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## **THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY BY THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COUNTRIES TOWARDS INDONESIA**

**<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat & <sup>2</sup>Hasbi Aswar**

Department of International Relations,  
Universitas Islam Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

<sup>2</sup>*Corresponding author: [hasbiaswar@uii.ac.id](mailto:hasbiaswar@uii.ac.id)*

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### **ABSTRACT**

As part of their “Look East” foreign policy, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been focusing on enhancing their relations with several Asian countries, including Indonesia, which is the largest economy in Southeast Asia. The adoption of this policy has resulted in an apparent increase in cooperation between these Arab Gulf nations and Indonesia. There is a visible trend of growing cooperation between GCC countries and Indonesia, particularly during the first term of President Joko Widodo, covering areas from diplomacy, energy, and trade to investments. Although the expansion of diplomatic, energy and economic ties between both sides has been widely discussed in the literature, little attention has been paid to the public diplomacy strategies used by the GCC countries in their interactions with Indonesia. Realizing the limitations of their newly developing relationships with Indonesia and the importance

of promoting a positive image to secure their political and economic interests in the region, the GCC countries are fully aware of the need for effective public diplomacy strategies. This research, therefore, aims to examine the public diplomacy strategies employed by the GCC countries towards Indonesia. These strategies can be arguably divided into four distinct groups: educational initiatives, cultural activities, religious studies and practices, as well as humanitarian aid. This study argues that while public diplomacy has increasingly become an integral part of the GCC countries' strategies in establishing relations with Indonesia, the application of these strategies has been prevalent only among a few GCC countries in which extensive political and economic relations are already well forged with Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Public diplomacy, Indonesia, GCC, Gulf States, foreign policy, national interests.

## INTRODUCTION

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, located at the westernmost part of the Asian continent, have been making significant strides in their relationships with Indonesia in recent years. This is driven by their desire and eagerness to strengthen ties with Asian nations as part of their “Look East” foreign policy strategy, amidst the persistent instability in the Middle East and growing concerns over the perceived risk of economic decline in the Western world (Al-Adwani, 2020). Indonesia's status as Southeast Asia's largest economy and a leading member of the G20 has persuaded the GCC countries to enhance their economic and political relations. With a majority Muslim population of approximately 250 million people, Indonesia is commonly perceived by the GCC countries as an attractive country for potentially profitable investment opportunities and export markets. Indonesia's strategic geographical location also offers the GCC countries a gateway to strengthen their positions in the Asia and Pacific region (Alagos, 2022). With the possible economic downturn arising from the US-China trade dispute and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the GCC countries have attempted to find alternative partners in Asia. As a result, Indonesia appears to be their priority (Rakhmat & Utama, 2020).

The interest of the GCC members has been strongly welcomed by the government in Jakarta. Indonesia offers the GCC countries access

to untapped export opportunities and investment destinations. On the other hand, the country has earmarked member states of the GCC as crucial gateways to expand its exports to the wider and incredibly lucrative Middle East and North African markets. Discovering new and alternative sources of foreign investment and markets is of the utmost importance under the current President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s economic agenda and strategy. This priority is warranted. Despite its status as Southeast Asia’s largest economy, Indonesia is conscious of the need to identify and attract foreign direct investment (FDI) to improve its weakening economy, expedite growth and reduce unemployment (Thee, 2012). Moreover, the continuing status of China as Indonesia’s largest trading partner and investor remains uncertain and is the subject of academic debate (Rakhmat & Purnama, 2020). The intensification of anti-China sentiment in the country, compounded by the enforcement of travelling and business restrictions in order to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, has prompted the Indonesian government to reconsider its substantial dependence on China as its major export market and source of FDI (Rakhmat & Purnama, 2020). The ongoing trade war between China and the US has steered foreign manufacturing, service and retailing companies to reassess and explore alternative operational bases for their companies. Many businesses have no choice but to shut down and relocate their factories and service centres in China to other regions, including Southeast Asia (Kwan, 2020; Goulard, 2020). Nonetheless, only a few foreign companies have opted to move their operations to Indonesia. Accordingly, strengthening socio-economic ties with its fellow Muslim countries, specifically among GCC members, appears to be an attractive and desirable option for Indonesia. As a result, in recent years, socio-economic ties between Indonesia and the GCC countries have increased and extended to various fields.

Despite extensive discussions on the expansion of diplomatic, energy, and economic ties between the GCC countries and Indonesia, the public diplomacy strategies pursued by the GCC towards Indonesia have largely been overlooked. The GCC countries recognise that their relationship with Indonesia has been fairly limited for many years and has only begun to improve recently. This highlights the importance of promoting a positive image to secure their political and economic interests in Indonesia. However, there remains a lack of research on Indonesia-GCC relations. Therefore, this research aims to fill the gap in the literature by examining the public diplomacy strategies

employed by the GCC towards Indonesia. Most studies focus on the influence of the Arab world on Islam in Indonesia (Azra, 2004; Eliraz, 2004; Hadiz, 2016). Literature on this subject extends to studies on the rise of Islamic extremism in Indonesia (Hasan, 2005; Chaplin, 2014; Kovacs, 2014). As the relationship between Indonesia and the GCC grows stronger over the years, the academic world has taken notice and has begun to examine the various facets of this bilateral relationship. Several studies have explored the relationship between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia (Al Qurtuby & Aldamer, 2018; Rakhmat, 2022), Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Jensen, 2017; Mason, 2022), and the relationship between Indonesia and the GCC, as a whole (Rakhmat et al., 2021). Research has even been conducted on specific sectors, such as the energy sector (Rakhmat & Pashya, 2022), and joint climate action (Rakhmat & Nugraha, 2023). Despite this growing body of research, one area that has been largely overlooked is the public diplomacy strategies pursued by the GCC towards Indonesia. Although the public diplomacy efforts of the GCC have been the subject of several studies (Strauß et al., 2015; Ma, 2013; Ulrichsen, 2021), none of these studies have focused specifically on the implementation of these strategies in Indonesia.

Therefore, this paper intends to augment the body of knowledge and understanding on Indonesia-GCC relations by examining the GCC countries' public diplomacy towards Indonesia. The time scope of this research focuses from the beginning of Jokowi's administration to 2022. This is because it is during this period that the relationship between the GCC and Indonesia saw considerable progress in comparison to the administration of his predecessors. The paper proceeds as follows. The subsequent part provides a brief background in relation to Indonesia-GCC cooperation. It is followed by a section which discusses the concept of public diplomacy as the theoretical framework of the paper. The ensuing section then examines the various public diplomacy strategies employed by the GCC towards Indonesia. This paper recognises that these strategies can be divided into four groups, namely educational initiatives, cultural activities, religious studies and practices, along with humanitarian aid. This study maintains that while public diplomacy has increasingly become a significant element of the GCC's approach in relation to Indonesia, the strategies have been apparent only among a few GCC countries with which Indonesia has nurtured extensive political and economic relations.

## **GCC-INDONESIA RELATIONS: A BRIEF BACKGROUND**

The relationship between Indonesia and the Arab World, including the GCC countries, has a long history dating back to the 13th century. During the period between 1000 and 1500, the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean connecting Southeast Asia and the Arab world were instrumental in establishing one of the world's most thriving maritime trade connections (Al Qurtuby, 2019). Over the centuries, Indonesia and the Middle Eastern countries have continued to cultivate and deepen their ties through various platforms such as the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, migrant labour, trade, and academic exchanges. This has resulted in a strong sense of mutual understanding and support for each other's national interests and priorities (Lucking, 2021). When Indonesia gained its independence from the Dutch in 1945, the GCC nations were among the first in the Middle East to officially recognize the nation's independence. Additionally, their participation in the 1955 Bandung Conference hosted by Indonesian President Sukarno showcased their commitment to the Non-Aligned Movement (Azra, 2006, p. 92).

While these shared interests had provided an opportunity for Indonesia and the countries of the Middle East to capitalise on the potential for bilateral ties, cooperation between the two waned as Indonesia was focusing on resolving its domestic politics and internal socio-economic strife. Similarly, shifts in the geopolitical dynamics drove Indonesia and the GCC countries to prefer to cooperate with major Western powers and neighbouring countries (Ehteshami & Miyagi, 2015: 30). As a result, Indonesia's relations with the Gulf countries did not see any substantial progress in the subsequent decades and the relations were only restricted to a few economic activities and exchange visits among officials. Indonesia no longer saw the Gulf States as a viable economic partner. In the past, there were limited investments between the GCC countries and Indonesia, as only a few GCC investors were eager and willing to invest in Indonesia and Indonesian investors were wary of investing in the unstable and insecure Middle Eastern region. Instead, other countries such as the US, China, Japan, and Singapore became the primary investors in Indonesia (Jensen, 2017). Despite the annual meetings held between the Indonesian and Gulf governments at international organisational platforms such as the United Nations and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the relationship between the two regions remained limited.

Nonetheless, the relations between the GCC countries and Indonesia arguably began to flourish under President Jokowi's administration. Growing regional instability and potential economic downturn in the US and Europe have prompted the countries of the Middle East to initiate a "Look East" policy, strengthening ties with Asian nations, such as China, Japan, South Korea, besides the ASEAN countries (Al-Adwani, 2020). Indonesia, as the largest economy in Southeast Asia, has encouraged Middle Eastern countries to strengthen and expand their foothold. Apart from being an attractive destination for investments, the archipelago's significant population makes it a promising market for Arab exports. Likewise, its strategic geographic location makes it a gateway for the Middle East to expand its footprint in the wider Asia-Pacific region. The return of GCC countries to invest in Indonesia has been welcomed by the President Jokowi's government. After assuming office in 2014, Jokowi undertook an official visit to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar in September 2015 (Parlina & Salim, 2015). Jokowi's official visits demonstrated Indonesia's new prioritised agenda concerning its foreign policy, which was a departure from his predecessors. Besides holding bilateral meetings with heads of state, Jokowi also met with officials at the GCC headquarters to improve strategic cooperation between Indonesia and GCC member countries. His engagement with the Gulf countries is related to his vision and mission, known as *Nawa Cita*, which consists of nine prioritised agendas for the Jokowi government, one of which is strengthening the Indonesian economy, which can be achieved by means of international cooperation (Lane, 2019, p. 67). Regarding Indonesia, the GCC offers the country not only access to untapped consumer markets, but also the opportunity to invest. Despite being the largest Southeast Asian economy, Indonesia still needs to attract significant amounts of investment to develop its economy, accelerate growth and lower unemployment (Thee, 2012). It should also be mentioned that the geopolitical rivalry between China and the US, which poses challenges to Southeast Asia, also prompted Indonesia to bolster cooperation with other Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East.

Both trade and investment relations between Indonesia and GCC member countries have demonstrated considerable progress and growth during President Jokowi's administration. In particular, these developments can be traced to the energy sector which dominated their trade relations due to Indonesia's diminishing energy reserves.

According to Indonesia's Central Statistics Agency in January–November 2020, the value of Indonesia's crude oil imports reached US\$4.29 billion, of which US\$2.11 billion came from Saudi Arabia. The GCC countries' energy investments in Indonesia have also increased recently with various projects undertaken by Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, Saudi Aramco, Nebras Power and the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) (Rakhmat & Pashya, 2022). Since President Jokowi took office in 2014, the improvement in trade and economic relations between Indonesia and the GCC countries has become increasingly noticeable, particularly in the non-energy sector. The GCC nations have made investments in several key areas in Indonesia, including Islamic finance, telecommunications, infrastructure, and banking, as highlighted in the study conducted by Rakhmat et al. (2021). However, it is important to note that the investment level from the GCC countries is still lower compared to that of Indonesia's traditional economic partners such as China and countries of the ASEAN region. This suggests that there is still room for growth and potential for further strengthening of economic ties between Indonesia and the GCC countries. It was reported that the volume of the trade between the two sides recorded an increase of 40 percent with the monetary value rising from US\$8.68 billion in 2016 to US\$12.15 billion in 2018. In addition, there was a 26 percent increase in investment from US\$60.3 million in 2016 to US\$76.1 in 2018 (Rakhmat et al., 2021).

The positive outcome generated from the growing economic ties between GCC countries and Indonesia has trickled into security and defence cooperation. The gradual withdrawal of America's military presence in the Middle East, compounded by China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, has prompted the governments of Indonesia and the GCC countries to seek alternative security partners. Although both Indonesia and the GCC countries are not major security players, certain circumstances as mentioned have forced the two sides to strengthen their defence cooperation. In Jakarta's mind, the declining role of the US in Southeast Asia and China's growing aggression in the South China Sea signify that it needs to look for non-traditional security partners elsewhere and the GCC appears to be an alternative.

Promoting military collaboration with Indonesia would help GCC countries to secure economic gains in the former. This collaboration

could contribute to its strategy of militarisation and replicate a partnership model that allows “little Sparta” to punch above its weight on both the regional and international stages. Government-to-government meetings relating to the military collaboration between the two sides have been frequently held since President Jokowi took office. The most recent meeting took place on March 6, 2022, when the officials and representatives of the governments of the UAE and Saudi Arabia held a series of meetings with their Indonesian counterparts to discuss and finalise their military collaboration (Mason, 2022). The scope of the agreement focuses on defence, science and technology industries, as well as increasing human resource capacity through the exchange of cadets and officers.

Both countries have also expanded their security cooperation to include the development of military hardware and equipment. In 2019, for example, after opening a defence attaché’s office at its embassy in Jakarta, the UAE signed a deal with three major Indonesian defence companies, namely PT Pindad, PT Len Industri and PT Dirgantara Indonesia on the development of defence equipment (Arora, 2022). Two years later, PT Pindad also partnered with Caracal International UAE for the development of rifles and drones (Pratiwi, 2021). Previously, in 2015, the Indonesian government entrusted PT Pindad to work in partnership with Continental Aviation Service (CAS) in the transfer of technology and licensing of SS2 rifles as well as the marketing of weapons and ammunition products to explore the markets in the Middle East (Parameswaran, 2015). Meanwhile, the UAE in collaboration with Rheinmetall Defence (RhD) Canada was planning to invest and transfer technology to manufacture a remote weapon system (RWS) with Pindad so that it can be marketed domestically in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. In addition, Qatar was reported to have shown considerable interest in the production of military equipment in Indonesia (Ziyadi, 2018). Notwithstanding Qatar is a small country, it is one of the largest buyers of military equipment in the Middle East and it maintains an interest in importing military equipment from Indonesia.

Aside from the military sector, Indonesia and the GCC countries, principally Saudi Arabia and Oman, have strengthened their collaboration on counterterrorism activities, particularly since the 9/11 attacks in 2001 (Sodikin, 2017). Cooperation between Jakarta and Muscat, for instance, has included significant information exchange

relating to de-radicalisation programmes between Indonesia's National Counterterrorism Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terrorism [BNPT]) and Oman's Counter-Terrorism Committee (Wijayaka, 2019). Through these programmes, they have sought to share experience and knowledge in preventing terrorism and radicalism, especially with the increasing expansion of the Islamic State in both countries, and in rehabilitating foreign fighters returning from Syria. The programmes have resulted in several initiatives, including support and collaboration between the central and local governments and even community institutions on rehabilitation, reintegration, as well as re-education as a form of counter-extremism. This counter-terrorism cooperation is also apparent in Indonesia-Saudi ties. From 2014 to 2022, Indonesia sent 178 people to attend various courses, such as a course on countering extremism at the King Khalid Military Academy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (Haryati, 2022). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia had sent two officers to the Indonesian Army Command and General Staff College.

Overall, the positive trend concerning the relationship between the GCC countries and Indonesia under the administration of President Jokowi is not exclusively confined to the trade and economic sectors. More accurately, the relationship between both sides has also strengthened and developed to incorporate other important security and political-related areas, for instance counterterrorism and counter-radicalism, combined with military cooperation. While the cooperation has been increasingly examined, what is less well known is that in its relations with Indonesia, the GCC countries have implemented public diplomacy strategies to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Indonesian people. The next section will initially discuss the conceptual framework of the analysis, prior to examining the various public diplomacy strategies employed by the GCC countries as regards Indonesia.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS**

To achieve the main objective of the paper, this research adopts the concept of public diplomacy. The main idea is that a country no longer targets certain state actors to achieve its interests, but it also needs to consider the response of the public and attitudes in the targeted country. The more positive and open a country's response

to the public in a specific country, the more straightforward it will be for that country to cooperate with the particular country and vice versa. The element used to attract the public of other countries, namely the ability to influence other countries through their attractiveness both in terms of culture, values and other attractions is known as public diplomacy (Nye, 2004). According to Leonard et al. (2002), there are three aspects of public diplomacy activities: First, increasing the sense of familiarity of the people of a country; secondly, creating a positive and appreciative impression of society and thirdly, establishing stronger relationships with other people via various avenues, such as educational activities and cultural exchanges (Leonard et al., 2002). More specifically, Nye (2004) explained that there are three dimensions a country can accomplish by means of its public diplomacy. First, daily communication, in which a state aims to explain government policies to the public to win the hearts and minds of the public of another country. The second dimension is strategic communication, which means the ability of a country to improve its nation branding. This can be seen, for example, in the efforts of the US to form a global opinion to vilify Russia on the issue of Ukraine and Russia's attempts to delegitimise the U.S. and NATO for their support of Ukraine. The third is to build sustainable relationships with the public in other countries through various agendas such as, providing scholarships, student or youth exchange programmes, training, seminars, conferences, in addition to access to media channels (Nye, 2004, pp. 107–109). Nevertheless, Nye (2004, p. 112) also contends that the practice of public diplomacy is not limited to the three points mentioned. Rather, to transfer a message to the world goes beyond verbal communication as “action speaks louder than words”. This can be seen with Norway which constructs its public diplomacy by means of actively participating in the global conflict mediating process, contributing to peacekeeping forces across the world and distributing humanitarian aid.

In the context of this study, this paper argues that the aforementioned concept is relevant to understand the GCC countries' public diplomacy strategies in relation to Indonesia. This is because the Gulf countries have applied different platforms, including educational initiatives, cultural activities, religious studies and practices, and humanitarian aid in their attempts to establish positive nation branding among the Indonesian people. It is worth noting that the concept of public diplomacy practices has also been utilised in numerous research on

such practices worldwide by the GCC countries (Strauß et al., 2015; Ma, 2013; Ulrichsen, 2021). However, none of the pre-existing body of literature has placed the implementation of public diplomacy by GCC countries in Indonesia as the principal subject of investigation.

In the context of research methodology, this study is based on primary and secondary literature, as well as interviews with scholars specialising in the GCC countries' foreign policy. It is important to state that the contemporary nature of the GCC-Indonesia relations and the limited academic studies available signify the importance of journalism as a source of information as regards this research. Hence, this study, apart from official documents, books, peer-reviewed articles and policy reports, relies on media articles published by reputable news agencies. To ensure reliability, the information in the media sources is not taken for granted. Aside from obtaining information from reputable media, cross-checking is performed by comparing with other sources.

## **THE GCC COUNTRIES' PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TOWARDS INDONESIA**

In the midst of the growing political, economic and security relations between Indonesia and the GCC countries, what is less examined is that the latter have made various public diplomacy efforts to strengthen their presence in Indonesia. The GCC, which consists of the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, accounts for more than 65 percent of all the oil reserves in the world and the region's annual oil output accounts for 30 percent of the total annual global oil production. Each year, the Gulf countries' oil export generates a third of the world's total oil exports (Maloney, 2008). The Gulf countries are expected to remain a significant source of energy in the next half century. The Gulf oil that is continuously delivered to different parts of the world is an essential "blood supply" for countless economies and industries. The export of this hydrocarbon resource also creates substantial amounts of petrodollars for the regional countries. In turn, this provides substantial financial resources for Gulf nations to make incredible achievements in their economic, social and cultural developments (Ma, 2013). This increasing wealth has resulted in these countries introducing an important plan with the aim of strengthening their position on the global stage and fostering cooperation with

countries around the world (*ibid.*). Moreover, through significant trade and investments, the plan is also being realised via the enhancement of public diplomacy initiatives.

According to Professor Mehran Kemrava of Georgetown University in Qatar, the motivations behind the pursuit of public diplomacy by each of the GCC countries differ significantly.<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia, for instance, is working towards establishing itself as a hub for global commerce and innovation, and improving its image as a conservative force on the global stage, competing with the UAE in the process. Meanwhile, countries like the UAE and Oman are utilizing public diplomacy to enhance their economic cooperation with other nations and promote their image as a moderate Islamic state. Bahrain and Kuwait, being smaller Gulf countries, have genuine economic interests driving their pursuit of public diplomacy. Likewise, the use of public diplomacy by Doha is a strategic move aimed at solidifying Qatar's reputation as a trustworthy and reliable international partner. It is a crucial aspect of the city's foreign policy that seeks to strengthen its influence as an influential investor and a patron of global cultural exchange. Through its efforts in public diplomacy, Doha is positioning itself as a prominent leader that represents a moderate form of Islam. Via the adoption of public diplomacy efforts, Ulrichsen (2014, p. 35) asserted that Qatar is interested in promoting its image "as a neutral and progressive leader within the Arab and Islamic world, and to garner the support of the wider Arab region in addition to the broader international community". In sum, Qatar's strategic use of public diplomacy serves as a means to enhance its reputation and establish itself as a leading player on the global stage.

Indonesia, as an important target of the GCC countries' "Look East" policy, is not an exception in witnessing the implementation of these countries' public diplomacy strategies. As the partnership between Indonesia and the GCC countries has grown significantly in recent years, the Gulf countries have come to realize the importance of overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers. Despite their shared Islamic identity, the governments in the Gulf have come to understand the importance of increasing the number of officials and ordinary individuals who are acquainted with each other's languages, societal norms, customs, as well as national and institutional interests. It is hoped that these factors will contribute to the strengthening

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<sup>1</sup> Personal interview, 29 January 2022.

of the economic and political ties that they have maintained. Simultaneously, Indonesia's position as the largest Muslim majority country in the world is regarded by the governments in the Gulf as an opportunity to demonstrate that they are the leaders of the Muslim world. As explained below, this paper understands that in the context of Indonesia, the GCC's public diplomacy can be divided into four types: 1) educational initiatives; 2) cultural activities; 3) religious studies and practices; and 4) humanitarian aid.

## **1. Educational Initiatives**

The first public diplomacy initiative by the GCC nations in Indonesia centered around education, which is a common strategy employed by many countries in the region to establish themselves as educational hubs in the Middle East. Qatar is a prime example of this, having established Education City, a state-of-the-art campus that spans fourteen square kilometres and hosts eight renowned universities from France, the UK, and the US (Cherkaoui, 2018). Meanwhile, Dubai International Academic City (DIAC) in the UAE has experienced a surge in student numbers in recent years, while Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait have upgraded many of their universities (Sengupta, 2022). These phenomena appear to have driven the GCC countries to also utilise education in their engagements with the outside world, including Indonesia. For the Gulf countries, educational public diplomacy serves as a tool to increase awareness of their respective countries amongst the Indonesian people, as it encourages the development of individuals who can successfully understand and engage with people from other cultures and countries (Bauer & Koch, 2009).

Saudi Arabia has been the foremost GCC country in this regard, with its funded Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies based at the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia University (LIPIA). The LIPIA, which is frequently regarded as the bastion of Saudi Arabia's religious soft power in Indonesia, is affiliated with the Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh (Idrus, 2018). While some consider it to be Saudi Arabia's platform to propagate the Salafi version of Islam in Indonesia (Varagur, 2017), this particular institution has played a crucial role in promoting a more positive image of Saudi Arabia in Indonesia through its academic exchange programs and learning activities (Juan & Rakhmat, 2022). LIPIA is known to produce

Indonesian alumni who have similar views to those of the Kingdom. During King Salman's visit, the institute was planning to open three new satellite campuses in Makassar, Medan, and Surabaya, several of which have been opened recently (Muhtadin, 2017). While the LIPIA predominantly focuses on Islamic and Arabic studies, other Saudi institutions have sought to collaborate with their Indonesian counterparts in other fields. For instance, in 2017, the Indonesian Institute of Sciences was approached by the King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology regarding agricultural techniques, irrigation of dry land, and food cultivation (Zulkarnain, 2017). Furthermore, the Head of the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia received a visit from the Head of the King Abdul Aziz Research and Archives Institute, Fahad Abdullah Al-Samari, in 2019. The visit was intended to explore Indonesia's participation in Saudi Arabia's project to develop an encyclopedia on the Hajj, highlighting the Kingdom's stewardship of the two holy cities of Makkah and Medina (Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, n.d.).

Qatar has also implemented its educational diplomacy efforts in Indonesia that it considers an important gateway to the Southeast Asian region and a promising market for Qatari exports and investors (Alagos, 2022). This was formalised with a MoU on education and culture signed during the visit of the Emir of Qatar to Indonesia (Pramadiba, 2017). For many years, Qatar has offered scholarships for Indonesian students to study at high school and university levels in Qatar. The most crucial example is the annual scholarship provided by Qatar University to learn Arabic at its one-year Arabic for non-native speakers (ANNS) programme. Rakhmat (2023) reported that a minimum of two Indonesians enrol in the programme, annually. Based on the data from Qatar's Ministry of Education and Higher Education in 2021, there are approximately 2000 students from Indonesia pursuing education in Qatar at various levels (Pramudyani, 2021). Furthermore, the plan is to increase the number, given that in 2021, the Qatari government expressed its intention to increase the number of scholarships for Indonesian students. In addition to providing scholarships, Qatar also planned to open the Indonesian branch of Qatar University (Ahdiat, 2021). If established, the university could contribute to Qatar's public diplomacy efforts. Over the years, several Indonesian universities have collaborated with Qatar University, including Universitas Darussalam Gontor, Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo and Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah (UNIDA,

n.d.; UIN Walisongo Semarang, 2014; UIN News Online, 2022). In addition to joint community service activities, the partnerships include curriculum exchanges, organising joint conferences, as well as joint research on religious moderation across the Islamic world, which signifies the emergence of religious moderation as a new strategic combination between both nations (ibid).

Apart from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, other GCC countries have also gradually expanded their educational diplomacy efforts in Indonesia, although they remain limited. This is because these countries have only recently renewed their interest in Indonesia. In 2021, Al-Azhar Indonesia University (UAI) and the UAE Embassy have committed to continuing to foster educational cooperation, particularly in the Arabic language. Additionally, the UAE through Alef Education has signed an agreement to expand digital cooperation for madrasah students in Indonesia (Damaledo, 2022), and has collaborated with the Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah for students to learn about the media landscape in the UAE (Suryana, 2017). Bahrain has also made efforts with the Bahrain Institute of Banking and Finance collaborating with the Tazkia Institute of Islamic Economics to provide certification programs and training in banking and financial institutions for students and professionals in Indonesia (Prabawati, 2019). Recognizing their weaknesses on the global stage, smaller GCC states have stepped up their efforts to form alliances with other countries and to consider any method that can increase their importance in the international arena. Given that the goals of public diplomacy encompass communication, persuasion, and engagement with global audiences, small states often invest resources in this area to ensure that their voices are heard.

## **2. Cultural Activities**

An additional public diplomacy effort pursued by the GCC countries with respect to Indonesia occurs by way of cultural activities. One of the ways this has been strengthened is through cultural events. For the GCC states, such events help to increase the awareness of the Indonesian public about these countries. Mohammed Al Sudairi<sup>2</sup>, Head of Asian Studies at King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic

Studies in Saudi Arabia in an interview for this research, confirmed that these cultural engagements are undertaken by the GCC countries

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<sup>2</sup> Personal interview, 27 January 2023.

as a method of nation branding, and enhance public relations outreach. In 2016, for example, the Saudi embassy in Jakarta organised the Saudi Arabian Culture Week at the National Museum and Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (Baiduri, 2016). The event featured art exhibitions, calligraphy, weaving sessions, as well as traditional music. Evidence which demonstrated how Saudi Arabia viewed these cultural events with importance was when King Salman made an official visit in 2017 (Ihsanuddin, 2017). The Minister of Education and Culture at the time, Muhadjir Effendy, stated that among the MoUs signed during the King's visit, were several on the hosting of artistic events, improving heritage preservation and developing bilateral cultural exchanges (Fizriyani, 2018). Areas of cultural opportunity between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have also amounted to music and theatre exchange programmes, as well as exchanging information on history, anthropology, museology and cultural heritage (Desita, 2017).

Similar initiatives were pursued by Qatar and the UAE. The most important example was Doha's selection of Indonesia as a partner country for a key annual event organised by Qatar, namely the Qatar Year of Culture (Diah, 2021). This agreement was signed at a meeting held by the Indonesian Ambassador together with the general manager of the Katara Cultural Village Foundation in 2021. In this prestigious event, countries that have a unique and prominent cultural reputation are selected. On account of this, Indonesia will be the first Southeast Asian country to participate as a partner (Gulf Times, 2022a). The year-long initiative includes various cultural seminars, exhibitions and events in both Indonesia and Qatar. The Qatar Year of Culture has been held every year since 2012. Countries that have contributed as partners include France, India, Japan and Turkey. Selecting Indonesia as a partner signifies the position of Jakarta in Qatar's foreign policy (Marpaung, 2021). In an attempt to become more involved in Indonesia, the Qatar Museum Authority in 2020 cooperated with several museums in Indonesia, such as the Indonesian National Museum and *Modern and Contemporary Art in Nusantara* (MACAN) (Marpaung, 2021).

The cultural public diplomacy undertaken by the UAE has taken a distinctive form. The UAE appears to prefer to treasure names and to establish certain monuments as a way to increase its public diplomacy in Indonesia. This can be seen from the treasuring of Jokowi's name as a street name in one of the main sections that divide the Abu Dhabi

National Exhibition Centre (ADNEC) and the Diplomatic Area, which is an area occupied by several representative diplomatic offices (Suharto, 2020). While the government in Abu Dhabi acknowledges that the inauguration of Jokowi Street in Abu Dhabi is a form of respect for Jokowi, who has contributed to improving bilateral relations between the two countries, the step was taken as a means to promote itself as a supportive partner of Indonesia. In addition to the inauguration of street names with the names of each country's leaders, the UAE government offered Indonesia a gift in the form of a mosque in July 2019 during the visit of Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed Zayed Al-Nahyan to Jakarta (Septania, 2022). Completed in late 2022, the mosque was built on three hectares of land in Jokowi's homeland in Solo, Central Java. As the mosque is designed in a similar way to the Syekh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, it can be assumed that the UAE intended to foster its cultural presence in Indonesia (Bahfein, 2021). The mosque, which was also envisioned as a place to propagate religious moderation, is also a means for the UAE to present itself as leader of moderation among the Muslim world (Dorsey, 2020).

Both Kuwait and Bahrain have joined the ranks of countries that employ cultural public diplomacy to engage with Indonesia. Kuwait, in particular, has made efforts to strengthen cultural ties with Indonesia by inviting them to participate in cultural events. For example, in 2020, the Indonesian Embassy was invited to join in the festivities of the Kuwait Market Festival, a yearly celebration marking Kuwait's national day. This festival, which is normally held on February 25th and 26th, acts as an avenue for displaying Kuwait's rich cultural heritage and provides an opportunity for the local people to connect with international visitors, including Indonesia (Kedutaan Besar Republik Indonesia di Kuwait, 2020). By participating in such events, Kuwait seeks to break down cultural barriers and promote stronger political and economic ties between the two countries in the future. The Indonesian Embassy in Kuwait showcased the rich culture and diversity of Indonesia by setting up an exhibition booth called "Wonderful Indonesia". The booths were filled with a variety of traditional Indonesian products such as handicrafts, body care products, fashion, and food. Visitors were treated to a visual feast of Indonesia's natural beauty, culinary wonders, and regional clothing, as well as dance performances. This initiative was not only beneficial for Indonesia but also demonstrated Kuwait's efforts to be

a welcoming partner to Indonesia. By inviting Indonesia to showcase its cultures, Kuwait sent a message of friendship and partnership, further strengthening their relationship and enhancing its image as a warm and inviting country. Bahrain has also made similar attempts, whereby the Indonesian Embassy in Manama has frequently been invited by the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiques (BACA) to organise various cultural activities, such as the “Indonesian Cultural Night” at the Bahrain Cultural Hall in 2019 (Kedutaan Besar Republik Indonesia di Manama, 2019).

The cultural activities between Indonesia and the GCC countries would serve as a vital platform for the latter in promoting a positive image and gaining social support among the Indonesian people. The objective of these initiatives is to establish a strong political and economic relationship by breaking down cultural barriers and presenting the GCC countries as benevolent global players. Although the exact success of these attempts may be difficult to quantify, it can be confidently predicted that such initiatives will continue to grow in the future as the GCC countries’ interests in Indonesia are expected to increase.

### **3. Religious Study and Practice**

Given the shared Islamic background of Indonesia and the GCC countries, religious-related public diplomacy is also a significant aspect of the GCC states’ diplomacy towards Indonesia. This is predominantly apparent with regards to Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Qatar, for example, has implemented the “Muttawa” initiative to facilitate exchange programs for imams and muezzin<sup>3</sup> to learn and teach Islam (Murtado, 2021). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia’s religious diplomacy focuses on the issue of pilgrimage and funding mosque development across Indonesia, and often involves the promotion of Salafi Islam, which is widely practised in the Kingdom (Aswar, 2016). In addition, Saudi Arabia has also leveraged on the allocation of hajj and umrah quotas to strengthen its ties with Indonesia, increasing the hajj quota for Indonesian citizens by 10,000 to a total of 231,000 during President Jokowi’s visit to Riyadh in 2019 (Kuwado, 2019).

The government in Riyadh has additionally established a joint action plan with Indonesia, entailing the provision of health facilities and

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<sup>3</sup> An Islamic term for imams and muezzin, those who call Muslims to pray.

services for Indonesian pilgrims (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2022). In 2021, Indonesia was also reportedly exploring ways to collaborate in the printing of Qurans with Saudi Arabia in order to help increase the availability of Qurans across the country (Oktaviani, 2022). As for the UAE, it has been active in inviting Indonesia to participate in the Dubai International Holy Quran Award held annually in the UAE (Rini, 2013). Moreover, Bahrain has also stepped into the exchanges. The most crucial initiative has been inviting Indonesian Muslim scholars to the Bahrain Forum, an interfaith dialogue held in Manama, whereby a number of prominent Islamic scholars from Indonesia attend to discuss the issue of religious moderation and East-West relations (Rizqa, 2022).

Indonesian Muslim organisations have also become an important target for the GCC states to implement their public diplomacy. This is not surprising given that Muslim organisations exert considerable influence in Indonesian politics with members including some of the most prominent figures, for instance the Vice President of Indonesia, Ma'ruf Amin and the Minister of Religious Affairs, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas. In December 2021, one of Qatar's donor agencies, the Qilaa Group, joined forces with one of Indonesia's largest Muslim organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), in an agreement to build 100 mosques and 10 hospitals in remote areas of Indonesia (Triono, 2022). A number of these will be built in Indonesia's new capital city in Kalimantan. To complement the agreement, in early 2022, the Qatari Ambassador to Indonesia visited the NU headquarters to discuss further activities in education and religious moderation (Michella, 2022). The UAE have also collaborated with NU on moderate Islam via scholarships, imam exchanges and the construction of mosques (Dorsey, 2020). During Jokowi's visit to Abu Dhabi in 2021, the UAE pledged to work with Indonesia in propagating moderate Islam.

These initiatives are significant as they can be considered part of some of the GCC states' ongoing attempts to project themselves as prominent Muslim actors on the international stage, who are moderate, tolerant, pluralist, and forward-looking. Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim nation, is a source of interest for the Gulf countries to present themselves as leaders of the global Muslim community. Nonetheless, the increased penetration of the GCC countries' religious public diplomacy and their promotion of dissimilar religious views across Indonesia has generated scholarly debates. Qatar's support of the

political Islam espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood, a transnational Sunni organisation founded in Egypt, was the main factor behind the 2017 Gulf crisis in which Saudi Arabia and the UAE decided to impose a diplomatic blockade against Qatar (Hanifan, 2021). Riyadh viewed Qatar's stance as in contrast to its Salafism ideas and teaching, which tends to be apolitical and prohibits criticising the government and demonstrations. Given the rising frustration with the performance of the Jokowi government in recent years, particularly over its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and the threat of terrorism by Jihadi groups, this Saudi version of Salafism has been welcomed by the Indonesian government (Fadli & Senjahaji, 2022). Meanwhile, concerning the UAE, Qatar's version of Islam is regarded as an attempt to stem Abu Dhabi's influence with its concept of "Moderate Islam" (Maharani, 2021). Over the years, Abu Dhabi has sought to project itself as moderate, tolerant, pluralist, and forward-looking. Consequently, the UAE has liberalised social mores including non-marital cohabitation, alcohol consumption and religious tolerance (Dorsey, 2021).

Although the Gulf crisis has now ended, this clash of different types of Islam could now be exported to Indonesia via the GCC countries' religious public diplomacy. Nonetheless, Indonesian actors appear to be anomalies in responding to the situation. NU, as Indonesia's icon of moderate Islam, has no problem cooperating with Qatar with its political agenda shaped by the Muslim Brotherhood. In the meantime, across Indonesian villages, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Indonesia, has their mosques funded by Saudi Arabia (Dorsey, 2020). Moreover, PKS' links to the Muslim Brotherhood and its apparent reluctance to buy into Saudi Arabia and the Muslim World League's agenda of a nominally tolerant and pluralist Islam that engages with Israel has not prevented PKS from reaping Riyadh's financial support.

#### **4. Humanitarian Aid**

A further important element of the GCC countries' public diplomacy in Indonesia is rendering financial assistance in disaster mitigation, health, education, housing, water supply, infrastructures and transportation. The abundant petrodollars appear to have led these countries to use humanitarian assistance as a means to improve their standing on the global stage, including Indonesia. Across the world, the GCC states have increasingly exploited their ability to provide aid

and overseas development assistance as a form of public diplomacy in countries where they have economic interests (Salisbury, 2018). It is essential to note that in Indonesia, while previous elements of public diplomacy are primarily implemented by the main countries of the GCC, this humanitarian aid has been deployed by nearly all of the GCC states towards Indonesia. Saudi Arabia has long provided Indonesia with humanitarian assistance, and this has continued throughout much of the last decade. One example took place in 2015, when the Saudi businessman and philanthropist Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, CEO of the Kingdom Holding Company donated millions of US dollars to charities (Hubbard, 2015). Donations from the Saudi government through the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, between 2015 and 2019, reached somewhere in the region of US\$82 million (Hendriana, 2019). The aid was dispersed across 27 humanitarian projects, including the construction of houses, health, education, clean water supplies and transportation. Similarly, through the Makkah Al-Mukarramah Foundation, Saudi Arabia has built 850 mosques and fostered 20,000 orphans in Indonesia in the last 12 years (Wright, 2015).

Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE have also actively distributed humanitarian assistance to Indonesia when the latter was struck by disasters. The most recent example was the aid sent from Abu Dhabi to assist Indonesia to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. The aid was in the form of medical equipment for Indonesian medical personnel to prevent and control coronavirus. The medical equipment was expected to help around 20,000 Indonesian health workers cope with the crisis (Pramudyani, 2021). Kuwait is also active in sending humanitarian aid to Indonesia, as mentioned by its ambassador to Indonesia, Abdulwahab Abdullah Al-Sager, who commented that Kuwait's total humanitarian assistance to Indonesia between 2004 and 2007 had reached 48 million Kuwaiti dinars (IDR 2 trillion) (Nasrullah, 2017). The funds were used for numerous humanitarian projects in various fields, such as education, scholarships, health, donations for the media, public infrastructure development, and others. One important example is that Kuwait offered health assistance several times. For instance, in Surabaya, 400 people received free cataract surgery (Nasrullah, 2017) and it also funded the construction of a number of villages, which were later named after several Emirs of Kuwait, such as Sheikh Jabir Al-Ahmad Al-Jabir Al-Sabah Village in Aceh and Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jabir Al-Ahmad Village (Jakarta Islamic Centre, 2017).

Chairman of the Indonesia-Kuwait Charitable Foundation, Ahmad M. Al-Hauli, affirmed that Kuwait frequently cooperates with many Indonesian charity organisations to fund humanitarian projects, such as payments for orphanages and others. Humanitarian assistance has also been distributed at the institutional and personal levels. For example, Pondok Pesantren Al-Markaz Al-Islami Sinjai received donations from Kuwaiti philanthropists to create the Aisyah Mosque in Babana and Tongke-Tongke villages in East Sinjai sub-district (Asdar, 2021). The mosque, which was successfully built in just 48 days, was inaugurated in April 2021.

With regards to Qatar, it donated provisions to victims of severe flooding across Indonesia in 2012 and 2016 (The Peninsula, 2018). Meanwhile, in 2015, the Qatari government offered US\$50 million financial assistance for Rohingya refugees in Aceh and North Sumatra (Middle East Eye, 2016). Three years later, when massive earthquakes hit the Indonesian region of Palu, Donggala and Lombok, the Red Crescent Qatar dispatched personnel and provided US\$5 million (Nathalia 2018). The most recent aid was provided in December 2021 when the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) signed an agreement with Indonesia Credit Impact Solutions Pte Ltd to provide rapid response impact seed funding to SMEs in the healthcare and food distribution sectors affected by the pandemic (Qatar News Agency, 2021). It is also worth pointing out that under the agreement with Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs, Qatar Charity, a humanitarian organisation, has been operating in Indonesia, assisting in the construction of schools and orphanages, as well as the provision of business capital for underprivileged Indonesians (Reliefweb, 2020). The most recent development took place in December 2022 when an earthquake hit Indonesia's West Java province. Qatar Charity provided urgent relief aid including food items, drinking water, hygiene kits, besides other items (Gulf Times, 2022b). Besides, the organisation distributed aid to 1,000 families in four villages significantly affected by the earthquake which damaged buildings and displaced people (Gulf Times, 2022b). It is difficult to deny that, although fostering cooperation is not an easy process, humanitarian assistance has helped maintain the cooperation between the GCC countries and Indonesia. As Krzymowski (2022) argued, humanitarian aid has become a crucial element of the GCC countries' foreign policy, and the most effective instrument for the implementation of political and economic goals. This is particularly true in Indonesia, as a country that remains in need of development and is repeatedly struck by natural disasters.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the GCC countries' public diplomacy regarding Indonesia during the administration of President Joko Widodo. The analysis suggests that alongside the growing political, economic and security relations between the GCC countries and Indonesia, the former have applied public diplomacy to promote themselves among the Indonesian people. With Indonesia being well-suited to the GCC states' "Look East" policy as a crucial gateway to the wider Southeast Asian region and a promising destination for Qatari exports and investments, the GCC countries see the need to win the hearts and minds of the Indonesians in the belief that it will help to smooth the path of their cooperation with Indonesia. At the same time, Indonesia's position as the largest Muslim majority country in the world is viewed by the governments in the Gulf as an opportunity to realise their interests in propagating themselves as leaders of the Muslim world. To date, the GCC countries' attempts at public diplomacy consist of four primary forms, specifically educational initiatives, cultural activities, religious exchanges, together with humanitarian aid. The paper has also discovered that the GCC countries' public diplomacy initiatives are not widely implemented by all the Gulf countries with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar making the most progress, while smaller Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain lag behind. This is primarily for two reasons. Firstly, the first three countries are collaborating extensively with Indonesia compared to the other three. Secondly, the first three countries are the GCC states that are aiming to overtake others in the global Muslim community (Siyech, 2022).

Although it remains difficult to measure to what extent these public diplomacy initiatives have been successful in achieving their objectives, a recent survey by the Sydney-based Lowy Institute ascertained the opinions among the Indonesian people regarding the Gulf countries as compared to their views on China and Australia, which was found to be increasingly positive. Some 57 percent of respondents were positive regarding Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, followed by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan at 52 percent (Strangio, 2022). Nonetheless, as discussed earlier, the GCC's public diplomacy initiatives, particularly the religious element, has brought about a certain degree of competition concerning the types of Islam, which if continued, could bring about certain divisions among the Indonesian people. Generally, with the positive prospects of the

overall Indonesia-GCC cooperation, it is likely that the Gulf countries' public diplomacy initiatives will increase and expand in the coming years. Through these, both sides could overcome linguistic-cultural barriers and increase understanding between the state and non-state actors who are acquainted with each other's societal norms and customs, methods of performing business, along with their national and institutional interests.

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