

RESEARCH BRIEF

Islamic Attitudes towards Israel and Jews: A comparison of Malaysia and Indonesia

Syed Imad Alatas
National University of Singapore
i.alatas@u.nus.edu

In Southeast Asia, Malaysia is notoriously known as a hotbed for anti-Semitic attitudes towards Jews. The general sentiment is that Israel is a country guilty of war crimes, and Jews are in one way or another implicated in these crimes. In a country where almost two-thirds of its population are Muslim, and very few Jews reside if at all, the presence of antisemitism is a notable phenomenon. Antisemitism is essentially directed towards outsiders. Particularly under the Mahathir administration, Malaysia is often cast in the spotlight for its views on Israel and Jews. To that effect, the Malaysian government views Israel and the injustices of the Arab-Israeli conflict through the lenses of “Islamic solidarity.” Israel, Jews, and Zionism are grouped together as an enemy of Islam; little distinction is made between these three categories. This lack of distinction functions as a form of political expediency in Malaysia, where they lambast Israel and Jews, garners political mileage for politicians.

Indonesia, the country with the world’s largest Muslim population, is home to a minuscule community of Jews. Like Malaysia, it does not have formal relations with Israel. When it comes to being anti-Israel and anti-Semitic, Islam does not perform the same function that it does in Malaysia. Historically, Islam as an ideology has not dominated Indonesia’s foreign policy, particularly with regards to Israel and Jews. Notions of sovereignty rather than an Islamic brotherhood are what drive Indonesian foreign policy towards Israel. Regarding the conditions of Jews in Indonesia, there are small Jewish communities, particularly in Northern

Sulawesi. They are free to practice their religion; one or two synagogues can be found in Indonesia.

The key difference between Malaysia and Indonesia is the nature of antisemitism that exists. On a quantitative level, antisemitism is less prevalent in Indonesia, according to The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) survey conducted in 2014, where it received a score lower than that of Malaysia (ADL, 2014): 48% versus 61%. This difference is best explained by the differing domestic politics that operate in both countries. In Indonesia, Islamic circles have a marginal, though by no means invisible, influence on propagating views of Jews and Israel.

At the official level, I will analyze Malaysia and Indonesia’s attitudes towards Israel from the time both countries achieved independence. It is after independence that both countries were able to begin formulating their foreign policy. Furthermore, the post-colonial era in Southeast Asia coincided largely with the early years of Israel’s formation. Islamic discourse, mostly against Israel, was vociferous. Malaysia and Indonesia had to deal with this vociferousness.

I will argue that the vilification of Jews and criticism of Israel is far more aggressive in the Malaysian context as it is a source of greater political expediency stemming from a greater politicization of Islam. I will first introduce the theoretical framework and methodology to understand Malaysian and Indonesian attitudes towards Israel and Jews. Following this, I will consider some historical developments in Malaysia and Indonesia regarding its foreign policy on Israel

to elucidate both countries' domestic politics. It is during these historical developments in their foreign policy that views of Israel were concretized. Finally, I will argue that antisemitism in Malaysia is far more pervasive than it is in Indonesia due to a higher degree of the politicization of religion in the former. There are also voices in Indonesia advocating for a multiculturalist attitude towards the different faiths.

Theoretical Framework

The topic for this study falls under the rubric of foreign policy analysis, which is the study of how states or political leaders devise foreign policy, implement it, and react to their regional and global geopolitical environment. Additionally, foreign policy is also used to advance a country's domestic interests. Ideally, both the foreign policy objectives of a country and its national interests are concurrently achieved. The constructivist approach will be used to study and compare Malaysia and Indonesia's attitudes towards Israel and Jews.

Attitudes towards and perceptions of a particular country or social phenomenon are always grounded in processes of meaning-making. These processes relate to the meanings a country attaches to its own identity in its geopolitical environment. The identity of states is what determines its interests in international relations and foreign policy. Identity can, of course, change over time, changes that are acknowledged in constructivism. In the Malaysian case, constructivism was reflected by the differing postures it took with regards to its anti-communist foreign policy. Initially, an ardent anti-communist and an ally of the U.S. during the Cold War, it drew itself closer to the Non-Aligned Movement that opposed colonial or neo-colonial states such as Israel. Theories such as realism and liberalism do not lend importance to the role of ideas and beliefs in international relations. They emphasize the idea of power, as opposed to the power of ideas. Within the logic of the idea of power, material resources are what determine foreign policy. Hence, there is a pre-determined world order according to which states are simply operating.

Social categories, such as religious identity, are not given importance in foreign policy analyses. Moreover, Eurocentric social sciences are grounded in the rejection of religion and the promotion of Enlightenment forms of rationality and secularity

(Tadjbakhsh, 2010). Constitutionally, Malaysia and Indonesia may not be Islamic states. Islam is one among other religions in the Indonesian Constitution. In Malaysia, Islam is the only religion stated in the Federal Constitution. However, the term "Islamic state" was not incorporated into either Constitution. However, Islam has, directly or indirectly, played a role in both countries' views towards Israel and Jews. The constructivist approach attributes agency to human individuals in that they shape international relations through their beliefs and actions. Articulations of religious identity are one way through which agency is expressed.

In the Malaysian and Indonesian context, such ideas play a pivotal role in foreign policy decision-making when it comes to relations with Israel. Islam, as an ideology, plays such a role. However, it is not just Islam but also a unique Islamic identity that influences how Israel and Jews ought to be perceived. This paper will show how various Malaysian and Indonesian administrations have attached any importance to Islam in the foreign policy towards Israel and attitudes towards Jews.

Methods

This essay will employ an exploratory qualitative study of the topic by reviewing secondary literature that focuses on Malaysia's and Indonesia's history of relations with Israel and the domestic politics in these two countries that drive such relations. Examples of the literature reviewed include media statements and statements made by leaders on official platforms and documents, such as memoirs or historical accounts illustrating views on Israel and the historical presence of Jews in Malaysia and Indonesia. A comparative approach will be undertaken to analyze the distinctive domestic politics that operate in both countries. The basic premise of exploratory research is that reality is socially constructed (Reiter, 2013). Exploratory research does not seek to make authoritative truth claims about a social phenomenon. Rather, it provides plausible ways of explaining the phenomenon in question. Rather than being methodologically relativistic, exploratory research shows that there can be better and worse explanations of reality. Hence, even competing explanations can co-exist. This study will aim to draw plausible links between perceptions of Islam and views towards Israel and Jews. The

exploratory study is best suited for a constructivist approach as it will be able to go back in time and survey statements or sentiments that formulate the governments' views on Israel and Jews.

Malaysia's Official Stance on Israel

Malaysia and Israel do not have diplomatic relations with one another. The statement on the pages of Malaysian passports that reads "This passport is valid for all countries except Israel" is a reminder of how the government feels about Israel. The principal reason for this absence of relations is Malaysia's opposition towards Israeli atrocities conducted against the Palestinians. Only a solution to the plight of the Palestinians will lead to a détente between the two countries. Amongst Malaysia's political leadership, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad is the most outspoken critic of Israel and Jews. He has not shied away from his opinion on Jews, saying they are "not merely hook-nosed, but understand money instinctively" (Mahathir, 1970, p. 84). During the Organisation of the Islamic Conference summit, he also commented that "we (Muslims globally) are actually very strong. 1.3 billion people cannot be simply wiped out. The Europeans killed 6 million Jews out of 12 million. But today the Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them" (Mahathir, 2003, par. 39). The Malaysian Foreign Ministry has clearly stated its views on Israel, with one example being during international sports competitions. In January 2019, foreign minister Saifuddin Abdullah issued a press release criticizing Israel for continuing to "disregard the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, while committing inhumane policies and practices that are in clear violation of international laws" (Saifuddin, 2019, par. 2). He said this in response to Israel's foreign ministry accusing Malaysia of opposing the spirit of competition after the latter banned Israeli athletes from the World Para Swimming that was scheduled to take place in July 2019. In the last few years, Malaysia has also consistently condemned Israeli atrocities committed in Gaza.

Malaysia's stance on Israel has been more or less unchanging. It would be more accurate to assess the anti-Israel stance on an "anti-Israel" spectrum rather than according to an anti-Israel/pro-Israel dichotomy. Questions of Islamic identity in Malaysia have played a significant role in foreign policy towards Israel

and views towards Jews. The first and best-known instance of diplomatic contact between Malaysia and Israel goes back to 1956 when Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett met with the then Chief Minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman (Podoler, 2017). They discussed appointing an Israeli consul in Kuala Lumpur. Diplomacy between the two was clear when in 1957, just after Malaya gained independence, Israel supported the admission of the Federation of Malaya to membership in the United Nations. However, Tunku Abdul Rahman in Malaya opposed diplomatic relations with Israel. The early 1950s further saw a "growing Islamic consciousness and piety" among the Muslims, aided by the establishment of various Islamic civil society movements (Liow & Afif, 2015, p. 50). Recognizing Israel would have been politically unwise because the Islamic opposition could use it against Tunku's government, the ruling United Malays National Organization. For most of Tunku Abdul Rahman's tenure, Malaysia did not formally recognize Israel. External factors also dictated Malaysia's hostility towards Israel and Jews.

On the regional front, in 1963, Indonesian Foreign Minister Dr Subandrio accused Malaysia of being a "neo-colonialist" British-dependent state, launching a policy of Confrontation (or *Konfrontasi*) against it (Saravanamuttu, 2010, p. 87). Malaysia had broken off ties with Indonesia after the former's proclamation in September 1963. *Konfrontasi* came to dominate Malaysian foreign policy in security and defense matters. It also had the effect of transforming Malaysia's hitherto anti-communist stance into one of diplomatic efforts to establish relations with countries in Afro-Asia and, later on, Eastern Europe. The Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Cairo in 1964, in which Malaysia failed to participate, prompted Malaysia to align itself with Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In this vein, Malaysia sought to position itself in relation to Arab states using the trope of Muslim solidarity to support the Palestinian cause for statehood. It also needed to gain Arab sympathy amidst *Konfrontasi*. As a result, Malaysia distanced itself from Israel and aligned itself to the Third World. The King and Malaysian diplomats frequently visited the Arab States, such as Kuwait and Egypt, where they were warmly received. These diplomatic overtures constituted Malaysian efforts in creating its image as a champion for Muslims globally. In the 1966 parliamentary session in Kuala Lumpur, Tunku Abdul Rahman denounced Malaysia's

ties with Israel, going so far as to berate Singapore for having Israeli advisers (Yegar, 2016).

During the Mahathir administration starting from 1981, Malaysia became more outspoken against Israel and its atrocities. In fact, Malaysia has supported the Palestinian Liberation Organization more than any other Southeast Asian country (Yegar, 2016). Mahathir consistently raised the Palestine question at United Nations meetings. For Mahathir, the Arab-Israeli conflict was viewed through a dichotomous lens: the Israeli state is the oppressor, whereas the Palestinian Muslims are the victims. It was clear which side was being denied justice. Although the Malaysian government has been consistent in supporting Palestinian efforts for independence, Mahathir was more vocal in that he voiced his anti-Israel sentiments in public. He insisted that the use of force by Israel and Palestine should be interpreted differently. The Palestinian use of force was only a means of self-defense against Israeli terrorist activity. Notably, Mahathir did soften his hard-line stance against Israel in the midst of the Israeli-PLO Declaration of Principles in Oslo in 1993, though this by no means meant he was ready to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. He merely considered it only if Israel worked harder to bring peace to the Middle East.

Abdullah Badawi's tone regarding Israel was more moderate and less bellicose than his predecessor's. Under Badawi's Prime Ministership, Malaysia assumed the role of the Chair of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Being the largest grouping of Muslim nations, Badawi was able to use Malaysia's international stature to articulate his views on the Israeli-Palestinian problem. In particular, he stressed the need for peace to be accorded to both sides of the conflict in a fair and just manner. Although he did note that the Palestinians needed to supersede their internal divisions to orchestrate a united front against Israeli occupation, he was also critical of the way the U.S. handled the conflict. At the APEC summit in South Korea in 2005, as Chair of the ASEAN Standing Committee, Badawi discussed with then U.S. President George W. Bush that the U.S. had to "play a bigger role in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and that it was perceived that the U.S. dealt with the two countries inequitably..." (Sodhy, 2012, p. 27). In 2009, Badawi was yet again critical of the U.S. for vetoing the UN Security Council's resolution to condemn Israel in lieu of its attacks on the Gaza Strip. Hence, Malaysia's

engagement with Israel during Badawi's era was mediated through the U.S. This symbolized Badawi's intent on using diplomatic channels to address the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Though less aggressive in his criticism of Israel than Mahathir, the former Prime Minister Najib Razak did make it clear which side he was on. For him, there was no compromise to be made regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict except that the state of Israel should stop oppressing the Palestinians. It was in 2013 that Najib visited Gaza at the invitation of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist organization. In his meeting with Hamas' leader Ismail Haniya, Najib explained that "this is a humanitarian visit to express our deep concerns for what happens to the Palestinian people in Gaza and to express our opposition to the aggression on Gaza" ("Malaysian PM in solidarity visit to Gaza," 2013, par. 4. Under Najib, UMNO's relationship with Hamas could best be described as a close one, with Hamas representatives being invited to UMNO's annual party conference every year. His most vociferous criticism of Israel came in December 2017 when he vocally challenged the decision of U.S. President Donald Trump to declare Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Malaysia has generally viewed Israel as an adversarial state that is only worthy of diplomatic recognition once it stops oppressing the Palestinians. Malaysian leaders have not sought to build diplomatic bridges with Israel. The context in Indonesia is slightly different in that leaders were not painstakingly anti-Israel, although they did not formally recognize Israel.

Indonesia's Official Stance on Israel

At first, Indonesia's view of Israel seems similar to that of Malaysia's. It too condemns "the continuation of Israeli illegal settlements development in Palestinian territories" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019, par. 1. It was Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi who made this statement at the United Nations headquarters in New York in May 2019. Malaysia and Indonesia also condemned the U.S.' recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the transfer of the embassy from Tel Aviv to the Holy City. Unlike Malaysia, there has been a change, albeit minor, in Indonesia's orientation towards Israel. This change entailed an unprecedented openness towards establishing ties with Israel.

Since 1949, when the Dutch recognized Indonesia's independence, Israel has made concerted efforts to build a relationship with the country (Muhammad, 2013). By January 1950, Israel recognized Indonesia as a new state. Although the then Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett considered sending a goodwill mission to Jakarta, his counterpart Muhammad Hatta postponed such plans indefinitely. On the other hand, Arab countries had already recognized Indonesia as a new state before the Dutch handover in 1949. Egypt was an example of such a country, recognizing Indonesia in 1947. It is also significant that Indonesian nationalist leader Sukarno and Egypt's Pan-Arabism leader Gamal Abdul Nasser were founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement. In this respect, Indonesia's alignment with the Middle East was not based on co-religionist (Islam) considerations but on the need to gain international support for its independence claims (Rizal, 2003).

Under Sukarno, Indonesia's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict was not dictated by Islam, but rather by a left-leaning philosophy of the global order. Sukarno classified global powers into two categories: the New Emerging Forces, or *nefos*, and the Old Established Forces, or *oldefos* (Modelski, 1963, p. 80). Indonesia was part of the *nefos* together with socialist countries. Israel belonged to the *oldefos* because they were supported by Western powers such as the U.S. and U.K. Sukarno's support for the Arabs in the Arab-Israeli conflict constituted a form of anti-imperialist struggle rather than pan-Islamic solidarity. In other words, Israel was regarded as the symbol of imperialism in the Afro-Asian world. During the 1955 Bandung Conference on Asian and African countries, Israel was excluded (Yegar, 2006, p. 141).

In the New Order under Suharto, Indonesia continued to reject Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. Like Sukarno, Suharto's foreign policy was not influenced by concerns of Islamic solidarity. Furthermore, the New Order tended to be more moderate in the anti-Israel stance. The Middle East was not the main concern of Suharto's government (very few leaders in Indonesia believed the Arab-Israeli conflict impinged on Indonesia's national interest). Instead, the goals of political stability and economic reconstruction were more important to achieve. Islam played an even lesser role in Indonesia's foreign policy. With the Communist bloc under Sukarno now defunct, the military viewed Islam as a threat to its political

dominance. Domestic economic imperatives meant that Suharto's government was markedly pro-West, especially towards the U.S., which supported Israel. During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Indonesia refrained from embargoing oil exports to countries that supported Israel, such as the U.S. and South Africa (Bickerton & Klausner, 2007).

On the military front, there were secret contacts between the Israeli and Indonesian armies, who were impressed with the former's capabilities after the 1967 Six-Day War. Some Arab countries questioned Indonesia's position, noting that it did not show its full support for them during the war. Adding to his view on the Arab-Israeli conflict was his reluctance to let the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) open an office in Jakarta. The government was afraid the office could be used by extreme Muslim groups in Indonesia to carry out anti-government activities. Suharto kept a tight lid on Islamic political activity during most of his years in power by adhering, at least officially, to a foreign policy with pan-Islamic underpinnings to stifle criticism from Islamist radicals. In reality, Islam was merely promoted as a religion to be practiced privately; it was denied a public space where Islam could be politically expressed. At the end of the 1980s, he officially recognized Palestine as a "state" and proceeded to open a Palestinian embassy in Jakarta in April 1990 (Yegar, 2006). Suharto sought to adopt a more open view of Israel and Palestine. This coincided with "greater inclusion of Islamic content into Indonesian foreign policy... expressed only in form, not in substance" (Rizal, 2003, p. 77). This strategic policy move garnered support from Muslims domestically and improved Indonesia's image as a leading Third World country. Restrictions on granting entry visas to Israelis were removed while Indonesian journalists were permitted to visit Israel. Suharto accepted a visit by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to Indonesia in October 1993, a month after PLO leader Yasser Arafat came to Jakarta. During the visit, Rabin raised the issue of relations with Israel. Suharto responded by saying that diplomatic relations could only be established once the Palestinians achieved independence.

Abdulrahman Wahid, one of Suharto's successors, was especially keen on establishing diplomatic ties with Israel (Al Hadi, 2010). Members within Nahdlatul Ulama, a traditionalist Islamic movement that he formerly led, also supported his idea (Wahid, 2010). He thought it did not make sense to have diplomatic

relations with China and Russia, atheist states, and not acknowledge Israel, who, like Indonesia, believed in God. Wahid's pluralistic view of religion was, in fact, in accordance with the official state ideology (*Pancasila*) where Islam is not given explicit priority to create an inclusive socio-political landscape for Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and other non-Muslims (Paris, 1996). Judaism, though, is not included in the Indonesian Constitution. From a pragmatic standpoint, Wahid sought to open trade ties with Israel, aware that it could help in Indonesia's economic recovery during the Asian Financial Crisis. Indonesia could use the Jewish lobby to attract foreign investment. Muslim clerics and activists opposed a relationship with Israel, noting that it went against the Indonesian Constitution that opposed all forms of colonialism. Most notably, the post-Suharto era saw the rise of a great number of Islamic parties. In fact, it was Islamic forces that played a key role in ousting Suharto. This was made possible by the abolition of the 1985 Mass Organization Law which required all organizations to adopt *Pancasila* as their "sole ideological basis" (Azyumardi, 2006, p. 27). However, the Islamic factor was still conspicuously absent in Indonesia's foreign policy. Relations with the Middle East, including Israel, were encouraged insofar as they advanced domestic economic interests. Eventually, Abdulrahman's political power succumbed to, among other factors, the hostility of radical Muslim organizations who vehemently opposed any sort of relationship with Israel.

Like Abdulrahman Wahid, his successor Megawati Sukarnoputri continued the policy of showing support towards Palestine and urging Israel to recognize an independent Palestine state. At the Summit Meeting of the 56-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference in 2002, she criticized developed countries that mistreated Palestinian people (Muhammad, 2013). Her foreign policy, like her predecessors, continued to be dictated by domestic political and international interests rather than religious inclinations. One such interest was the economic recovery that the country badly needed due to the 1997 financial crisis. In explaining her visit to nine ASEAN countries after her inauguration, she said that the visit was meant to develop a business environment conducive for the implementation of domestic recovery measures (Rizal, 2003). Reference to the Arab-Israeli world and Islam was practically absent in her foreign policy. This was evident when she made no plans to visit Middle Eastern

countries during her first year in power. Economic recovery, which depended on international support, further dictated a foreign policy that was pro-West. Being explicitly anti-Israel meant being anti-U.S., which Indonesia could ill-afford. Nevertheless, the September 11 attacks meant that she could not dismiss an Islamic agenda. Megawati's government was torn between two positions. She had to choose between supporting the U.S.' "War on Terror" and not looking like a weak state submitting to the U.S. in front of her citizens. After President Megawati's visit to the White House on September 19, 2001, anti-American protests within radical Islamist circles occurred. They viewed her visit as tacit support for the U.S.' plan to attack Afghanistan. The Indonesian Council of Ulama's also called for Muslims to engage in *Jihad* or holy war, should the invasion of Afghanistan occur. When it did occur, the Megawati administration criticized the U.S. military campaign, owing to pressure from the Islamic circles. However, she made no reference to Islam in her criticism. Indonesia did not cut diplomatic ties with the U.S. either. Megawati's foreign policy required the engagement of the U.S. for Indonesia's national interests. Her foreign policy did not disregard the Islamic factor; it just was not dictated by it. Notwithstanding her criticism of the U.S., Israel was not censured during her time.

Former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) has demonstrated strong support for Palestinian independence through the United Nations platform (Tasevski, 2018). In 2011, Indonesia supported Palestine's membership in the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. In 2012, it also voted in favor of granting Palestine non-Member Observer State status in the UN. During the Yudhoyono administration, SBY and his foreign minister, Marty Natalegawa, consistently advocated in favor of Palestinian independence. President Jokowi Widodo's government has also demonstrated its support for Palestine at the United Nations. In June 2018, Indonesia supported a United Nations General Assembly resolution censuring Israel's excessive use of force against Palestinian civilians protesting in the Gaza Strip in 2018, resulting in the deaths of over 100 Palestinians.

Notwithstanding the presence of a large Muslim population and the plethora of Muslim civil society groups in Indonesia, Islam did not play a crucial role in Indonesia's view towards Israel. Recognizing

Israel certainly would have upset the Muslim majority in the country. For many Indonesian Muslims, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is an Islamic problem (Rizal, 2003). However, this demographic factor was not at the top of the hierarchy of concerns for the various Indonesian governments. It was more imperative that Israel recognized Palestine on the grounds of sovereignty rather than Islamic solidarity. The plight of Palestinians is also not widely used as a tool during election campaigns in Indonesia to gain support from the electorate. Views propagated at the international level can trickle down to the national level. The next two sections will explain how the Malaysian and Indonesian governments' views on Israel and Jews are reflected in their domestic politics.

Jews and the 'Islam' Factor in Malaysian Politics

Today, Jews in Malaysia are generally non-existent, or they exist in very small numbers at best. It is important to note that the antisemitism in Malaysia should not be confused with the classical antisemitism in the Christian and certain parts of the Arab Islamic world where there was, and is, persecution of a visible Jewish population (Ainslie, 2019). Instead, antisemitism in Malaysia is a by-product of racial politics and competing claims to Islamic legitimacy. During the 19th and early 20th century, there was a small Jewish community living in Penang. Penang houses a Jewish cemetery that was set up in 1805 and has about 110 graves. The last known Malaysian Jew, David Mordecai, died in 2011 at 87 years old and is buried in this cemetery.

Suffice to say, moral opposition to Israel's actions against the Palestinians need not equate to the same opposition towards ordinary Jews. It is necessary to clarify what antisemitism means for the word is often misused and instrumentalized to silence criticism of Israeli policies. Antisemitism is a deep-seated bigotry that involves a process of "othering" a group of people. It further involves a demonization of Jews as a group of people that "harbor demonic or evil powers," a demonization prevalent even in medieval Christian Europe (Marcus, 2015, p. 156). Criticism against Israeli policy is merely a matter of principle and belief, not a character assassination of Jews. Antisemitism does not take into consideration whether Jewish people support

Zionism or not. This consideration should be present when talking about the state of Israel.

In Malaysia, support for the Palestine cause is grounded within a nationalist and co-religionist Muslim framework that portrays Zionism as not just antagonistic towards countries' sovereignty but against the religion of Islam itself (Nair, 1997). The current 21st-century political climate infused with nationalism, religious identity, and exclusivism has made it perilous to have a favorable attitude towards Israel and Judaism. Being against Israeli policy in Palestine and Jews carry equal moral significance. Israeli policy on Palestine is strategically used by Malaysian Muslim politicians and religious elites to create a narrative that Jews are evil and ill-intentioned. Jews are seen as a microcosm of what is wrong with the world. In this respect, promoting a positive understanding of Jews may not garner a party political mileage. The proverbial battle lines are drawn in religious discourse, with Muslims being portrayed as the group of people who need to stand up against the Jewish oppressors in Palestine. Muslims, Palestinians or not, are the victims of such oppression. Such a narrative is simplistic and easily lends itself to be used for garnering support from the Malaysian Muslim masses. During his first tenure, Mahathir's outspokenness on the oppression of Palestinians helped to nullify criticism back at home that the ruling government, UMNO, was not "Islamic" enough. As a global spokesperson for the disenfranchised, he undercut the Malaysian Islamic Party's (PAS) claim of Islamic legitimacy (Dhillon, 2009).

The above anti-Semitic narrative is situated within a wider discourse of Muslim extremism known as Salafism that marginalizes non-Muslims or Muslims who do not follow the Sunni Islam school of thought. Salafism, a literalist and ahistorical interpretation of Islam, permeates all levels of Malaysia's political bureaucracy and even the education system. Elements of Muslim extremism within Malaysia's political and religious bureaucracy have been present since the period of Islamic revivalism when Malaysian students went to Islamic institutions in Saudi Arabia and Egypt to receive their education. Some came back with ideas homogenizing groups of people, such as the Jews.

PAS has taken on this anti-Semitic rhetoric by invoking the term 'ummah' (Müller, 2010). It refers to the global body of Muslims who are obliged to stand up for Muslims deemed to be oppressed – such as the

Palestinians. The term is convenient because it helps create a bifurcation between two groups of people, in this case, the Jews and Muslims. The problems of a community can then be attributed to external causes, such as a foreign group of people. There is less intellectual room to criticize oneself. As a result, an “us vs. them” mentality emerges. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was one of the key events in the Muslim world that shaped PAS’ worldview (Shiozaki, 2015). As previously mentioned, it is this Muslim victimization that gets translated into essentialism of the oppressor under the banner of Salafism. Under the rule of former Prime Minister Najib Razak, Saudi-sponsored Salafism permeated through Malaysian society at an unprecedented pace. With Salafism as an ideology able to take root in Malaysia through Saudi Arabia, it has been used to portray Jews as evil conspirators seeking to assert hegemony. For example, anti-Jewish propaganda in Malaysia has equated Jews with Shia Muslims. Anti-Shia Facebook pages are spreading conspiracies on how the Iranian government is allegedly in cahoots with the Jews to control the world and to remove Islamic governments from the face of the earth (Müller, 2017).

On the other hand, views of Jews in Indonesia are slightly more nuanced, owing to the presence of pluralistic voices.

Jewish Life in Indonesia

The first Jews arrived in Indonesia in the 17th century. They were businessmen operating on behalf of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Eventually, this company was liquidated in 1800 and came under the purview of the Dutch and became a colony called the Dutch East Indies. Jews from the Netherlands also came to settle in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century. Other Jews were immigrants from Iraq or Yemen. The first known post-VOC account of Jewish presence in the Dutch East Indies appeared around 1860. Jewish traveler Jacob Saphir visited the archipelago on his way to Australia. He reported the existence of Jews in Batavia, Surabaya, and Semarang. However, there was a lack of Jewish communal life. There was no synagogue, cemetery, or even teachers. Saphir lamented this reality, reporting that Jews were ashamed of their origin (Saphir’s letter documented in Hadler, 2004, pp. 295–299). This Jewish invisibility

continued until the first half of the 20th century. In 1921, Zionist fundraiser Israel Cohen arrived in Java and published a Zionist newspaper called *Erets Israel*. Five years later, the Dutch Indies Zionist Association was founded. By the late 1930s, there were about 2,500 Jews living in Indonesia, with most of them concentrated in Java (Kowner, 2011). Before the outbreak of WWII, Jews continued to grow in numbers to about 3,000. The outbreak of the war signaled a turning point for Jews in Indonesia. During the Japanese Occupation, there were rumors that the secret police of the Nazi army, the *Gestapo*, had asked their Japanese counterparts to arrest all Jews (Hadler, 2004). Jews of all nationalities were grouped together, be it Iraqi, German, Polish, or Dutch folk. After the Japanese’ unconditional surrender in 1945, the majority of Dutch Jews left Indonesia. Less and less Jews remained in Indonesia as Sukarno began implementing his nationalization policies in 1957. He ordered the nationalization of all Dutch businesses, expelling almost 46,000 Dutch nationals (Golstein, 2015); these included Dutch Jews. Sukarno’s participation in the Non-Aligned Movement, which included anti-Zionism, also made the situation of Jews in Indonesia precarious. Later on, the Suharto regime instrumentalized violence and kept a tight lid on discussions pertaining to violence. In this environment, Jews were easy targets of discrimination. Anti-Semitic literature also proliferated during his time, exposing “the Zionist hand in the shaping of the semi-secular state ideology Pancasila...” (Hadler, 2004, p. 307). The mid-1999 period also saw several publications blame the Jews for Suharto’s downfall through allegedly Jewish-inspired ideals of political reformation. This was followed by numerous books suggesting the Jews’ desire to take over the world (Ricci, 2011). Yet, moderate voices do exist in Indonesia. The late Muslim intellectual Nurcholish Madjid, who viewed Judaism in the same light as Islam, called for an emphasis on similarities rather than differences between religions and saw the historical Jewish-Muslim co-existence under Muslim rule as a point of reference that could inform Muslims today that such a relationship is possible.

Manado, the capital city of North Sulawesi, perhaps stands as an anomaly to the general invisibility of Judaism in Indonesia (Franke, 2013). A 62 feet tall menorah was built there at the end of 2011. The monument was financed by the Indonesian government, costing about US\$150,000. What is significant is that

North Sulawesi, a primarily Christian area, is a safe space for Indonesian Jews to practice their faith. The example of North Sulawesi also shows what happens when non-Jewish Indonesians meet Jewish Indonesians. Where the former group has generally not met or interacted with the latter, such interaction creates an atmosphere of mutual understanding and acceptance. “Non-Jewish Indonesians consider Jews in Indonesia first and foremost as representatives of Israel, Zionism, etc., until concrete encounters and communication with real Jews change their perception” (Franke, 2013, p. 50). In Malaysia, there are no known intellectual voices or empirical case studies emphasizing on the importance of mutual understanding between Muslims and Jews.

Conclusion

To conclude, Islam has played a role in the domestic politics of Malaysia and Indonesia to varying degrees. In Malaysia, Islam is politicized at the domestic and international levels with regard to the Palestine issue so that the state is able to garner electoral support. On a related note, preserving an Islamic image is crucial in silencing Islamic opposition that it is not “Islamic” enough. Opposing Israeli actions in Palestine goes hand in hand with caricaturing Jews as conspirators hell-bent on taking over the world. Malaysian governments, especially under Mahathir, do not shy away from anti-Semitic statements. In Indonesia, Islam plays a limited role in its foreign policy on Israel. Governments, especially the Wahid administration, have been keen on establishing ties with Israel. The Suharto administration was not concerned about voicing an Islamic opposition against Israel, delaying the opening of a Palestinian embassy in Jakarta. Despite antisemitism being present among the Indonesian Muslim masses, the intellectual atmosphere is diverse in that there are moderate voices advocating for Jews not to be discriminated against. Furthermore, antisemitism is not ingrained in the Indonesian political psyche like it is in Malaysia.

Recommendations for Future Research

Examining the attitudes of governments towards Israel is no doubt important from an international relations point of view. However, improvements to this paper could be made by examining the attitudes of ordinary Muslims towards Israel and Jews. Although

surveys have been conducted to examine these attitudes, especially in the Malaysian case, more studies could be done to look at how attitudes on the ground could influence foreign policy. Official statements of Israel and everyday attitudes towards Israel and Jews may not always agree with one another. Should a favorable or non-confrontational attitude towards Jews be seen as anomalous to the official stances of most Muslim countries towards Israel, or merely an alternative viewpoint? Combating antisemitism, which is different from any moral opposition towards Israeli policy in Palestine, requires a conversation between civil society leaders and statesmen.

Declaration of Ownership

This report is my original work.

Conflict of interest

None.

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