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IRAN'S "LOOK TO THE EAST" POLICY: CASE STUDY OF INDONESIA

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Introduction

Iran's "Look to the East" policy is an outcome of its antagonism with the United States, particularly against the backdrop of the latter's withdrawal from the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal in 2018 and the subsequent sanctions on Iran. This foreign policy approach of Iran seeks to mitigate Tehran's international isolation by building political, religious, economic, and cultural relations with the East.

This study investigates the dynamics of bilateral relations between Iran and Indonesia in recent decades. The study analyzes the various interests Tehran pursues in Indonesia and the means it uses for this end while considering the limitations and constraints that impede the development of Iran-Indonesia relations. The study focuses on three main topics: the factors influencing/impacting Iran-Indonesia relations; Iran's soft power policy in Indonesia; and the dimensions of Iran-Indonesia relations.

Indonesia with a collective Muslim population of approximately 240 million⁽¹⁾ has long been regarded by Iran as an important pillar of its religious, economic, and foreign policy objectives. Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country with the highest Muslim population, is a significant variable in Iran's "Look to the East" policy in Southeast Asia. Academics and policymakers have traditionally evaluated the bilateral relations between Iran and Indonesia through the prism of their relations with other countries, notably with the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Although Indonesia, in accordance with its pluralist and politically secular traditions, has resisted any religious and sectarian influence from Iran since the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution, this has not stopped Tehran from pursuing various interests in Indonesia, such as the promotion of the Iranian model of "religious democracy" in Indonesian politics and society, and sectarian ideas based on the principles of the Iranian revolution. In addition, Iran has pursued various illicit activities in Indonesia to mitigate the impact of the US-led economic sanctions on the country's domestic front.

Previous studies on Iran-Indonesia have mainly focused on religiopolitical perspectives as part of the broader scholarship on Shiism in East Asia. This includes Umar Assegaf's paper in which he discusses the social identities among Indonesian Shiites in the era after the overthrow of Indonesia's former President Suharto. Assegaf provides a historical outline of how the Shiite community in Indonesia was viewed with suspicion in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, and an overview of how the Iranian revolution, which was perceived as a victory of Islam over the Western-backed Pahlavi government, attracted the attention of Indonesian religious scholars and academics.⁽²⁾

Chiara Formichi examines the conversion of some Indonesians to Shiism from the 1960s until the 1980s and its impact on Shiite devotion in contemporary Java, an Indonesian island with a Muslim majority population. Formichi states that although the Indonesian government feared political instability in Indonesia in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, what the then regime in Indonesia failed to grasp was that "The most powerful consequence of the revolution was the diffusion of literature on Iran-Persian history and philosophy, which mostly fed the brains of those dissatisfied with religion rather than with the political status quo." Formichi discusses the personal stories of four Indonesian men who converted to Shiism after the Iranian revolution and how this impacted the formation of the next generation of "Shiite devotees" in Java.⁽³⁾

Hilman Latief gives a thorough overview of Shiite institutions, groups, schools and publishers that emerged in Indonesia in the wake of the Iranian revolution. The author also identifies prominent Indonesian academics

and religious leaders who were instrumental in spreading the religious and political ideas that formed the basis of the Iranian revolution.⁽⁴⁾

As can be seen from reviewing pre-existing scholarship on Iran-Indonesia interactions, most of it focuses more on the topic from a historical and religious studies perspective. As a result, there is currently a literature gap as there is no significant research that discusses Iran-Indonesia relations in the context of international relations and diplomacy. Through descriptive analysis, this study will examine the relationship between Iran and Indonesia and pinpoint Tehran's main foreign policy objectives in the Southeast Asian country.

Factors Influencing/Impacting Iran-Indonesia Relations

Strategic Location

At the confluence of the Pacific Ocean, the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean, Indonesia boasts a key geostrategic location in the Asia-Pacific region. Indonesian waterways are used by more than half of all international shipping. They are located along the seaways that connect East and South Asia with Oceania, making it the world's biggest archipelago country, with 17,000 islands stretching 3,200 miles from east to west.⁽⁵⁾

Given that Indonesia's western island of Sumatra is situated next to one of the most important maritime passageways in the world, the Strait of Malacca, this country's strategic location is crucial to the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. The strait connects Singapore, Peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, and shortens the distance between the Middle East and the massive Asian markets by connecting the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific Ocean (China, Japan, and South Korea). Indonesia is a crucial regional participant in the Indo-Pacific security architecture created by the United States and other Western powers like the European countries and Australia because of its geostrategic location in the Indo-Pacific area and its status as the largest maritime country in Southeast Asia.

There have been several documented cases where Iran has attempted to exploit Indonesia's strategic location in the Indo-Pacific for its transnational illicit activities.

In accordance with its Archipelago Sea Lanes (ALKI) regulations, Indonesian authorities detained two oil tankers in 2021: the Panamanian-flagged MT Freya and the Iranian-flagged MT Horse, which were transiting Indonesian waters on their way to China. They were seized on suspicion of illegally smuggling oil through Indonesian territorial waters in violation of the right of transit passage.⁽⁶⁾ According to media reports, both had disabled their automatic identification system (AIS), which is required by Indonesia's

Ministry of Transportation to monitor vessel movements in Indonesian waters.

A report issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) stated that Iranian-affiliated drug gangs are encroaching on Southeast Asia's expanding methamphetamine industry, which has had an astonishing rise and is now spreading throughout the region.⁽⁷⁾ Another study from the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction stated that Iranians were one of the top two nationalities of people detained for trafficking methamphetamine in Indonesia, and noted an increase in reports of methamphetamine being smuggled into Indonesia from Iran.⁽⁸⁾

Several Iranian nationals have been detained in Indonesia during the last decade on charges of transporting drugs. For example, in 2009, seven Iranians were detained for reportedly bringing 371 capsules of methamphetamine into Bali Island.⁽⁹⁾ Also, in the same year, Indonesian authorities arrested 10 Iranian citizens on similar charges of being in possession of \$10 million worth of methamphetamine on international flights into Jakarta.⁽¹⁰⁾ In 2014, Indonesian authorities detained two Iranian citizens in West Java on charges of carrying 70 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine worth approximately \$9.5 million.⁽¹¹⁾

In 2021, an Indonesian district court in West Java sentenced 12 members of the Bali Nine heroin smuggling drug gang to death by firing for smuggling about 400 kilograms of methamphetamine. Iranian national Hossein Salari Rashid, who received a sentence with his wife, was referred to by the head of the Sukabumi prosecutor's office as the "mastermind of the crime."⁽¹²⁾

Indonesia's Significance in the Islamic World

Indonesia has a special position in the Arab and Islamic world because of it having the largest Muslim population. This makes Indonesia an important country in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and a significant arena of competition. Competing powers have actively built connections with Islamic scholars, academics and government-affiliated and private religious institutions in Indonesia to strengthen their religious credentials. More light can be shed on this phenomenon by examining the donations made to Indonesian religious seminaries and Indonesian universities for the study of the Arabic language and Islamic sciences, as well as through investigating the sources of funding for the construction of mosques; the latter has received generous donations from influential Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey.⁽¹³⁾ During a state visit to Indonesia in 2017, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia allocated a budget of \$13 billion to fund education, businesses, and religious institutions in Indonesia.⁽¹⁴⁾ In addition to making substantial investments in the Indonesian economy, the UAE also built a mosque in its diplomatic district that was named after the

current President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, in recognition of his contribution to fostering relations between the two countries.⁽¹⁵⁾

The Muslim World League (MWL), which is headquartered in Makkah, has actively worked on numerous construction, charitable, and educational projects with the Indonesian government and private organizations.⁽¹⁶⁾ For example, the MWL signed a cooperation agreement in 2020 with the Foundation for the History of the Prophet Muhammad (□) to construct the Prophet Muhammad and Islamic Civilization History Museum in Jakarta. Indonesia's then Vice President Jusuf Kalla, who was also serving as the foundation's chairman of the Board of Trustees at the time, was present at the signing ceremony.⁽¹⁷⁾

Despite having the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia is often described as a multi-ethnic, multireligious and pluralistic country that practices and promotes the moderate form of Indonesian "Nusantara Islam." In the words of Rumadi Ahmad, a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Sharia and Law in the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta, "At a time when many Muslim countries globally have been involved in political conflicts, civil wars, and other strife, Indonesia remains an oasis of pluralism, a model Muslim country. The Indonesian version of democracy not only disproves the myth that Islam and democracy are incompatible but also demonstrates how Islam can be managed and maintained within a modern nation-state. Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country, with 230 million Muslims comprising 87.2 percent of the total population. Yet Islam is not the national religion. In fact, there is no official religion mentioned in the Indonesian Constitution."⁽¹⁸⁾

The Shiite Minority in Indonesia

Shortly after the Iranian revolution in 1979, the new Iranian republic pledged in its Constitution to propagate the revolution's ideology beyond its borders and called for a revolution throughout the Islamic world. In a speech, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolution's first supreme leader, urged the Iranian people to "endure hardships and pressures" so that the Iranian government could fulfil its primary duty of promoting Islam worldwide.⁽¹⁹⁾

The Iranian revolution opened up new opportunities for Iran to carry out the "Supreme Iranian plan" inside and outside the country. The new government adopted a strategy whereby it encouraged Shiite groups and communities outside of Iran to carry out its transboundary project.⁽²⁰⁾

Despite being a country with a Muslim majority population, Indonesia also has sizable minorities of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucianists. Sunnis make up the bulk of Indonesian Muslims. At least 1 million Shiites live in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta, Makassar, and Bandung.

The Shiite community has had a presence in Indonesia since the ninth century, it is believed that Ahmad ibn 'Isa al-Muhajir, the great-grandson of

the sixth Shiite Imam, Ja'far as-Sadiq, migrated from Basra to Hadramout in southern Yemen. Ahmad ibn 'Isa's descendants later travelled eastwards and reached Java, where many settled.⁽²¹⁾ However, it was the Iranian revolution that had a significant impact on Shiite identity within Indonesia. A more assertive and socially active Shiite community emerged that actively engaged in religious preaching and encouraged many Indonesians to join the Shiite sect. Many Indonesian academics, religious experts and students who had lived and studied in Iran during the political upheaval of the Iranian revolution returned to Indonesia after the event.

Latief identifies two main groups that played an essential role in spreading Shiite thought in Indonesia after the Iranian revolution: the first was the Qom alumni, which consisted of Indonesian students who had studied in the hawza in Qom, Iran, and then returned to Indonesia, and the second was a student group at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB). This group ran a circle of knowledge at the university which promoted Shiism and the teachings of the Iranian revolution.⁽²²⁾

Iran's Soft Power Policy in Indonesia

Through propagating the Iranian revolution's ideology, Iran has aimed to achieve influence and establish a support base among Muslims worldwide. This propagation has combined both hard and soft power. Examples of Iranian hard power have been apparent in numerous countries. For example, in Iraq, where Shiites make up the majority of the population, the Iran-affiliated Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and other militias continue to have significant influence in the country through penetrating state apparatuses, exercising violence and attacking Western and Arab interests.⁽²³⁾ Even in countries where Shiites constitute a minority as in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the IRGC has recruited them to fight in Iran's proxy wars in Syria and Iraq.⁽²⁴⁾

In countries where it does not enjoy a demographic advantage, such as in Indonesia, Iran deploys soft power to propagate the philosophy of the Iranian revolution. This involves propagating the Iranian revolution's political framework, a hybrid political structure, through different mediums. This idea of a "religious democracy" was highly appealing to a religious audience consisting of devout or conservative Muslims.⁽²⁵⁾ Farish A. Noor attributes this to a phase in history where "Muslim societies were grappling with the dilemma of how to construct a postcolonial modernity that was on the one hand modern and at the same time authentically local – at times couched in terms that were ethno-culturally essentialist and reductivist."⁽²⁶⁾ The Iranian revolution also provided a window of opportunity for Muslim Brotherhood-aligned politicians and religious leaders throughout Southeast Asia to capitalise on the popularity of Iran's revolution which they believed would significantly expand their own electoral base. According to Noor, "It was

hardly surprising that Southeast Asian governments were perturbed by the developments in Iran. In Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, dissident Islamist parties and movements openly supported the Iranian revolution and its underlying principles. In Indonesia, groups like the Komando Jihad under the leadership of Islamist firebrands like Imran bin Zein began mobilising their followers and issuing a call to arms, taking the Iranian revolution as their cue."⁽²⁷⁾

Education and Research Cooperation

The distribution of Iranian literature in Indonesian universities significantly increased after the Iranian revolution. The literature's subject matter included readings on Iran's contemporary governmental structure, religious practices, and culture. In addition to the Shiite community in Indonesia, some Muslim conservatives were drawn to the "religious democracy" political model that emerged in Iran as well as some leftist groups that saw the Iranian revolution that toppled the Pahlavi government as a victory over American imperialism. Sofjan states that following the Iranian revolution, Iranian Shiite scholars and ideologues such as Murtadha Mutahhari, Ali Shariati and Tabataba'i enjoyed a large following.⁽²⁸⁾

Currently, the Islamic Cultural Center (ICC) of the Iranian Embassy in Jakarta disseminates Iranian literature and is readily accessible in university and public libraries throughout Indonesia and has been translated into Bahasa Indonesia, the country's native language.⁽²⁹⁾

Several universities in Indonesia, such as Indonesia University (U.I.) and Islamic State University (UIN) in Jakarta and Yogyakarta respectively, and Gadjah Mada University and Hasanuddin University in South Celebes, as well as Muhammadiyah Universities in Jakarta, Malang and Yogyakarta have set up study centers known as "Iranian corners," where religious and political literature authored by Iranian scholars is available.⁽³⁰⁾

The Indonesian figures and organizations identified by Latief that have played a critical role in disseminating Iranian literature in Indonesian universities and actively facilitating educational exchanges between the two countries include the following:

■ Husein al-Habysi: An Indonesian religious scholar who had converted to Shiism and established the Islamic educational institution called Yayasan Pesantren Islam (YAPI) in Bangil, East Java and he has maintained an intellectual network with Shiite scholars in Iran and has facilitated the transfer of thousands of Indonesian students to study at religious institutions in Iran;⁽³¹⁾ Assegaf states that "The activities of Hussein al-Habsyi's pesantren in Bangil greatly contributed to the spread of Shiism in Indonesia, and any analysis of Shiite genealogy in the archipelago would not be complete without mention of him."⁽³²⁾

■ Jalaluddin Rahmat: A lecturer at Padjadjaran University-Bandung and founder of the Ikatan Jamaah Ahlul Bayt Indonesia (IJABI) who has authored several papers and books, and played a vital role in spreading Shiite traditions in both rural and urban areas, and mentored students who studied about religion and politics in post-revolution Iran.⁽³³⁾ Assegaf refers to him as “the most active intellectual in spreading Shiism on campuses and more broadly to the educated middle class of Indonesian Muslims.”⁽³⁴⁾

■ The Fatimah Foundation: A Jakarta-based organization founded in 1997 that publishes an annual journal called *An Naba* and has published many other sectarian and communally provocative articles in Bahasa Indonesia, English and Arabic such as “The Deviations of the Doctrines of Ahlu Sunnah wa al Jama,” “The Blemished Wahhabis’ Characteristics,” and “The Mistakes of Muhammad’s Companions.”⁽³⁵⁾

■ The Al-Jawad Foundation of Islamic Studies: An organization based in Bandung, West Java, that declares its mission “to practice the teachings of the *ahlul bayt* in daily life, individually and communally, and to propagate them extensively within society.”⁽³⁶⁾ Marcinkowski describes the political orientation of the Al-Jawad Foundation as a whole to be “the official line of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁽³⁷⁾

Iranian diplomats and officials have been regular visitors to Indonesian universities, delivering lectures on several domestic and international issues concerning Iran. Other than holding such events at Indonesian universities, similar events have also been organized in Iranian universities that have seen the participation of Indonesian students, academics, and officials. One such event was held in 2018 called the National Dialogue entitled “Grounding Indonesian Unity, Realizing Social Justice” at the Imam Khomeini International University in Qom. The event saw the attendance of Octavio Alimuddin, the Indonesian ambassador to Turkmenistan (stationed in Tehran), and several Indonesian students studying in Iran.⁽³⁸⁾

Several Indonesian students are given scholarships by the Iranian government to attend Iranian universities. The Shiite religious city of Qom is where most Indonesian students in Iran are based. In a reciprocal move, the Indonesian government also announced in 2019 that Iranian students would be eligible to apply for the DARMASISWA scholarship⁽³⁹⁾ to study the Indonesian language, arts, music, and crafts.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Media and Culture

After the Iranian revolution, bilingual literature was the principal tenet of Iran’s soft power in Indonesia, but over time, it started to invest significant capital in penetrating Indonesian print and electronic media.

Articles and other literature supportive of Iran’s foreign policy and its political and theological ideas are no longer only found in journals or

magazines issued by Shiite organizations but have also now found a space in the country's mainstream media.

A 2021 article published in the Bahasa Indonesia daily *Gerusi* called for cultural exchanges between Indonesia and Iran and discussed Shiite customs. The article referred to the visit of a group of Indonesian writers to Qom on the Iranian government's invitation and echoed Tehran's position on the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The author presented three post-Iranian revolutionary traits that Indonesia should learn from and possibly embrace:

- First, the resilience of the Iranian people in the face of external dangers posed by foreign ideologies, and politics.
- Second, despite the longstanding economic sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe on Iran, infrastructure construction has proceeded at a rapid pace as though the embargo has had no bearing on the country's ability to maintain its economic independence.
- Third, Iranians continues to uphold their unique culture, and speak in Persian.⁽⁴¹⁾

The Iranian Embassy in Jakarta has, on an annual basis, facilitated interactions between Iranian and Indonesian journalists and media outlets. For example, in 2009, a delegation of Iranian journalists led by Mehdi Sarrami, manager of digital media affairs at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was sent by the Iranian government to Indonesia. During the visit, members of the delegation asked for help from Indonesian media outlets to help Iran "counter the misinformation that has demonized the country."⁽⁴²⁾

In 2015 the Iranian Embassy in Jakarta, on behalf of Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, invited numerous senior Indonesian journalists to the country where they visited several Iranian media outlets such as Iran Daily, Financial Tribune, Iran News Agency, and the private news agency Mehr News Agency. Mohammad Taqi Roghaniha, the managing director of Iran's Cultural and Press Institute, said, "The presence of Indonesian media in Iran is very important to obtain first-hand information and offset the Western propaganda against Iran. Western press coverage about Iran is inversely proportional to the actual situation."⁽⁴³⁾

To appeal to Indonesians from all political and religious backgrounds, the Iranian government also launched initiatives to promote the Persian language and culture. The Iranian Embassy has annually organized Nowruz (the Persian New Year) festivities at the National Library of Indonesia, with the attendance of Iranian and Indonesian officials.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Iranian films have also achieved popularity in Indonesia, with several of them screened over two days in 2019 by the ICC in Indonesia at the National Library in the country. According to Mehrdad Rakhshandeh, cultural adviser at the Iranian Embassy in Jakarta, the event strengthened relations between

the two countries because the films highlighted shared religious and cultural values.⁽⁴⁵⁾ A year later, on Java Island, at the 15th Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival, seven Iranian films were shown. Four Iranian films were then shown at the 14th Bali International Film Festival in 2021.⁽⁴⁶⁾

In 2017, on the eve of the month of Muharram, Iran started broadcasting live sermons in Bahasa Indonesia. The Shiite community in Indonesia has since annually gathered at the ICC, which was built in 2002 with funding from Iran to commemorate the month of Muharram.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Iran-Indonesia Relations: Dimensions

Economic Relations Against the Backdrop of Sanctions

On several occasions, Iran and Indonesia have expressed a desire to strengthen their trade and commercial ties, particularly in the energy sector. However, US-led Western sanctions against Iran have made this problematic. Iranian exports to Indonesia stood at \$16.1 million in 2020 compared to \$221 million in 1995. Petroleum coke (\$8.07 million), tropical fruits (\$4.19 million), and carbonates (\$1.14 million) were the top goods shipped from Iran to Indonesia in 2020. On the other hand, Indonesian exports to Iran have increased at an annualized rate of 1.63 percent over 25 years, from \$132 million in 1995 to \$198 million in 2020. In the same year, the main products exported from Indonesia to Iran were nuts (\$113 million), palm oil (\$18.7 million), and coconut oil (\$9.79 million).⁽⁴⁸⁾

Energy has been the main component of economic cooperation between Iran and Indonesia. Both countries have collaborated on industrial projects and signed bilateral agreements in various fields. The two countries signed a joint agreement in 2008, the day after Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's state visit to Iran, to build a 300,000-barrel-per-day oil refinery in Indonesia as part of a joint venture between the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and Indonesian national oil company Pertamina, and a 360,000-barrel-per-day plant to refine gas liquids in the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and a 1 million tons-a-year urea plant in southern Iran.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The Iranian nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which eased some of the international sanctions against Iran in exchange for Tehran limiting its nuclear program, was signed by Iran and the P5+1 in 2015 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council — China, France, Russia, the United States and the UK plus Germany).

Indonesia welcomed the JCPOA, noting in a statement from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs that "The agreement proved the effectiveness of peaceful ways to solve problems in line with the Indonesian position which has always called for diplomacy and dialogue in seeking a solution to the problem over Iran's nuclear program."⁽⁵⁰⁾ Since then, bilateral trade relations between Iran

and Southeast Asian countries rapidly developed. A trade delegation from Indonesia visited Iran a couple of months before the JCPOA to participate in the Iran-Indonesia Economic Commission. The then Iranian Minister of Communication Mahmoud Vaezi and the then Indonesian Co-coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Sofyan Djalil inked an agreement during the event to raise the trade volume to \$2 billion.⁽⁵¹⁾

Indonesia expanded its oil sector collaboration with Iran shortly after the JCPOA. The two countries inked a lucrative agreement under which they would work together on a project worth \$8.4 billion as per which a 300,000-barrel refinery would be built in Indonesia.⁽⁵²⁾ A deal to jointly construct an oil refinery with a 50,000-barrel daily capacity in East Java Island, Indonesia, was later reached in 2015 by Iran, Indonesia, and China.⁽⁵³⁾

The Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, and past sanctions and more were imposed on Iran. The sanctions also applied to any country that purchased oil from Iran and financial institutions that conducted transactions with Iranian banks.

In the aftermath of the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA, Indonesia issued a statement in which "regret" was expressed over the withdrawal.⁽⁵⁴⁾ A statement issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs termed the JCPOA as an important achievement of diplomacy that contributed to the promotion of the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons as well as stability in the world.⁽⁵⁵⁾

The United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA also impacted Indonesian firms. In 2019, the United States District Court for the District of Columbia charged an Indonesian citizen named Sunarko Kuntijoro and three Indonesian-based businesses, PT MS Aero Support (PTMS), PT Kandiyasa Energi Utama (PTKEU), and PT Antasena Kreasi (PTAK), with violating US sanctions against Iran by exporting US-origin goods and technology to the Tehran-based aviation firm Mahan Air. This airline was earlier listed as a Specially Designated National and Blocked Person (SDN) for providing financial, material and technological support to Iran's IRGC-affiliated Quds Force.⁽⁵⁶⁾

A year later, two Iranian citizens, Sahebali Moulaei and Mohsen Faghihi, along with two Indonesian citizens, Arnold Kaunang and Alfrets Kaunang, were charged with 19 counts of exporting US aircraft parts to Iran in violation of US export laws and sanctions against Iran by a US federal court in the Eastern District of Virginia. The court ruling also mentioned the existence of "front companies" with offices in Indonesia that were used to hide the country of origin to facilitate the purchase and export of US-made aviation parts to Iran.⁽⁵⁷⁾

In 2020, Indonesia abstained from voting in response to a United Nations Security Council resolution proposed by the United States that called for an extension of the arms embargo on Iran. According to the Director of International Security and Disarmament at Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Grata Endah Werdaningtyas, Jakarta took the position of abstention because it considered the draft resolution to be inconsistent with the JCPOA.⁽⁵⁸⁾ A year later, during a visit to Indonesia, the then Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif praised Indonesia for supporting the JCPOA and for pushing UNSC Resolution 2231⁽⁵⁹⁾ into practice. Zarif also expressed hope that the two countries' business relations would continue to improve through the establishment of the Iran-Indonesia Joint Business Commission and other agreements.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Since the start of the JCPOA talks, Indonesia expressed its support for an agreement between Iran and its Western counterparts. The JCPOA, according to Indonesia's envoy to Tehran at the time, Octavio Alimudin, was the only option for Iran to advance and for the international community to keep track of Iran's nuclear activities. The envoy further stated that Indonesia would be able to purchase liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) from Iran under the JCPOA, which was previously prohibited under the embargo; this helped increase bilateral trade between Indonesia and Iran.⁽⁶¹⁾

The then Permanent Representative of Indonesia to the United Nations in Vienna Darmansjah Djumala expressed Indonesia's support for the JCPOA during a meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors. While urging the United States to resume negotiations with Iran, Ambassador Djumala acknowledged positive developments such as a bilateral technical agreement between Iran and the IAEA that would allow the nuclear watchdog to carry out its duty of monitoring and inspecting Iran's nuclear program.⁽⁶²⁾

In 2021 during a virtual meeting between the Iranian Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdul Reza Zabib and the Director-General of the Asia Pacific and Africa at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Abdul Kadir Jailani, the two countries agreed to complete the negotiations on the Indonesia-Iran Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA).⁽⁶³⁾

In May 2022, an Indonesian delegation led by the Deputy Chairman of the Indonesian House of Representatives Coordinator for Industry and Development Rachmat Gobel visited Tehran. The Iranian side, during the negotiations, emphasized the necessity of establishing a specialized working group to lay out a plan for promoting the expansion of commercial ties between the two countries. The Iranian side also stressed that the trade commitments made during President Widodo's visit to Iran in 2016 were not met.⁽⁶⁴⁾

Agenda of Bilateral Visits and Meetings

Formal diplomatic interactions between Iran and Indonesia continued after

the Iranian revolution, as mentioned earlier, despite Indonesian concerns about the spillover of the "religious democracy" political model that was in contradiction to its secular and inclusive values as well as against the religious beliefs of the majority Muslim population.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Iran managed to gain the sympathy of a significant section of the Indonesian population, which has been exploited by visiting dignitaries from Iran during state visits to Indonesia.

The 2006 state visit to Indonesia by former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was the ideal illustration of Iranian populism in the country. According to classified American diplomatic cables published on WikiLeaks titled "Indonesia/Iran: Ahmadinejad a Difficult Guest," Indonesia attempted to play a diplomatic role to help in resolving the conflict between Iran and the United States. Despite Indonesia's desire to play a constructive role as a mediator, the American cables noted that the then Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was taken aback by Ahmadinejad's belligerent bluster, hardline ideology, and disrespectful behaviour toward his Indonesian hosts during his state visit to Jakarta, including his "aggressive rhetoric and breaches of protocol, which alarmed and embarrassed President Yudhoyono."⁽⁶⁶⁾

Ahmadinejad, during his visit, was received warmly by Indonesian students and Muslim groups. During his meetings and public events, he described Israel as a "cancer" and a "tyrannical" regime and repeated his assertion that Islam would supplant liberal democracy as the world's dominant ideology, calling on all Muslims to reject liberal democracy and the West. The American cables also noted that President Yudhoyono claimed that Ahmadinejad continued with his rhetoric at the D-8 summit (the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, also known as Developing-8) in Bali to mobilize support for his country's nuclear program. President Yudhoyono was worried that his and Indonesia's international reputation would suffer because of the country's association with Ahmadinejad.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Another paragraph from the leaked American cables stated that the National Security Advisor to the Indonesian President Patti Djalal said "President Yudhoyono was in a 'bad mood' and believed that Ahmadinejad had abused Indonesian hospitality by his verbal attacks on Israel and strident acts while on Indonesian soil. It is one thing to make these comments for domestic audiences in Iran, Djalal said, but it is disrespectful to the host to do so while on a state visit. Yudhoyono now fears that association with these tirades may have damaged Indonesia's international reputation."⁽⁶⁸⁾

During a guest lecture at a university in Depok, Ahmadinejad defended the Iranian nuclear program and scathingly criticised Israel. This was met with applause from an enthusiastic crowd of students. During the talk, some students carried banners reading "Iran in Our Hearts" and "Nuclear Power

for Peace.” Ahmadinejad generated a loud applause when responding to a question he found to his liking, and he spontaneously offered a student a scholarship to study in Iran.⁽⁶⁹⁾

In December 2016, Indonesian President Joko Widodo paid a state visit to Iran. During the visit, which occurred nearly a year after the implementation of the JCPOA, President Widodo held bilateral meetings with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, where the two leaders discussed cooperation in the energy sector.⁽⁷⁰⁾ During the meeting, the Indonesian premier committed to buying more than 500,000 metric tons of LPG from Iran. President Widodo was accompanied by 60 Indonesian entrepreneurs who explored trade and investment opportunities in Iran.⁽⁷¹⁾ President Widodo also held a separate meeting with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The press release of the meeting published by the Office of the Supreme Leader of Iran mentioned that the low level of economic exchange between Iran and Indonesia does not reflect the considerable capacities of the two countries. “By determining [clear-cut] time intervals, the volume of economic exchange between the two countries must increase to such figures as high as \$20 billion a year,” the press release said.⁽⁷²⁾

Conclusion

Considering this study, the following two observations can be made. First, Indonesia hopes to establish itself as a “middle power” in international relations by participating in bilateral and multilateral engagements with Iran. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia hopes to leverage this position and play a more proactive role in bridging the differences between Iran and the West. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis has highlighted Jakarta’s ambitious foreign policy to project itself on the international stage, best exemplified by Indonesian President Widodo’s state visits to Moscow and Kyiv.

Second, Jakarta has vigorously opposed any Iranian populism or revolutionary rhetoric within its borders. This can be deduced by noting that no Iranian head of state has made a state visit to Indonesia since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s controversial trip there in 2006.

Whether the JCPOA is revived or not will be the key factor in determining the future of relations between Iran and Indonesia. Jakarta, driven by “economic pragmatism,” wants to improve its economic ties with Iran, especially in the energy sector. The Indonesian government and businesses may be encouraged to access the Iranian energy market if the JCPOA is reinstated, but the enthusiasm may not be as high as it was following the adoption of the agreement in 2015 due to the bad experiences after the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the JCPOA. Recent events such as the killing of the Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani that heightened tensions between Iran

and the United States; the escalation of attacks launched by the Iran-backed Houthi militia on Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and the impasse at the Vienna talks due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict have put Jakarta in a tight spot, where neutrality and a policy of economic pragmatism with Tehran may no longer be a viable option. Iran, meanwhile, will continue to use all the resources at its disposal, from Indonesia's Shiite minority to its revolutionary and anti-Western rhetoric, to strengthen its position and influence in the country.

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