

## United Arab Emirates' Soft Power Approaches towards Indonesia (2015-2022)\*

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Diplomatic relations between the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia have been going on for almost five decades. However, the cooperation between the two countries was still very limited at the beginning of diplomatic relations. As time went by, this cooperation began to expand, especially after Jokowi's visit to the United Arab Emirates in 2015. After this visit, the United Arab Emirates also showed increased interest in Indonesia and started to aggressively exercise soft power in Indonesia. Agreement after agreement have been signed, not only in the economic, political, and security sectors, but also in other areas. This phenomenon of increasing cooperation is one form of success in the soft power exercised by the United Arab Emirates towards Indonesia. Therefore, this research will look at the United Arab Emirates' soft power strategy towards Indonesia from 2015-2022. The concept developed by Joshua Kurlantzick is used to analyze using four important indicators that include

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educational cooperation, religious exchanges, humanitarian assistance, as well as cultural exchanges.

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## I . Introduction

It cannot be denied that Asia is increasingly becoming a significant player on the international stage in the 21st century. Strategic opportunities in Asia have even been explored by the Gulf Countries Council (GCC) countries since the 1980s, when Western economies began weakening due to inflation; on the other hand, Asian economies were increasingly showing growth (Jensen 2017). Through the "pivot to Asia" policy, the GCC countries, including the United Arab Emirates, saw good potential in Asia not only for an expansion of economic and geopolitical interests (Janardhan 2020).

In the context of Southeast Asia, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries play an important role in increasingly competitive economic growth. This makes ASEAN more attractive to Middle Eastern countries. The "Look East Policy" (LEP) also proves that countries in Asia and ASEAN are increasingly receiving more attention from the Gulf countries (Talbot and Tramballi 2020). One form of implementation of the "Look East Policy" can be seen in the cooperation established between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Indonesia. Indonesia began diplomatic relations with the UAE in 1976 and the relationship commenced with cooperation in the economic and political fields (Bagis 2021). Subsequently, these two countries began to show increased closeness in the last eight years (Djalal 2021). Dozens of Memoranda of Understanding in various sectors have been signed, which shows that the cooperation being established is increasingly expansive (Hendartyo 2022). For instance, the total values of trade between Indonesia and the UAE reached US\$ 3 billion in 2020 and the same figured reached US\$ 4 billion in 2021, an increase of US\$ 1 billion or 37.8% (ibid.). Furthermore, in mid-July 2022, the two countries signed a comprehensive economic cooperation through the Indonesia-United Arab Emirates-Comprehensive Economic

Partnership Agreement (IUEA-CEPA) which is expected to increase the value of trade between the two countries to up to three times (Abdulkader 2022). This IUEA-CEPA is also based on Dubai's potential as the world's main logistics center. The strategic positioning of Dubai makes it an agent for developing business partner networks and expanding the market for Indonesian products to the Middle East, Africa and Europe (Embassy Republic of Indonesia in Abu Dhabi n.d.).

The relationship between the two countries is not limited to political and economic partnerships. For Indonesia, the UAE is a strategic partner in establishing bilateral relations because it also has a predominantly Muslim population (Kusnandar 2021; World Population Review, n.d.). Therefore, this common identity has become a catalyst for the two countries to strengthen cooperative relations through soft power strategies. Soft power activities from the UAE emanate from the closeness between Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) and President Jokowi, who have visited each other several times (Rakhmat et al. 2021). Apart from that, both countries are also active in participating in several events held in both countries. For instance, President Jokowi attended the "Dubai Expo 2020" which was held from October 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022, with the participation of 192 countries (Khalid 2019). Moreover, the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia (KBRI) in Abu Dhabi strongly supported Indonesia's participation in the Gulfood exhibition which was held in Dubai in 2018. Indonesia highlighted cultural culinary delights as its main product, by serving various types of traditional Indonesian food products (Gpriority 2021). This area is crucial because, as Marwanti (1997) argues, food is a very important part of culture since cuisine from a nation says so much about its culture. Marwanti further argued that food is not only a means of maintaining human relations but can also be sold and promoted to increase the country's foreign exchange (ibid).

Apart from cultural exhibitions, in 2022, the two countries began exploring educational cooperation through one of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama. This was realized in the IUEA-CEPA MoU point number five, namely collaboration between Nahdlatul Ulama University (UNU) and Mohammed bin

Zayed Humanitarian University (Ernis 2022). Furthermore, the Chancellor of Al-Azhar University Indonesia (UAI) began exploring cultural cooperation in 2019 and educational cooperation in 2020 with the UAE (Fahlevi 2021). The two countries are also interested in exchanging information regarding strengthening the concept of moderate Islam through the exchange of mosque imams (Kastara.id 2019). This collaboration became fruitful in 2021 with the arrival of 15 mosque imams from Indonesia to be placed in several mosques in Abu Dhabi (Asikin 2021), and continued in 2022 with the departure of 17 imams by the Ministry of Religion (Kemenag) to the United Arab Emirates (Swasty 2022).

Despite these, there have been no literature that discusses the soft power strategies carried out by the two countries in their relationship. Therefore, this research aims to examine the soft power strategy of the United Arab Emirates in cooperation with Indonesia from 2015 to 2022. In doing so, the paper attempts to cover three important points: First, to examine what soft power strategies are being implemented by the United Arab Emirates towards Indonesia in the 2015-2022 period; second, to investigate why the United Arab Emirates is interested in making Indonesia its soft power target; and third, to analyze the impact of the United Arab Emirates' soft power strategy on the relations between Jakarta and Abu Dhabi.

The relationship between the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia has been discussed in various journal articles and books. The discussions are quite diverse, from economic cooperation to energy cooperation in bilateral and regional contexts. A discussion of Indonesia-UAE relations in regional security can be found in Sterling Jensen's article entitled "Indonesia-UAE Relations in the Context of Regional Governance." In general, Jensen (2017) explains how the instability in the Middle East, especially the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, could affect Indonesia's relations with the Gulf countries, especially with the United Arab Emirates. In this case, Saudi Arabia is concerned about the dangers of expanding external extremism and terrorism from Iranian expansionism. Therefore, Saudi Arabia is keen to spread its influence in Indonesia to limit the geopolitical power of Iran. However, this is an issue of concern for Indonesia, as Saudi Arabia is also considered to have an

ideological influence that tends to be extreme. This also has the potential to cause new problems. Therefore, to stem these two influences, the United Arab Emirates is seen as a country of balance. Moreover, the UAE also has an interest in promoting moderate Islam within the country.

Furthermore, Mustofa (2021) discussed the defense cooperation in the article titled "Analysis of Cooperation between Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates in the Defense Sector (2019-2021)." Mustofa's study highlights how there has been a significant increase in defense cooperation established between the UAE and Indonesia. This can be seen from several replies to visits made by the Minister of Defense, Prabowo Subianto, from 2017 to 2022. This collaboration also sees the potential for the exchange of cadets from Indonesia and the UAE.

Another study explains the tourism relationship between the two countries, as written by Riska Destiana and Retno Sunu Astuti (2011) in the article entitled "Development of Halal Tourism in Indonesia." Destiana and Astuti explain how the promotion of Indonesian halal tourism at the World Halal Tourism Award event in Abu Dhabi. To increase foreign tourists, Indonesia has been actively promoting its tourism, including in Middle Eastern countries. The United Arab Emirates is one of the countries that contributes to foreign tourists in Indonesia. The number of Emirati tourists increased quite significantly over the nine months of 2017, reaching 6,074 people. Indonesia is earnest in developing halal tourism considering the need for halal tourism from Muslim-majority countries is quite high, such as tourists from Middle Eastern countries. The halal tourism industry began developing in 2015 and it is one of the priority programs of the Ministry of Tourism. Indonesia experienced an increase of 18% in 2018 with an increase in foreign exchange reaching more than 40 trillion Rupiah in the halal tourism sector. In 2019, the figure increased to 25%, or 5 million foreign Muslim tourists (Destiana and Astuti 2011).

Some of the literature above shows that there have been various discussions regarding relations between the UAE and

Indonesia. However, there has been no discussion that specifically highlights the soft power strategies carried out by the United Arab Emirates towards Indonesia. Therefore, the main objective of the paper is to examine the UAE's soft power strategy towards Indonesia from 2015-2022. To that aim, the paper adopts the concept of soft power. Nowadays, soft power has become the most widely implemented strategic tactic in activities for establishing cooperative relations between countries. Soft power itself is a complex concept to define, as it views the relation between international actors are broader than the role of Government-to-Government (G to G) relations. Joseph Samuel Nye (2008) defines soft power as the ability to influence other people to obtain desired results through attraction rather than coercion or payment which includes cultural resources, values, and policies (Nye 2008). Furthermore, Nye also states that soft power is a strategy to attract the attention of other people to avoid threats from the use of military weapons or economic sanctions. In other words, soft power can be used as a means for success in world politics, given that the country has a strong hard power base. Soft power and hard power must go hand in hand to achieve interests because a soft power strategy has a higher potential for success when a country has a mature hard power base (Nye 2004).

In the context of soft power relations, the paper tries to analyze the case of the UAE and Indonesia using the concept of soft power put forth by Joshua Kurlantzick, who is of the view that soft power is a dynamic strategy. In other words, soft power changes from time to time, which is broader than Nye's definition (Nye 2008). Apart from cultural resources, values, and policies, the domain of soft power according to Kurlantzick also includes religious exchange, mutual cooperation, and social assistance (Kurlantzick 2006). Therefore, this research will identify the types of soft power activities between the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia using Kurlantzick's theory. This is also relevant to the case study where from 2015 to 2022, relations between the two countries improved significantly with the signing of several memoranda of understanding in the fields of educational cooperation, religious exchanges, humanitarian assistance, as well as street naming and

cultural exchanges.

## II . UAE-Indonesia Relations

In this part, two important points will be discussed. First, it will cover the background of the relationship between the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia in general, namely political, economic, and security cooperation. This discussion is crucial as they form the foundation of the collaboration between the two nations. Furthermore, it also illustrates the United Arab Emirates' interests in cooperating with Indonesia. This part is crucial to lay the basis of the analyses in the next subsection, which explores the UAE's soft power strategies towards Indonesia and why the UAE is interested in exerting soft power in its ties with Indonesia.

### 2.1 Political, Economic and Security Cooperation between UAE and Indonesia

The United Arab Emirates is strategically located between the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman in the Northwestern Indian Ocean and is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC consists of six sovereign countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. The region gained global strategic interest due to the discovery of oil in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historically, petroleum was first discovered in Iran in 1908 (Brew 2016). Following World War II and the subsequent withdrawal of Britain from the region, countries in the region increased cooperation with each other and formed the regional organization, Gulf Cooperation Council, in 1981 (Al Makhawi 1990). However, the GCC's journey was not as smooth as expected. Initially, the GCC was formed with the aim of protecting the region. On the contrary, the organization has been characterized by inevitable internal conflicts, disputed by various religious groups and other political conflicts to date (Guzansky 2016). The proximity with Iran and shared borders with Iraq and Yemen increase the security threats in these six countries. In addition, apart from ongoing conflicts surrounding the region including the Israeli-Palestinian war and the Syrian conflict, there is a prolonged tension between the two influential axes in the Middle East, namely Iran and Saudi

Arabia. Despite these threats, the region is strategic in the global politics due to its role in global energy supply. This started when World War II ended, and the Gulf energy sector increasingly accelerated and succeeded in influencing global market upheaval (Rakhmat et al. 2021). Meanwhile, countries in the region have limited human resources and technology for processing petrochemicals. This ultimately gave rise to competition among world hegemonies to get a role in processing petroleum and natural gas there (ibid). Therefore, the increasingly uncertain regional instability has encouraged GCC members to look at partners in safer regions. One of them is the United Arab Emirates which seems to be very aggressive in partnering in the Southeast Asian region, especially Indonesia.

The unitary federation of the United Arab Emirates has been recognized by Indonesia as a sovereign country since 1976, followed by the start of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Two years after that, in October 1978, Indonesia officially opened the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Abu Dhabi (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Abu Dhabi n.d.). In 1993, Indonesia appointed an Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador to the Indonesian Mission in the UAE. Indonesia also opened the Indonesian Consulate General and the Indonesia Trade Promotion Center (ITPC) in 2003 to facilitate trade and friendly relations between the two countries and increase exports of domestic non-oil and gas commodities to the UAE. On the other hand, the UAE sent its representative to Indonesia in June 1991, which was led by an Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador to facilitate the continuation of friendly relations. The opening of embassies in both countries has led to developing relations in the political field. This has been supported by the UAE's support for the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia and Indonesia's position as a crucial player in regional and international organizations.

The frequency of visits between these two countries continued to increase in the years that followed, which culminated during the presidency of Joko Widodo. In 2020, for example, then Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) was appointed to the steering committee for the development of Indonesia's new capital city in



East Kalimantan along with two other important figures including Masayoshi Son who is the CEO of Softbank and Anthony Charles Lynton Blair who is the former British Prime Minister (Islam 2020). These three figures were given the task of providing input and advice, promoting Indonesia, and building trust regarding the development of the new capital city in East Kalimantan. The appointment of MBZ is one of the signs of heightened collaborations between the UAE and Indonesia during the Jokowi era. In 2021, the two countries held a meeting to discuss strategic cooperation to develop business and investment, which resulted in a cooperation agreement between the Indonesia Investment Authority (INA) and the Abu Dhabi Growth Fund (ADG) (Wareza 2021). Another collaboration was related to floating solar panels between Masdar and Pertamina. In addition, the meeting also discussed cooperation on the development of the Balikpapan refinery, on manufacturing, and on distribution of vaccine and bioproducts.

The joint economic cooperation played an important role in the deepening of relations between the UAE and Indonesia. Indonesia's position as one of the countries with the largest market in Southeast Asia is one of the factors that attracted the UAE to collaborate with Indonesia. Indonesia's active involvement in G20 and large population of 275 million people feature heavily in the UAE's strategic calculations (World Population Review 2022). This large population makes Indonesia a consumer market with high appeal to global and regional countries. The increase in Indonesian people's purchasing power in recent years has additionally lured the UAE to give Indonesia its share of the country's export market.

This economic collaboration resulted in both countries experiencing increased synergy in a multitude of sectors. For example, Indonesia and the UAE deepened their cooperation in the Sharia banking sector and the automotive industry in the years that followed (Kemenlu 2021; Kumparan Bisnis 2021). Furthermore, Abu Dhabi and Jakarta agreed to open the Indonesia Trade Promotion Center (ITPC) in Dubai to facilitate the smooth running of non-oil and gas export activities from Indonesia in 2003. In 2021, the ITPC office was moved to the Port Saeed area, which is one of the business districts in Dubai. The new location is close to UAE

government institutions and to the offices of ITPC partners such as Dubai Economic Development (DED) and the Emirates Authority for Standardization and Metrology (ESMA). This transfer can be considered as an effort to promote and advance the economic ties between the two countries.

The relationship has also been facilitated by air connectivity. In 2006, Indonesia and UAE signed an MoU in the field of air transportation. This air transportation cooperation has facilitated operations in the logistics sector which is considered pivotal for economic cooperation. In 2009, UAE's First Gulf Bank offered a loan of US\$ 350 million to the Indonesian coal company PT Asmin Koalindo Tuhup (AKT) for promoting coal export to the UAE (Reuters 2012). Indonesian products that are very popular for export to the UAE domestic market include textiles, machinery, aircraft spare parts, garments, plywood, paper, plastic products, household appliances, furniture, electronic equipment, charcoal, tea, flour, and fresh fruits. Moreover, in 2015, the two countries began to develop cooperation in the infrastructure sector. This collaboration has been continuing to accelerate with Tasweek Real Estate Development of UAE's investment in a mixed-use project on Indonesia's Bintan Island worth US\$ 300 million (Deil 2015). This project consisted of building condominium towers, villas, hotels, and commercial shops on 26 hectares of land.

The UAE and Indonesia are also promoting cooperation in the energy sector. An agreement by PT Chandra Asri Petromichal Tbk with Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) worth US\$ 270 million has been signed to develop the oil and gas sector cooperation (CNN Indonesia 2020). This agreement aims to explore crude oil processing in Indonesia, specifically in the Balongan area, West Java. One of the contents of the agreement is ADNOC's willingness to supply 528,000 MT of LPG to Pertamina by the end of 2020. Moreover, the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy began cooperating with the UAE in 2021 to develop the creative economy in the field of publications, fine arts, design, fashion, and architecture sub-sectors (Sofia 2021). Following up on this collaboration, the two countries signed an MoU during the Indonesian-Emirates Amazing Week (IEAW) series in Manado and

Abu Dhabi. This agreement was signed directly by Sandiaga Salahuddin Uno, Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia, and Noura bin Mohammed Al Kaabi, Minister of Culture and Youth of the United Arab Emirates. Organizing this event is part of the diplomacy carried out by the Indonesian Embassy in Abu Dhabi which involves three other ministries, namely the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Indonesian Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment, and the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy. The IEAW event also attracted cooperation between Bank Syariah Indonesia and Dubai Islamic Bank in the financial sector.

Furthermore, the UAE also showed interest in the Indonesian Investment Institute with investment funds amounting to US\$ 10 billion or 143.9 trillion in the Rupiah exchange rate (Ulya 2021). According to the direction of Mohammed Bin Zayed, these funds would be allocated for the development of strategic sectors in Indonesia such as infrastructure, development of roads, ports, tourism, agriculture, and other potential sectors. Another promising collaboration that the UAE and Indonesia are currently working on is in the renewable energy sector (Cahyadi 2022). The UAE is presently developing a 142-megawatt floating solar power plant (PLTS), which is predicted to be the largest solar power plant in Southeast Asia (Primadhyta 2017). The UAE has expressed its keenness to support Indonesia's preparations for the energy transition which seeks a target of using 23% of EBT by 2025 and 30% by 2030 (BAPPENAS 2021). In addition, the UAE also played a major role in the development of the Cirata Reservoir in West Java with a land area of 250 hectares (Directorate General of New Renewable Energy and Energy Conservation 2020). The construction of the solar power plant was signed in 2020, with funds disbursed amounting to US\$ 22.9 billion.

As a concrete sign of closer cooperation, the UAE and Indonesia signed the Indonesia-United Arab Emirates Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IUEA-CEPA) on July 1, 2022 (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia 2022). This agreement is seen as Indonesia's entry point to the UAE, which is a hub for increasing exports to non-traditional destinations such as

the Gulf region, Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, while it is a means for the UAE to expand its foothold in Indonesia and the wider Southeast Asia region. During the IUAE-CEPA negotiations, the two countries agreed to open market access to the UAE by reducing and eliminating import duties of around 94% of the total tariff line using a direct or gradual mechanism once the agreement comes into force (Romys 2022). The agreement also includes regulations in the fields of economic cooperation, trade in goods, services, investment, intellectual property rights (IPR), Islamic finance, rules of origin of goods, customs procedures, and trade facilitation, government procurement of goods and services, small businesses and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), digital trade, as well as legal provisions and institutional issues. Based on the cost-benefit and prognosis analysis of the IUAE-CEPA agreement, it is projected that Indonesia's exports to the UAE will increase by US\$ 844.4 million or an increase of 53.9% in the 10 years since Entry Into Force (EIF) (ibid). Apart from that, Indonesia's imports from the UAE are also projected to increase by 307.3 million, or an increase of 18.26%. This could be an opportunity for Indonesia to reduce the trade deficit with the UAE.

Meanwhile, the two countries have also maintained cooperation in the security sector, motivated by the rise of terrorist activities in Indonesia and the Middle East. To counter this, the two countries have started cooperation in the defense sector. In 2015, this effort was manifested in a defense partnership agreement between PT Pindad (Persero), the producer of Indonesia's main weapons system (Alutsista), which the UAE has trusted as an arms trade partner (Maulana 2015). In this partnership, there is an agreement on the technology transfer and licensing plan for the SS2 assault rifle, as well as the marketing distribution of various ammunition to Middle Eastern countries through the strategic partnership Continental Aviation Services (CAS) (Tempo.co 2015). According to PT Pindad, this collaboration allows for the development of long-range weapons for the Indonesian military. On the other hand, CAS will also collaborate with Rheinmetall Defense (RhD) Canada, by transferring technology and investing in the manufacture of a Remote Weapon System (RWS) including the

Pindad brand to be marketed for the domestic needs of the Indonesian National Army (TNI) and the Police Republic of Indonesia (POLRI). Apart from that, this military partnership also includes Indonesia sending approximately 100 units of Fire Support Ships (KPA) X 18, or known as Tank Boats to the UAE (Maman 2021). In 2020, PT Lundin Indonesia began producing these ship units and 105 mm cannon in collaboration with Cockerill Maintenance and Ingenierie (CMI Defense) from Belgium (Pindad n.d.)

The UAE and Indonesia's defense cooperation is not only bilateral but also multilateral. The two countries participated in an international forum, namely the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which is an organization consisting of 20 members. Within IORA, countries in the Indian Ocean region are tasked with facilitating and promoting security, economic and social cooperation in the maritime sector (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia 2017). In the 2015-2016 period, Indonesia was given the mandate to serve as the chairman. The IORA High Level Committee (Summit) in 2017 was held in Jakarta and brought together the leaders of the UAE and Indonesia (ibid). Apart from IORA, the UAE and Indonesia also joined the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) defense cooperation which is an effort to increase security in the Indian Ocean (Bateman 2008).

Recently, the UAE and Indonesia have increasingly demonstrated their closeness, marked by the visit of the UAE Minister of Defense to Indonesia in 2019. Conversely, the Indonesian Minister of Defense, Prabowo Subianto, visited the UAE in early 2020. During the visit, the leaders of the two countries agreed on several defense cooperation agreements, including the construction of light aircraft with PT Dirgantara, and the exchange of officers at various levels between the UAE and Indonesian militaries. Moreover, both countries agreed to exchange information to maintain regional security. In 2022, defense cooperation between the UAE and Indonesia was discussed again in a meeting held by Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto with UAE Minister of Defense Mohammed Ahmed Al Bowardi, as well as attending the 2022 World Defense Show exhibition in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (Hakim 2022). In

this meeting, the two leaders discussed continuing cooperation in the fields of defense and education following the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2020 in Abu Dhabi at the Joint Defense Cooperation Plan (JDCCP) meeting.

2020 was a historic year for bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and the UAE. The agreement, valued at US\$ 22.9 billion or approximately 314.9 trillion Indonesian Rupiah, encompasses the signing of sixteen MoUs. This includes five MoUs that involve government entities, aimed at bolstering collaboration in areas such as religion, education, agriculture, health, and counter-terrorism, with a focus on defense cooperation (CNN Indonesia 2020). Additionally, eleven other MoUs were established to develop various B2B sectors, encompassing oil and gas, petrochemicals, ports, telecommunications, and research.

Based on the analysis, the UAE and Indonesia have deepened their cooperation in the political, economic, and security sectors. This cooperation has been discussed in several existing literature. However, there has not been much discussion regarding the soft power strategies of the two countries. Therefore, the following part will discuss the soft power strategies of the UAE with Indonesia which is the topic of this research.

## **2.2 Factors Behind the United Arab Emirates' Soft Power Strategies Towards Indonesia**

The United Arab Emirates is keen on leveraging soft power in Indonesia due to its recognition of Indonesia as a promising market, particularly within the economic sphere. Indonesia's substantial influence in regional contexts like ASEAN underscores its significance, largely driven by the sizable Indonesian market. Collaborating with Indonesia, particularly in trade, exports, and imports, holds the potential for the United Arab Emirates to derive significant economic benefits.

Apart from economic factors, Indonesia's image as a country that promotes moderate Islam and religious inclusiveness motivates the UAE to promote its soft power. The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is also promoting the country's image related to

moderate Islam as a defining aspect of Indonesian Foreign Policy, aiming to shape its position within the global order (Miftahuddin 2010). However, the protests that erupted in 2016 questioned the image of moderate Islam in Indonesia. The protest was started after a statement by the governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's was considered blasphemous and contained verses of the Quran (Burhani 2016). Several Muslim groups were behind the protest. They mobilized large crowds and were often viewed as radical and conservative due to their intolerance towards non-Muslims (ibid). The protest attracted a lot of international media attention, with quite a few even questioning the face of religious moderation that had been advocated by Indonesia (Chandra et al. 2017). Despite this, Indonesia is still persistent in trying to keep the image of moderate Islam alive.

The United Arab Emirates, recognized as a global model for promoting moderate Islam, shares a vision with Indonesia on mainstreaming Wasathiyah Islam (moderate Islam). Consequently, the UAE is leveraging this alignment to further promote Wasathiyah Islam in Indonesia through collaborative efforts. Indonesia, through Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which is considered a milestone and reference for Indonesian society as an inclusive and pluralistic representation of Islam, took the central role in bridging cooperation in promoting moderate Islam with the UAE. If we look closely, top NU officials have had a special relationship with Abu Dhabi in recent times. Furthermore, President Jokowi also shares a close personal relationship with the ruler of UAE Mohammad bin Zayed. This was conveyed directly by Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Binsar Panjaitan. This closeness can be seen as part of the UAE's soft power strategy towards Indonesia, and the cooperation will be explained further in the next chapter.

### **III. The UAE's Soft Power Strategy towards Indonesia**

#### **3.1. Educational Collaborations**

The education sector is one of the most exploited soft power tools by international relations actors. In the case of UAE and Indonesia,

it is done mainly through student exchange programs from various universities and madrasas. Even though this educational cooperation is not as developed as the cooperation between Indonesia and Egypt, the educational cooperation between Indonesia and UAE is progressing. In 2021, for instance, Al-Azhar University Indonesia (UAI) and the UAE Embassy in Indonesia began fostering cooperation to maintain the UAE's diverse cultural heritage through knowledge. This strategy exemplifies one of the UAE's effective soft power approaches, precisely hitting the mark by creating avenues for cultural observers and researchers to engage in collaborative studies on UAE culture. Furthermore, the UAE and UAI are also committed to encouraging the development and strengthening of Arabic language studies. The development of the Arabic language has become a common soft power strategy for Gulf countries. For example, Saudi Arabia has also established the Institute for Islamic and Arab Sciences (LIPIA) in Indonesia to strengthen its identity in Indonesia (Juan and Rakhmat 2022).

In addition, the UAE, through Alef Education, has signed an agreement to expand digital cooperation for madrasa students in Indonesia. This agreement was discussed in the 2019 Joint Steering Committee Forum discussing the digital implementation program in the education sector. As many as 500 thousand Indonesian madrasa students had access to the digital platform by 2020 as part of the agreement (Damaledo 2022). Initially, mathematics lessons were prioritized which aimed to hone the numerical literacy skills of seventh-grade madrasa students. Alef Education extended the free trial contract for using the education platform for Indonesian students, and this was expanded to include Arabic language learning in 2022. This digital platform access opportunity was also extended to students in grades 7 to 12. In other words, more than 1.5 million madrasa students benefited this access as part of the agreement (ibid). As a developed country, the UAE has long-established best practices in the digital-based education sector. Digital-based learning has the potential to reduce operational expenses in the education sector. Additionally, it is recognized as a valuable factor in promoting educational advancement in Indonesia.

Apart from that, the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board (PBNU)



together with representatives from the Mohammed bin Zayed Humanitarian University have launched a cooperation regarding the establishment of the School of Future Studies under the auspices of Nahdlatul Ulama University in Yogyakarta through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in July 2022 (Aziz 2022). This MoU is one of the points of agreement between the Indonesia United Arab Emirates-Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IUEA-CEPA).

### **3.2. Religious Exchanges**

As the largest Muslim country in the world, religious relations between Indonesia and the Middle East are innate, including the United Arab Emirates. This common identity has been used by the two countries as a reason to work together in promoting religious moderation. Starting in 2019, the UAE and Indonesian governments agreed to explore cooperation regarding the mainstreaming of Wasathiyah Islam and madrasa education development in the country (Ministry of Religion 2019). This collaboration was conveyed by M. Nur Kholis Setiawan, the then Secretary General of the Ministry of Religion, during his visit to Abu Dhabi. The collaboration includes several programs to mainstream Wasathiyah Islam, one of which is sending mosque imams from Indonesia to work in several mosques in the UAE. As a part of this program, 13 and 15 imams were sent to the UAE in 2019 and 2020 respectively (Michella 2021). The program was held again in 2022 with 17 imams were sent to the UAE (Christiyaningsih 2022). The Indonesian government plans to continue to encourage the UAE to increase the quota for accepting mosque imams in the country.

The UAE's religious soft power in Indonesia was strengthened by the signing of an MoU regarding cooperation in Islamic religious affairs and was represented by the Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia Fachrul Razi and the Chairman of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs of the UAE Mohammed bin Matar Kaabi in Qasr al-Wathan Presidential Palace, Abu Dhabi in 2020 (Setiaji 2020). This signing was witnessed directly by President Jokowi and the Crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed bin Zayed. The MoU included six points:

1. Collaboration of experience and expertise in promoting the concepts of religious moderation and the dangers of extremism, as well as the values of tolerance.
2. Collaboration in developing the resource capacity of imams, khatibs, and muftis to share best practices.
3. Cooperation to exchange expertise in the field of hafiz or memorizing the Quran, reading and translating skills, and memorizing the Sunnah.
4. Cooperation in exchanging experiences in the fields of waqf management, development, and investment.
5. Collaboration in exchanging prints, translations, and publications of the Holy Quran as well as related research results, publications, and magazines.
6. Exchange of expertise in the construction and management of mosques which aims to promote mosques as safe and comfortable places of worship and moderate religious guidance.

During the 2019 visit of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed to Indonesia, he pledged to gift President Jokowi a mosque in the latter's hometown. This mosque, personally designed by the Crown Prince, mirrors the architecture of the Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi. The construction of the mosque began in March 2021 on approximately 3 hectares of land with funds reaching US\$ 20 million or around 300 billion Indonesian Rupiah. It is estimated that it can accommodate 10 thousand worshipers and is expected to be operational in September 2022 (Rakhmat and Purnama 2020). It is anticipated that this mosque will serve as a beacon of moderation and religious tolerance. Additionally, it has the potential to emerge as a landmark for religious tourism in Indonesia.

In examining the religious cooperation between the UAE and Indonesia, numerous noteworthy aspects merit consideration. One of them is that countries in the Middle East have a very strong influence in Indonesia and even the wider Southeast Asian region. One influential factor is the trend toward adopting more devout religious views, commonly referred to as *hijrah*. This variety of Islamist movements is increasingly expansive transnationally from various countries in the Middle East. This phenomenon is formed by students who receive education in the Middle East and preach

according to the views they have absorbed upon their return (CNN Indonesia 2019). For example, students of Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood traditions incorporate their newly influenced worldviews into their students in Indonesia after they finish their studies in the Middle East. Apart from preaching to the public, they also reach out to educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, Quran schools, printing presses, and other places of strategic importance. Most of them also preach through social media and YouTube utilizing modern technologies.

In this case, Indonesia is a soft target for Middle Eastern countries to spread their influence. Several narratives have emerged that Indonesia has become a field of competition for the spread of religious influence according to the version of each Middle Eastern country. For example, Indonesian religious scholars can be traced to the influence of Saudi Arabia with its Salafis, and Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood. It can therefore be said that Indonesia has become a battleground for the United Arab Emirates in promoting its influence known as Wasathiyah Islam. The UAE's efforts can be seen in its intensity through the cooperation described above, such as exchanging imams, building mosques, and so on.

### **3.3. Humanitarian Assistance**

Besides educational and religious sectors, the UAE's soft power strategy towards Indonesia has also focused on humanitarian affairs, especially amid the global rise in COVID-19 cases. Given Indonesia's high case numbers, nations like China, South Korea, and the UAE have stepped up their support during the early days of the global pandemic (Nurbaiti 2020). In 2020, the UAE sent 20 tons of medical supplies estimated to help around 20,000 medical professionals overcome the spread of the COVID-19 virus (The Filipino Times 2020). This assistance reached US\$750,000, including 100,000 units of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), 20,000 hand sanitizers, 500,000 pairs of medical gloves, and 50,000 surgical masks and respirators (Nugraha 2020).

In the following year, in mid-2021, the UAE again sent aid to the country as the cases of coronavirus infection increased in

Indonesia. The government in Abu Dhabi sent 54 tonnes of emergency health aid, 26 tonnes of which contained 450 tonnes of oxygen cylinders and equipment, in addition to 250,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine (Nurganingsih 2021). As of 2021, the UAE has sent two aid shipments, the first of which was received in May which included 500,000 vaccine doses, 960 Seegene Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) kits, 12,000 units of Rapid Molecular Testing kits, 12,000 Swab Collection Kits, and 18 tons of PPE. Moreover, the UAE government also sent vaccine assistance of 121,648 doses to 60,824 people with disabilities in Bandung, West Java (Sinaga 2021). The UAE's vaccine aid to Indonesia represents more than just a gift; it signifies Indonesia's successful vaccine diplomacy as part of its soft power strategy. Indonesia's strategy to lobby influential countries to procure the COVID-19 vaccine has borne fruit. Apart from the UAE, several countries such as China, Japan, and the United States have also sent vaccine aid to Indonesia (Farmita 2021). The UAE is the largest vaccine producer in the Gulf countries and the Middle East, achieved through collaboration between the Chinese pharmaceutical giant Sinopharm and the UAE's Group 42 (G42). This partnership is estimated to produce 200 million vaccine doses per month (Wardah 2020). Furthermore, China's close ties with Indonesia imply that the vaccine aid also represents a contribution from China. This situation further strengthens the bonds between the three nations.

Apart from vaccine assistance and cooperation, the UAE has assisted Indonesia in several other projects. For instance, the UAE constructed a 100-meter-long suspension bridge connecting Ciwaru Village and Pasir Tanjung Village, Lebak, Banten (Ulya and Djumena 2021). This construction was fully funded by the UAE government which is channelled through The United Arab Emirates' Red Crescent Authority (RCA) in 2021. The UAE's generosity is estimated to help approximately 1,000 families access the suspension bridge daily. Furthermore, the UAE sent humanitarian aid to victims of the landslide disaster in West Java and the aid reached approximately 2,500 people (ibid). In the same year, the UAE Red Crescent's rapid response action sent aid to victims of the earthquake disaster in Mamuju, West Sulawesi. It is estimated that as many as 30,000 people received benefits. With these assistance packages, the UAE's

generosity is becoming increasingly familiar among the Indonesian people, in both urban and rural areas.

### **3.4. Street Naming and Cultural Events**

Another facet within the UAE's extensive soft power strategy towards Indonesia encompasses symbolic gestures such as street namings and dynamic cultural engagements. Notably, the naming of the Jakarta-Cikampek toll road after MBZ in 2021 reflects Indonesia's profound appreciation for the resilient diplomatic ties that have flourished between the two nations over the past 45 years (Natasha 2021). This move not only commemorates the UAE leader but also symbolizes the strength of the bilateral relationship. In a reciprocal gesture, the UAE honored President Jokowi by naming a street after him in 2020, situated strategically between the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Center (ADNEC) and the embassy area, underscoring mutual appreciation and fostering positive growth in relations (Tifada 2020).

The strengthening of ties is further evidenced by the consistent invitations extended to Indonesia to participate in various events hosted in the UAE. These invitations serve as platforms for multifaceted cultural exchange while also yielding economic benefits for both nations. Collaborative initiatives, exemplified by the 2020 event at Bait Al Gharbi in collaboration with the Sharjah Institute for Heritage (SIH) and Indonesia's inaugural participation in the "World Heritage Week in Sharjah," showcased Indonesia's rich cultural heritage (Kemenlu n.d.). This not only fostered cross-cultural understanding but also generated tangible economic outcomes, with the event at Bait Al Gharbi contributing to trade transactions amounting to AED 110,000.

Furthermore, Indonesia strategically promotes its non-traditional food and beverage offerings on the global stage, exemplified by its presence at the Gulfood exhibition held at the World Trade Center, UAE, in February 2021. The Gulfood Exhibition, an annual event, attracts participants and visitors from around the world. Indonesia's active involvement in such global showcases not only underscores its recognition of the Middle East's immense potential but also provides a prime opportunity to exhibit its diverse and high-quality

products, thereby enhancing their international visibility and market value. The success of these promotional efforts is reflected in the notable increase in the value of Indonesian exports to the Middle East in the food and beverage sector, reaching US\$89.42 million in 2020 (Uly 2021).

Moreover, the promotion of Indonesian products and culture continued on a grand scale at the Dubai Expo held from October 2021 to March 2022. Originally slated for 2020 but postponed due to the global challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dubai Expo served as a significant platform for Indonesia to showcase its cultural richness and economic potential. The attendance of Indonesia's President at the event further underscored its strategic importance in enhancing bilateral relations (*ibid*). In essence, Indonesia's active and strategic participation in these international events, despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the global health crisis, attests to its unwavering commitment to leveraging cultural and economic exchanges for mutual benefit and fostering enduring ties with the UAE.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated that the Look East Policy has brought the UAE to strengthen its foothold in the Southeast Asian region, one of which is in Indonesia. In conclusion, the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) soft power strategy towards Indonesia exemplifies a dynamic and thoughtful approach to international relations, emphasizing cultural, religious, and aid collaborations. Through cultural initiatives, such as promoting Emirati arts and traditions in Indonesia, the UAE aims to build bridges and foster mutual appreciation, thereby creating a strong foundation for lasting relationships. Educational, aid, and religious partnerships showcase the UAE's commitment to contributing to Indonesia's development while simultaneously enhancing its own global image as a reliable partner and a staunch promoter of moderate Islam.

Firstly, religious collaborations are likely to remain a focal point in the UAE's soft power strategy towards Indonesia. The UAE

may continue to explore opportunities to collaborate in promoting its concept of moderate Islam. In addition, the UAE's humanitarian assistance could also deepen, contributing to the long-term sustainability of their partnership. Cultural exchanges may also intensify, as the UAE seeks to enhance its soft power by promoting a better understanding of Emirati traditions, arts, and values in Indonesia. Joint cultural events, educational programs, and people-to-people interactions could become more prominent, strengthening the cultural ties between the two nations, and fostering a sense of shared identity.

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