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The role of Indonesian government in middle east conflict resolution: consistent diplomacy or strategic shifts?

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Indonesia and Middle Eastern countries are associated with a shared characteristic in the form of Islam, despite the geographical separation and cultural and ethnic distinctions. Since gaining independence in 1945, Indonesia has consistently advocated for the peaceful resolution of conflict in the Middle East, including the Palestinian/Arab–Israeli conflict. Therefore, the objective of this study was to explore the motivations behind Indonesia’s consistent support for Middle Eastern conflict resolution. Although the Indonesian government is eager to advance its involvement in the conflict resolution process, it is also compelled by the constitution to uphold the “Free and Active” foreign policy axiom, which essentially restricts Indonesia from taking on a side, maintaining cordial ties with the parties involved. These principles prevent Indonesia from favoring one side and maintaining positive relations with both conflicting parties. Indonesia has often played a passive role as a facilitator or participant in conflict resolution attempts rather than actively taking on the role of a mediator. Indonesia’s unwavering commitment to resolving the Middle East conflict largely originates from Islamic solidarity with a predominantly Muslim population in the region and a shared identity as a fellow developing country, rather than being solely based on its constitution. Alternatively, this sense of unity may also stem from the notion of solidarity within the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Islam, middle east, solidarity, Indonesia, global south

1 Introduction

Indonesia and the Middle East are geographically distant countries with significant cultural and linguistic dissimilarities, despite being separated by thousands of miles ([Adiputera and Missbach, 2021](#)). However, the two are tied by Islam ([Anwar and Fortuna, 2010](#)) as a large percentage of their populations are of the Muslim faith. This common similarity has consistently drawn Indonesia into conflict in the Middle East, specifically the decades-long Arab–Israeli conflict ([Dharmaputra et al., 2022](#)). In the historical, social, and political context, modern-day Indonesia is inseparable from Islam, with Islamic values playing an important role in the country’s struggle for independence from colonial Dutch rule. According to statistics, 86.7% or 237.55 million of the Indonesian population is Muslim, making it the largest Muslim-majority country in the world ([The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, 2023](#)). Several sources reported that the entire Muslim population in Indonesia exceeds 207 million individuals, constituting 90% of the total Indonesian population and approximately

13% globally with Islam and *adat* as competing bases of social authority enacted by the Dutch colonial government.

Islam promoted the emergence of religion-based resistance groups to colonial rule in the later political development era. Politically, there is no doubt that Islam significantly influenced the formulation of the 1945 Constitution and the establishment of state institutions. The historical and social background provides strong normative bases for Indonesia to develop policies shaped by Islamic norms and values (Ayoob, 2011). However, it is important to acknowledge that Islam is not the exclusive factor determining the diplomatic relations of Indonesia with other nations in the Middle East (Alles, 2015).

Another salient aspect pertains to the resemblance between the non-aligned foreign policy outlook and that of other nations in the southern hemisphere (Fogg, 2015). Most Middle Eastern countries are affiliated with the Non-Aligned Movement except for Israel and Turkey (Husnul, 2022). The concept of the Non-Aligned Movement was initially proposed by Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia (Muttaqien, 2013). President Sukarno invited the recently liberated southern republics to participate in the Asian-African Conference held in Bandung in April 1955. The manifestation of Indonesian backing for the Palestinian cause was evident in this gathering, as Israel was excluded from the list of invitees. Navigating the complexities of Middle Eastern political issues poses a challenge for Indonesia, making it difficult to actively participate in conflict resolution in the region. Indonesia faces the intricate task of maintaining positive relations with conflicting parties while upholding foreign policy principles. Taking an active part in conflict resolution may contradict foreign policy principles, which led to the adaptation of the “free and active” foreign policy principles, laid out by the first Vice President, Mohammad Hatta. This policy was adopted during the Working Group of the Central National Committee of Indonesia (KNIP) session in 1948. The word “free” means that Indonesia does not take a side with world powers (Anwar, 2010). According to Hicks (2021), “active” means that the country does not maintain a passive or reactive stand on international issues and instead obtains active participation in the settlement.

This research assessed five major conflicts in the contemporary Middle East political scene, namely, the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Syrian upheaval, the Saudi–Yemen conflict, Egypt’s transitional democracy, and the Iranian nuclear issue (Songbatumis, 2021). In each of these conflicts, Indonesia encountered various challenges and was often torn between taking a passive versus an active role (Winanti and Alvian, 2021). Preliminary research has been conducted on the underlying rationale behind consistent endorsement of Middle East conflict resolution, the impact of Islam on foreign policy, and the role of the Global South perspective in supporting the resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict (Correa-Lopera, 2019). President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) played a facilitating role in the Arab–Israeli conflict, serving as a venue for negotiations between the internal factions of Palestine, represented by the hardline Hamas and the moderate Fatah. These two political movements historically held divergent perspectives and have struggled to find common ground with Jakarta as a venue for negotiations. The stance of President Bashar al-Assad has presented a predicament for Indonesia, given the favorable diplomatic ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia. In mid-September 2019, the conflict between Yemen and Saudi Arabia escalated following the targeted attacks on two major oil facilities. Yemen Houthi group claimed culpability for the incident, but the

United States (US) attributed it to Iran despite the country’s denial. Indonesia was stuck in the middle of this conflict, specifically when Saudi Arabia promptly formed a military coalition with an extended invitation (Wolf, 2023). However, the decision to join a military alliance directly contradicted the country’s non-alignment stance in the framework of foreign policy (Wicaksana, 2022).

In the Egyptian democratic process, there is a perspective suggesting that Indonesia, being the third-largest democratic state globally, should take a more active role in promoting democracy (Zaini, 2019). The push toward playing a more active role is also prevalent in the context of the Iranian nuclear issue. Indonesia continues to embrace impartiality against the exclusion of Iran by the US and the allies, to maintain a good relationship (NG Elbahnasawy, 2020). As the most populous nation with a Muslim majority, it is expected by Muslim countries and organizations, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), to take a leading role in resolving these problems. Therefore, this research aims to examine the predicament faced by Indonesia in the resolution of conflict in the Middle East, taking into account both the domestic interests and foreign policy principles (Stutzer et al., 2019).

2 Literature review: Indonesian government policy in middle east eastern conflict

Foreign policy is fundamentally viewed as the extension of domestic politics (Adiputera and Missbach, 2021). Despite the fact that the influence of the external environment cannot be ignored, domestic objectives have largely shaped the country’s foreign policy. The basic doctrine has remained consistent, and the articulation and implementation have evolved in response to changing political constellations, the world views of leaders, and government priorities at any given time (Natalegawa et al., 2019).

Royal Institute of International Affairs (1983) described foreign policy as “the actions of a state toward the external environment and the conditions under which these actions are formulated” (Serek and Lomicova, 2020). This definition means that research on the foreign policy of a particular country can be traced back to the formulation of the external environment. Adeed Dawisha also stated that the foreign policy of developing countries needs to focus on either the influences, the decision-making process, or the implementation process. In this research, the influences were selected as the area of analysis because it was widely accepted that the population of a country significantly influences its domestic political climate and foreign policy. Despite the prominent influence of Islam on the foreign policy of Indonesia, there is a methodological ambiguity as to when Islam should be determined to act as a motivator, a legitimate factor, or simply a justification. Therefore, this research aims to determine the influence of foreign policy on the strategic geographical condition, position, political system, population, economic capability, and culture of a country.

Indonesia strategically included Islam as a significant component in the diplomatic efforts in the Arab world from 1945 to 1949, with a shift from influence to active engagement in foreign affairs. Scholars argue that Islam plays a significant role in analyzing Indonesian politics, particularly in the context of foreign policy. A debate occurred during the drafting of the 1945 Constitution between secularist nationalists and Islamic nationalists as to whether Sharia law should

be incorporated into this law (John and Sjoberg, 2020). Thereafter, the decision was made to remove the explicit text associated with Islam (Serek and Lomicova, 2020). Sharia value has remained implicit as shown in articles 29(1) and (2) of the 1945 Constitution and paragraph 3 of the opening of the 1945 Constitution (Gallier, 2020).

Historically, Indonesian foreign policy regarding Middle East conflict has been dependent on the president (Murphy, 2012). During the leadership of Soekarno, Indonesia consistently maintained a neutral stance on global conflict, including the conflict in the Middle East. However, it supported the independence and sovereignty of the newly independent Arab countries, including Palestine, and focused on national development. During the time of Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Soekarnoputri, and SBY, Indonesia promoted dialog and a diplomatic approach to conflict occurring in the Middle East, including Israel–Palestine. Similarly, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was interested in conflict resolution in the Middle East and participated in building global solidarity through humanitarian assistance, as well as sending peace troops to conflict areas.

Apart from historical facts and religious similarities, the Middle East conflict has always received attention from the Indonesian government. This is a form of implementation of the objectives and ideals, which are enshrined in the state constitution, namely, implementing world order based on independence, eternal peace, and social justice (Amal, 2020). According to preliminary research, this process strengthens humanitarian solidarity over conflict that has a negative impact on community security. Palestine with its historical closeness to Indonesian independence and the existence of religious values is currently still a concern for scholars (Shemer-Kunz, 2023; Strömbom and Persson, 2023; Yiftachel, 2023).

When examining the foreign policy of developing countries, there are three key areas of analysis, namely, the factors that influence foreign policy, the process of decision-making, and the execution of foreign policy (Dawisha and Dawisha, 1982). This research evaluates the correlation between the execution of foreign policy and the establishment of principles governing Indonesian foreign policy, as discussed in “The Implementation of Foreign Policy.” In 1948, Indonesian Vice President Mohammad Hatta established the notion of “free and active” as a response. During the Cold War, the country was in a state of development and did not associate itself with either of the superpowers but actively worked toward establishing a global order that emphasized fairness and everlasting world peace.

According to Dawisha and Dawisha (1982), Indonesia has the potential to assume four distinct roles in various international contexts, namely, mediator, arbiter, facilitator, and participant. While the prevailing viewpoint in policy research suggests that Islam has had little impact on foreign policy, a contrasting display is presented during the revolution for independence. Clifford Geertz stated the significance of associating religion and politics, by reporting that religious affiliation plays a role in molding the perspectives of those rooted in religious principles (Rahmatulloh, 2013). Moreover, Geertz reported that religion substantially influences the formation of social and political dynamics. In sociology, Emile Durkheim, a prominent scholar, stated that religion is a fundamental means of fostering cohesion and establishing a sense of belonging among members of a given society (Sandy, 2018). This is particularly evident in the framework of mechanical solidarity and the context of organic society.

The examination of international organizations shows a discernible correlation between politics and religion, as evidenced by

the observations made in this research. Indonesia has been a member nation of OIC since its establishment in 1969 and is also part of the D-8, an intergovernmental organization comprising only Islamic states. A recent development comprises the generous mosque donation by Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed al Nahyan in Surakarta, which is a scaled-down replica of the primary mosque in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The research on the relationship between Islam and democracy in Indonesia and the implications for foreign policy has garnered significant scholarly interest in recent times. SBY initiated the notion of Indonesian global identity, with an emphasis on the coexistence of Islam, democracy, and modernity. Many Indonesians stated that, following 9/11 and the Bali bombing in 2002, Indonesia has attempted to enhance its engagement in the Islamic world. The country has acknowledged and welcomed the recent global recognition as the largest Muslim nation worldwide (Sager, 2018). Concurrently, it has made an effort to project an image of a country where Western liberal values, such as democracy and the safeguarding of human rights, are in perfect harmony with Islamic principles (Christmann, 2018).

3 Research methods

This qualitative research was carried out with non-numerical examination and observation interpretation methods to discover the underlying meanings and patterns of relationships. Data were collected through library research and in-depth interviews with four Indonesian Ambassadors to the Middle East, namely, Qatar, Lebanon, Algeria, and Egypt. Ambassadors claimed to be executing the country's foreign policy toward Middle Eastern countries by engaging in the resolution of regional issues. The data collected were analyzed by understanding cases in detail through case-oriented analysis to determine the role of Islam in the decision-making process under each president (Babbi, 2016). At the same time, Middle Eastern political issues are analyzed by putting the issues in a systematic order to examine the country's response to conflict.

4 Results and discussion

The relationship between Islam and foreign policy has always attracted many scholars (Correa-Lopera, 2019). Anwar and Fortuna (2010) stated that Indonesian foreign policy is similar to the two sides of a coin. On one side, Islam as an identity can be used to express a moderate political stance as shown under the SBY policy, which illustrated political support for Palestinians in achieving independence and closing the diplomatic relationship with Israel. It is generally accepted that support for Palestine's independence is based on the push by the Indonesian Muslim community, which accounts for 87.4% of the population. SBY projected Islam as a moderate, tolerant, and outward-looking religion to the world. This retains some political benefits, such as the possibility to be a mediator to Arab–Israeli conflict and the domestic conflict in Egypt and Lebanon. Another benefit is that it enables Indonesia to act as a bridge between Western countries and the Islamic world.

Islam is occasionally portrayed as a religion that is intolerant and discriminatory toward women and also espouses violence including terrorism and anti-Western. SBY responded to this analysis by trying

to communicate with the international world that democracy, Islam, and modernity are interconnected and have a unique value (Zaini, 2019). The support for Palestine and opposition to Israel among the Muslim community in general are based on religious solidarity. This shows that the traditional approach of foreign policy rooted in Islam would prevent the government from opening a diplomatic relationship with Israel. Although SBY has been successful in taking political advantage of Islam, the dilemma remains as the president often encounters difficulties when making decisions. There is no easy choice in public policy, but Jokowi needs to consider whether an Islamic-based foreign policy is important in the current political agenda. The refusal of the Jokowi regime to join the Islamic Military Alliance initiated and led by Saudi Arabia did not mean that Jokowi had left Islam rather but selected the alternative with minimum risk.

Another area of analysis applied in this article is “the implementation of foreign policy,” which concerns how it was changed into actions, the policy implications toward the international system, the reactions of internal actors, and the correspondence between actions and the principles of foreign. This area of analysis was used to explain why Indonesia refused to join the Islamic Military Alliance. Analysts may find difficulties in differentiating whether a decision-maker of foreign policy is driven by Islamic values and the reason for Jokowi’s refusal to join the Islamic Military Alliance initiated by Saudi Arabia (Elbahnasawy, 2020). Jokowi has left Islam as a motivator of foreign policy and instead chose another value, which is the “free and active” principle. In critical situations, the government regards Islam as a constraint, rather than a solution in determining foreign policy. Dawisha advised the analyst to use the expertise and knowledge, to arrive at a specific conclusion to these difficulties. According to Korany and Dessouki in the book “Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization,” foreign policy in Arab countries has experienced transformations in the globalization era. At the advent of the Cold War, this region had become a place of competition between the Western Bloc, represented by the US and the Allies, and the Eastern Bloc, represented by the Soviet Union. Toward the conclusion of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was more dominant in almost all Arab countries.

Indonesia needs to ensure its foreign policy is in accordance with the decision-making process and behavior of Arab countries. Data on the political situation in the Middle East to which Indonesia responded to, such as the Gulf War I and II, and the US occupation, were used to provide comprehensive information in this research. Several books stated that Islam rarely influences Indonesian domestic and foreign policy since Indonesia is not an Islamic country. However, Anak Agung Banyu Perwita in the book titled “Indonesia and the Muslim World: Islam and Secularism in Foreign Policy of Soeharto and Beyond” stated that foreign policy was also influenced by the religious views and beliefs of the policymakers. This book examined whether Indonesia, with a significant Muslim population, always considers Islam in formulating and implementing foreign policy (Elbahnasawy, 2014). Nasr believed that Islam had been influencing the foreign policy of the country with dependency on domestic political demands, international political environment specifically Middle Eastern political stability, and the interest of the government. This is because when the government needs Middle East rich countries to invest in Indonesia, Islam is explored. Meanwhile, the Islamic factor tends to build constraints for the government in formulating and implementing foreign policy because the Islamic community often acts as a guide that meets the interests of the Middle East. The Islamic factor is

evidenced in the refusal to open a diplomatic relationship with Israel, despite the potential benefit and economic interest. The Islamic factor may also create a dilemma for the government as supporting one party participating in conflict endangers the relationship with others. Conflict in the Middle East, such as the Yemen-Saudi Arabia, comprises fellow Muslim countries, which makes it difficult for Indonesia to participate. Islam is used to balance relationships between the West and the Eastern Bloc given that the relationship is very imbalanced. This was in accordance with the research by Daniel Novotny from Kenneth Waltz, stating that “during the Cold War, there was a sizeable imbalance of power in favor of the US and the allies.”

4.1 Indonesian concern in Arab–Israel conflict

Israel and certain Arab countries, namely, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, have been at war for the past 50 years (Tuna, 2019). During this time, Israel had maintained the occupation of territories belonging to Arab parties, namely, the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Golan Heights (Ghazali et al., 2015). Despite various attempts at peaceful negotiations for the return of these regions from Israel, significant progress has not materialized. Since the start of the conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Israel in 1948, Indonesia, as a newly independent nation, has consistently shown support for the independence of Palestinians in reclaiming the territory. This country had actively participated in Arab–Israeli conflict resolution, significantly contributing to implementing the rule of law to promote peace. This aspect included sending peacekeepers post-Sinai War in 1956, as part of the United Nations Emerging Forces (UNEF). Additionally, Indonesian peacekeepers in Lebanon, specifically after the Israeli attack on the southern region in 2006, played a role in the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL). These two roles ran smoothly until today despite the refusal of Israel to entertain peacekeepers from Indonesia, due to a perceived pro-Palestinian stance, which has continued to mediate in the internal conflict between the Hamas and Fatah groups within Palestine.

Hamas also known as the Islamic Resistance Movement, which was established in 1987 by Ahmad Shah Yassin, has consistently been recognized as a hardline Islamic political entity. The main aim is to enforce Islamic law (Sharia Islam) and establish an independent Islamic state in Palestine (Bahloul et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the Fatah group, founded by Yasser Arafat in 1967, envisioned Palestine as a secular state, advocating for the separation of religion and state affairs. The profound ideological differences between Hamas and Fatah form the basis of the identity, attracting distinct supporters. Hamas gained significant support following the 2006 Palestinian Authority election victory, which was later annulled. Internationally, the US and other countries classified Hamas as a terrorist organization due to the frequent use of violence. The post-2006 war or conflict between the two groups resulted in the tragic deaths of at least 600 Palestinians from both sides. Fatah is presently led by Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President who controls the territories (Palestinian National Authority), mostly located in the West Bank (Mensi et al., 2021). Meanwhile, under the leadership of Khaled Meshal, Hamas dominates the regions in the Gaza Strip (Gençyürek and Ekinci, 2022).

The ideological difference between Hamas and Fatah is also manifested in the attitude toward Israel (Zhou et al., 2020). Hamas,

known for the uncompromising stance and refusal to acknowledge the existence of Israel (Dodd and Collins, 2017), was accused of arranging the Katyusha rocket attacks, prompting military responses from Israel in 2008 and 2014, resulting in massive damage and casualties among both Hamas and Gaza residents. Meanwhile, Fatah adopted a more moderate position, recognizing Israel and expressing the willingness to engage in negotiations with the Jewish state. Based on this background or context, supposing Indonesia wishes to act as an arbitrator or mediator, maintaining neutrality amid these ideological differences is crucial because it needs to earn the trust of both sides. For the Fatah group, Indonesia gained trust when it was visited by Mahmoud Abbas some time ago. While on the part of Hamas, it is recognized as a country that contributed to the opening of the Rafah border between Palestine and Egypt when Israel attacked Gaza in 2008. Indonesia also showed its support by establishing a hospital in Gaza, supported by the Indonesian Red Cross and Medical Emergency Rescue Committee (MER-C), a local humanitarian organization specializing in medical emergencies. In 2015, the government pledged to deploy 4,000 peacekeepers and aimed to be among the UN's top 10 contributors by 2019 (Kumar et al., 2020).

Jokowi consistently supported the Palestinian struggle, despite not endorsing hardline Islamic groups domestically (Golan et al., 2019). To show this commitment, an inaugural Indonesian Honorary Consulate was established in Ramallah, West Bank, under the leadership of Maha Abu Susheh, a Palestinian woman. Despite the refusal of Israel to allow Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, entry into Ramallah, the inauguration ceremony was instead conducted in Amman, Jordan. The establishment of the Honorary Consulate was expected to enhance the ability of Indonesia to offer assistance to Palestine, particularly in capacity building. However, the negative response from Israel is expected to pose challenges for Indonesia in supporting Palestinians, potentially impacting diplomatic relations with nations supporting Israel, such as the US and the allies. The refusal to visit Ramallah, governed by the Palestinian Authority according to the 1995 Oslo Agreement, can be perceived as a cautionary message directed toward Indonesia (Kristjanpoller et al., 2021). At the local level, community organizations, such as Tarbiyah and the Palestine Calling Group (often referred to as Friends of Palestine are Calling), expressed sympathy for the Palestinian struggle (Mavragani and Gkillas, 2020).

This research focuses on conflict in the Gaza region including Hamas entities and Israel. The prolonged warfare, which started on 7 October 2023, has resulted in the unfortunate loss of life and a significant number of Palestinian casualties, reaching at least 11,180 individuals, as reported by CNN, a reputable news outlet. Indonesia is actively advocating for conflict resolution through the promotion of a swift cessation of hostilities while expressing condemnation toward Israel for the acts of aggression targeting medical facilities and civilian zones. In response to the increasing situation, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Lestari Marsudi, formally requested an emergency session by the United Nations General Assembly on 26 October, to address and resolve the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

4.2 Indonesia and Arab spring: Syria, Saudi Arabia–Yemen conflict, and Egypt

Since 2011, the Middle East has experienced widespread political movements, and the colossal impact has effectively toppled the

dictatorial regime, which had been in power for two decades (Park et al., 2018). Driven by new media, people power played a significant role in overthrowing leaders such as Zaenab Abidin bin Ali and President Hosni Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively (Greyling et al., 2021), along with the removal of Ali Abdullah bin Saleh, and Moamar Qaddafi in Yemen and Libya. Although the Middle East region is geographically distant from Indonesia, it showed a heightened concern for events in the region due to shared religious ties. Despite occurrences of similar events in other areas, such as Africa and Latin America, commonality in religion caused Indonesia to be concerned with the events in the Middle East. The support for political Islam in the Middle East raises concern about the potential encouragement of Islamic resurgence in the country. According to Michael Leifer, Islam entered the Indonesian foreign policy process more as a challenge, than support. While all Arab Spring countries aimed to implement a successful political transition to democracy, most countries have failed, with only Tunisia successfully completing this process, despite the threat of armed conflict (Lyo et al., 2020).

Effective mediation led by influential civilians is considered essential for Tunisia to avoid the potential outbreak of civil war (Correa-Lopera, 2019). Meanwhile, other Arab Spring countries, particularly Syria, have encountered violent and destructive civil conflict. In Syria, protests calling for the immediate impeachment of Bashar Assad turned into a regional conflict, marked by a proxy war between great regional, and even international, powers. This complex situation further accelerated the sectarian Sunni–Shia issue. Peace efforts yielded minimal tangible results, with only limited ceasefires and provisional agreements confined to specific territories. However, militant groups have expanded their influence across borders, connecting territories in Iraq. The current state of the Middle East is characterized by diverse conflicts including various actors, issues, and dimensions (Zaini, 2019). Issues or challenges such as sectarianism and extremism have become prominent, while peace efforts and achievements remain significantly minimal (Serek and Lomicova, 2020).

The consequences of conflict in the Middle East require intensive global efforts for prompt resolution (Elbahnasawy, 2020). A striking outcome in the last 2 years is the large number of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. Millions have been forced to leave their hometowns and search for refuge in various regions across the world (John and Sjoberg, 2020). Several others are displaced in neighboring countries, specifically Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Additionally, millions have sought asylum in Western European nations, specifically in Germany. For example, Aylan Kurdi, a young boy from Kobani, whose body was washed up on the shores of Turkey, is a heartbreaking symbol of the plight of refugees, prompting a change in the attitude of some European countries. Although Indonesia is not a party to the UN Convention on Refugee, according to the office of the United Nations Refugee Agency in Jakarta, it has accepted approximately 14,000 refugees and political asylum seekers from Middle East countries. This acceptance is based on religious solidarity and humanitarian considerations. In Yemen, the fall of the regime led by Ali Abdullah Salah turned into a prolonged conflict. Initially expected to transition successfully and peacefully into democracy as part of the Arab Spring countries, Yemen instead experienced deep divisions between the Shiite group based in Shadh Houtsi (South Yemen), led by supporters of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and those of President Abdul Rabbuh Masur Hadi (Stutzer et al., 2019).

Yemen is characterized by diverse tribes, each with regional affiliations (Christmann, 2018). When the Houthi faction, which many regarded as being supported by Iran, captured the capital Sana'a without the slightest resistance from the Yemeni army, it prompted the connection of Saudi Arabia and several other Arab countries. However, in navigating this complex situation, Indonesia faced a dilemma. The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, who is also the Defense Minister, Mohammad Bin Salman, urged Indonesia, as a Muslim-majority country to join the newly formed Islamic Military Alliance (Sager, 2018), consisting of 34 countries, including Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Nigeria. Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Adel al Jubeir, clarified that the main purpose of the Alliance was to form a coalition of Islamic countries for information-sharing and training, as well as to provide armed forces to tackle military movements leading to terrorism such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda. However, the effectiveness of the alliance as a solution to global terrorism remains a subject of debate. The alliance, headquartered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, has faced criticism for further dividing the Muslim world and establishing unclear criteria for membership (Gallier, 2020). Based in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, the alliance is the birthplace of Islam and the guardian of two Muslim holy cities, namely, Mecca and Medina. Despite the natural expectation for Muslims to feel a deep bond with this country, a contrasting reality was reported. Rather than promoting unity, the alliance intensified division in the Muslim world, organizing it into separate compartments with criteria that are progressively unclear (Gallier, 2020).

In the past, the Islamic World was characterized by divisions based on religious schools, namely, Sunni and Shia, attitude toward international conflicts, ranging from radical to moderate, pro-west, pro-east, and non-aligned ideologies, and economic statuses including rich, middle, and poor (Rahmatulloh, 2013). Additionally, countries with a majority Muslim population and moderate tendency such as Indonesia are presently facing a dilemma concerning whether to accept or reject an invitation to join the Islamic military alliance (Sandy, 2018). Accepting the offer proposed by Saudi Arabia would mean Indonesia violated the principle of an independent and active foreign policy, as that of the non-alignment prohibited participation in military alliances. However, rejecting the offer may result in exclusion from the Islamic world. The bombing of the Indonesian Embassy in Yemen raised doubts, with some considering it as a warning due to its refusal to join the fight against the Houthis. Currently, there are only two remaining military alliances, namely, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Australia, New Zealand, US (ANZUS), which were founded in 1949 and 1951, respectively. Other military alliances, such as the Warsaw Pact and the Baghdad Pact, including the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), were disbanded due to the absence of a common and cohesive membership. The Islamic Military Alliance may face a similar fate as the perceived enemy lies in the organization, making it difficult to destroy the enemy without causing harm to the Islamic community. Meanwhile, the Saudi–Yemen conflict had created another conflict in the Gulf region, the Saudi–Iranian conflict (Andrini et al., 2022).

To showcase impartiality in conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, embarked on a diplomatic mission in January 2016. During the course of the journey, Minister Marsudi had a meeting with King Salman bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia (Mas'ood, 2002). This visit was aimed at amending the declining diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, which

had been strained as a result of the decision taken by Indonesia to abstain from joining the Islamic Military Alliance. Following this, Mrs. Retno Marsudi visited Iran to meet with President Rouhani and expressed the endorsement of a peaceful resolution to the ongoing Saudi–Iranian conflict. The Saudi government appreciated this initiative, recognizing it as the first Muslim nation to participate in addressing conflicts and disputes in the Middle East. Furthermore, Indonesia tried to perpetuate the dissemination of the Islamic faith as *Rahmatan Lil Alimin* (a blessing for all beings), alongside principles of tolerance and democracy. Meanwhile, the policy implemented by Indonesia to regulate the Arab Spring is characterized by a wait-and-see approach. This approach is understandable because Indonesia has a cordial relationship with every Arab Spring country. For example, Egypt, the first Arab country to recognize Indonesia's independence in 1946, has maintained a cordial relationship from the days of the first president, Sukarno, to the current regime of Jokowi (Zaini, 2019). This relationship is also manifested in the status as the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, members of OIC and Group of D-8 (Development Eight), along with Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nigeria. In 2012, President Muhammad Husni Mubarak was replaced by Mohammad Mursi in a general election (Correa-Lopera, 2019).

After winning the election, Muhammad Mursi became the only Egyptian President elected through an open process (Serek and Lomicova, 2020). However, this presidency lasted only a year before it was overthrown by a military coup led by Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, who later assumed office through an election (of which the democratic nature was doubted; Elbahnasawy, 2020). Indonesia approached this situation cautiously, considering the affiliation of Muhammad Mursi with the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwanul Muslimin*), a group perceived as a hard-liner and advocating for the implementation of Sharia Law. Despite the support of Indonesia for democracy, it refrained from protesting the military coup, which resulted in thousands of casualties, particularly among the Muslim Brotherhood. This decision was influenced by the concern that supporting the Muslim Brotherhood might promote similar Islamic political movements in the country. Consequently, Indonesia decided to support Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, with a welcoming event during the OIC Extraordinary Summit in early March 2016. The visit of President Abdul Fatah al-Sisi marked a significant moment in the relationship between Indonesia and Egypt, signifying a new chapter. This is because no Egyptian president had visited Indonesia since the time of President Anwar Sadat. In addition, the nuclear program initiated by Iran also attracted Indonesia because it was sanctioned by the US. The US had suspected Iran of developing weapons of mass destruction. Indonesia, known as a moderate Islamic state with friendly relations with the West, including the US, pledged support for the nuclear program, provided it was for humanitarian purposes. This commitment was conveyed during the visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in May 2006. Furthermore, Indonesia assured its willingness to mediate with the US to lift the sanctions against Iran, showing the diplomatic role in regional affairs (Elbahnasawy, 2020).

The expectation of Indonesia in supporting an Iranian peaceful nuclear program and advocating for the lifting of the US sanction was high when it was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2017 (John and Sjoberg, 2020). However, Indonesia surprised many by voting in favor of UNSC Resolution Number 1747, which imposed sanctions on Iran for non-compliance with the NPT, a treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, by

continuing to produce uranium (Anwar; John and Sjoberg, 2020). This decision prompted the Indonesian parliament to question the stance of the government on supporting the UNSC sanctions, and in subsequent votes, Indonesia decided to abstain. While Indonesia and Iran are globally recognized as the most populous Sunni and Shiite Muslim countries, respectively, both countries share membership in international organizations, such as the OIC, the Non-Alignment Movement, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The dissimilarity between Sunni and Shiite extends beyond their views on the Prophet Muhammad's succession to differences in religious rituals. This divergence has increased suspicions among some Sunni Muslims in Indonesia regarding the spread of Shiite beliefs in the country. Despite these internal complexities, Indonesia has successfully adopted a balanced approach to domestic and foreign policies. The nation actively mediates conflicts between Iran and the international community, specifically with the US, advocating for the withdrawal of sanctions against Iran (Gallier, 2020). Simultaneously, the Indonesian government aims to remain neutral in the Saudi–Iranian conflict and does not support the growth of Shia Muslims in the country (Serek and Lomicova, 2020).

4.3 Global south solidarity

Indonesia possesses distinctive characteristics, including its geographical location in the Southern Hemisphere, often referred to as the Global South (Bakry et al., 2021). It is acknowledged for actively embracing the concept of the Global South, focusing on collaborative efforts among countries in the Southern Hemisphere. The inaugural tenure of President Sukarno led to the foundation for diplomatic engagements, which were rooted in the principles of South–South Cooperation (SSC). South–South Cooperation (SSC) is often considered a mechanism to transform the uneven ties between the Global South and the dominant Global North. During the leadership of Soekarno, Indonesia witnessed two distinct phases in foreign policy. The initial period of independence, from 1945 to 1955, was characterized by efforts to gain support. This was followed by the age of guided democracy from 1956 to 1965 (Khaki et al., 2023).

The initial aspect of foreign policy mainly focused on gaining acknowledgment from the international community (Talbi et al., 2021). Irrespective of the efforts to achieve international acknowledgment, Indonesia refrained from associating with any defense bloc or alliance during a period when the international community gradually became polarized amidst the Cold War. The inception of South–South Solidarity was marked by the convening of the Asia–Africa Conference in Bandung from 18 to 24 April 1955. Subsequently, a meeting held in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, from 1 to 6 September 1961 served as a precursor to establishing the Non-Aligned Movement. Indonesia played a significant role in establishing the Non-Aligned Movement, assuming the role of a major proponent.

The Western and Eastern Bloc, characterized by capitalist and socialist systems, respectively, coexisted as two distinct geopolitical entities in a specific historical period (Kayral et al., 2023). Indonesia is dedicated to upholding the idea of non-alignment, refraining from associating with any specific bloc or alliance. The commitment to addressing the Middle East conflict, driven by either Islamic solidarity or SSC, is evident through active engagement in conflict resolution efforts. Distinguishing between Islamic solidarity and the Global South poses a significant challenge. Despite the significant Muslim population in Pakistan, Indonesia refrained from partaking in conflict

in the Non-Aligned Movement, such as the dispute between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir problem (Ashraf et al., 2023).

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, foreign policy enacted by Indonesia was significantly influenced by the predominately Islamic populace, with religious considerations often posing challenges for the government in shaping foreign relations. Instead of assuming a mediator role, Indonesia became more practical in the active participation and facilitation of solutions to the Middle East problem, effectively handling conflict including friendly states. However, it also engaged in peacekeeping operations in the Sinai and Lebanon regions. Supporting the Arab–Palestinian–Israeli issue was a top priority in Middle East foreign policy. Indonesia adopted a measured approach, specifically when managing conflict including other Muslim nations. The Arab Spring, a democratic process that started in Tunisia and spread across the Middle East, presented various challenges for Indonesia in supporting the government of President Abdullah Fatah al-Sisi in Egypt, where the democratic process was still evolving. Indonesia showed a nuanced stance in its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. While the UN Security Council had imposed sanctions on Saudi Arabia, Indonesia extended generosity to the Iranian government in conflict, contributing to the strengthening of bilateral ties. This support played a role in fostering diplomatic relations with Iran, which was experiencing isolation on economic, political, and cultural fronts. Foreign policy toward the Middle East showcased a balance between autonomy and adherence to principles such as non-alignment, SSC, and Islamic solidarity in OIC.

Author contributions

SS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

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