initiate negotiations with Israel. The pivotal question, however, revolves around the potential efficacy of forging connections with these specific groups.

Acknowledging the need to comprehensively map Israeli societies, there arises a delicate concern about public discourse, given the diverse nature of our populace. Any discussion on this matter must not inadvertently convey the impression that Indonesia is recognizing Israel. A cautious and strategic approach becomes essential to discern groups supporting Israel from those opposing it, aligning with the prudent steps taken by Iran.

Examining the impact of applying pressure on Israel, recent generations in the country have expressed weariness, exemplified by instances like the U20 World Cup rejections. This sentiment reflects a broader perception of Israel as an unwelcome nation, influenced significantly by the actions of its government.

Concurring with your viewpoint, it becomes evident that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should dedicate a concerted effort to engage with these groups in the future. Fortunately, we possess the necessary resources for such endeavours, considering the substantial number of Indonesians, including those affiliated with Islamist groups, who have studied in Israel and possess a nuanced understanding of Hebrew.

9. Does Indonesia have plans to engage with Palestinian civil societies that opened their branch here, such as the BDS Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement?

In our pursuit of effective communication strategies, there is a recognition that a less formal and official approach is preferable. The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, renowned for its efficacy in countering Zionist initiatives, offers grassroots participation avenues through actions such as refraining from purchasing Israeli products and divesting from related investments.

Advocating for the establishment of dialogue and potential collaboration in research and discussions, I emphasize the BDS’s tripartite strengths encompassing “intellect, network, and written communication”.

Noteworthy is the observable impact on certain Israeli-related products and restaurants, experiencing a decline in customer patronage. As we project into the future, the potential for the BDS to expand presents an opportunity for collaborative efforts, as their evolution may necessitate insights and suggestions from governmental bodies.

I believe engagement with BDS should be done through dialogues and discussions, providing insights into figures like Miko Peled, whose father served in the IDF during the Six-Day War, transitioned from military service to becoming a vocal advocate for Palestine, notably in New York against Israel’s occupation. Establishing communication channels with individuals like him holds significance in our broader outreach efforts.

10. Indonesia assists Palestine across various sectors, including capacity building, politics, humanitarian efforts, economic support, and trade. What are the upcoming plans or initiatives for these segments?

We plan to expand bilateral cooperation by exploring a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with Palestine. This initiative aims to strengthen economic ties between the two nations, fostering mutual growth and development. In addition to trade agreements, Indonesia is actively engaged in capacity-building efforts, particularly in law enforcement, judicial systems, and agriculture.

To enhance technical cooperation, Indonesia is extending support to Palestine in areas such as cattle breeding, agriculture cultivation, and Micro-Small-Medium Enterprise (MSME) skill development. These initiatives are designed to empower the Palestinian community and contribute to sustainable economic progress.

A significant aspect of Indonesia’s commitment involves broadening educational opportunities for Palestinian students. Following the Ministry of Defense’s example, scholarship programs are expanding, with potential openings in top Indonesian universities. Recognizing potential language barriers, Indonesia is prepared to offer language courses, facilitating effective communication and integration for Palestinian students in Indonesian academic environments.

In the realm of parliamentary diplomacy, Indonesia is actively advocating for collaboration between Islamic countries and least-developed nations with Palestine. This strategic outreach is aligned with Indonesia’s principled stance: as long as Palestine remains under Zionist occupation, diplomatic relations with Israel will not be entertained. This unwavering commitment signifies that Indonesia will continue to provide support and assistance to Palestine without compromising on its standards.
In summary, Indonesia's multifaceted approach encompasses economic cooperation, technical assistance, educational opportunities, and diplomatic advocacy, all geared towards empowering Palestine and maintaining a steadfast commitment to its cause.