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Saudi King Salman's Visit to Indonesia: Bound by Ties of Islam

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When he came to Indonesia last week, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud was not just another head of government passing through on an Asian tour. At least not by the way Indonesia greeted him. He received as close to a royal welcome as possible for a republic to provide. Perhaps deservedly so. King Salman is special because he is the custodian of the two Islamic holy cities, Mecca and Medina, while Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. The king is the first Saudi monarch to visit Indonesia in 47 years, and local media celebrated the significance of the visit. The 1,500-member royal delegation arrived in eight wide-bodied jets with cargo that included a few limousines. The king and his entourage spent a nine-day holiday in Bali — Indonesia's most famous tourist island.

While the visit was historic, it raises the question: why now? If it has taken this long for a Saudi leader to visit Indonesia, what is the true state of relations between the two countries?

In Asian culture, regular face-to-face encounters are essential in nurturing relations. Islam similarly has *silaturahmi*, the tradition of visiting friends and relatives on a regular basis. This is true in everyday life, and should also be true in diplomacy. Indonesian presidents, Suharto, Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Soekarnoputri, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and Joko Widodo all visited Riyadh, symbolizing the importance they attached to Saudi ties. The visits by Indonesia's leaders were as much addressed to the Saudi hosts as to the Indonesian public who judge their leaders by their displays of religiosity. Religion is indeed the one thing that binds Indonesia and Saudi Arabia more than other factors like economics and politics. To suggest that the relationship lacks warmth because of the long absence of a Saudi king's visit is to deny the power of Islam in bringing two nations together.

Trade and investment between the two countries have remained low in comparison with the economic ties Saudi Arabia has forged with Indonesia's neighbor Malaysia and many non-Muslim countries. In Jakarta, King Salman witnessed the signing of several economic agreements, including a pledge of \$1 billion from the Saudi Fund contribution to finance development projects. There were deals worth \$2.4 billion signed separately by private business sectors. Prior to the visit, Indonesian officials had raised the prospect of multibillion dollar deals. After the king's departure, they decided to include the \$6 billion oil refinery project signed in December to the king's overall economic package. Even that still falls short of the \$25 billion they had touted ahead of the visit.

While the two countries have a growing economic relationship, the pace remains slow. Indonesia has never been a major beneficiary of Saudi's petro-dollars. Any hope that the visit will change economic relations has to be tempered by the fact that Saudi Arabia is

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The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

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undergoing an economic recession and is itself undertaking a National Transformation Program making the economy less dependent upon oil.

There is probably more money flowing in the other direction. Indonesia sends the largest contingent of any country to the annual haj pilgrimage in Mecca/Medina. With rising economic prosperity, many Indonesians choose Saudi Arabia as their first overseas trip, to perform the *umrah*, the off-season pilgrimage. Riyadh is spending billions of dollars renovating and expanding the capacity of Mecca and Medina as part of its post-oil Saudi plan. When tourism replaces oil as a chief source of revenue, Indonesia will be the main target because of the sheer size of its Muslim population.

It is not exactly a two-way road when it comes to tourism. King Salman’s visit to Bali may be a good promotion for Indonesia, but the Middle East has never been a big market, and only a few places in Indonesia cater to the specific needs of Arab tourists. Instead, they go after the bigger markets like Australia, Europe, the United States, and Asia, including now China.

Indonesia also contributes a significant number of workers to Saudi Arabia, particularly domestic helpers. When Indonesia halted the flow of young women to work in Saudi houses following reports of abuse, Riyadh intervened, pleading with Jakarta to resume the flow of these workers.

Bali, a predominantly Hindu island, made the point of not covering up the nude statues during King Salman’s visit. “Take Bali as it is” was the message when the island welcomed the Saudi royals. The Saudis could have gone to Lombok, the island next door, which is developing its sharia-tourism to attract Muslim tourists. Nevertheless the king chose Bali, even extending his stay by three days.

Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have some common but limited strategic interests. Although predominantly Sunni, Indonesia has stayed away from the rivalry between Sunni-Saudi Arabia and Shiite-Iran by cultivating relations with both countries. The week of King Salman’s visit, Indonesia announced billions of dollars of new oil deals with Iran. Indonesia has tried to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran, an effort that did not go very far. But the gesture is important diplomatically to show Jakarta’s non-aligned status in this rivalry that is almost as old as Islam itself.

Religion is the one big factor binding the two nations, but even in religion they do not always see eye to eye. Indonesia has not been spared from the global struggle within Islam between more traditional, strict interpretations of the religion and the moderate and tolerant brand that has evolved in Southeast Asia. The battle line has been drawn between Wahabism, the conservative ideology propagated and financed by the Saudi Kingdom, and Nusantara Islam, the name Indonesian Muslim scholars coined to describe the Islam widely practiced in *nusantara* (the archipelago) that incorporates local cultures and wisdoms.

King Salman also announced the establishment of Arab language centers in three Indonesian cities in addition to the one in Jakarta, which is also known as the center for the propagation of Wahabism. The Indonesian government raised no objection to the plan, but President Widodo organized a meeting between King Salman and leaders of various religions to show that in spite of being a majority-Muslim nation, Indonesia is progressive when it comes to interfaith relations.

The language used by the two countries’ leaders reflects an ideological gap. While King Salman in his speeches stresses the need for unity among Muslims to face their common challenges, Indonesian leaders put the emphasis on more tolerance and moderation. Islam may bind the two nations, but each seems to have its own interpretation.

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