

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Operation al-Aqsa Flood



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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Operation al-Aqsa Flood

Prof. Dr. Walid ‘Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

In 1967, the foreign ministers of five Asian states (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) convened a conference that led to the establishment of an international regional organization known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Subsequently, five additional countries from the same region joined in successive phases: Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (formerly Burma), and Vietnam. In 2022, Timor-Leste was granted approval in principle to accede as a member of ASEAN. The total population of this regional organization was estimated at approximately 700 million in 2024. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projections for 2025, ASEAN’s aggregate purchasing power parity (PPP) gross domestic product (GDP) amounts to nearly \$10.7 trillion, which represents about 5.4% of global GDP, or roughly 11.3% of Asia’s overall GDP.²



The degrees of political stability among the countries in the group vary markedly. According to Kaufman’s model for measuring political stability, five countries exhibit positive stability levels. Singapore leads with a score of 1.42, followed by Brunei at 1.37, Laos at 0.81, Malaysia at 0.17, and Cambodia at 0.04. However, some of these countries, such as Singapore and Cambodia, show tendencies toward decline, whereas Brunei and Laos demonstrate improvement, with Malaysia experiencing fluctuations. In contrast, five other countries fall within the range of negative political stability, with scores ranging from Myanmar at –2.13, followed by the Philippines at –0.57, Indonesia at –0.4, Thailand at –0.28, and finally Vietnam at –0.04. This indicates that approximately 75% of the region’s population resides in areas where the average level of regional political instability reaches about –0.63.³

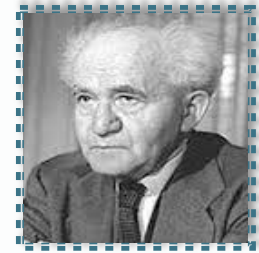
Among the member states of the organization, five are classified as Flawed Democracies, with scores of 6.18 in Singapore, 6.27 in Thailand, 6.44 in Indonesia, 6.63 in the Philippines, and Malaysia leading this group with 7.11. In contrast, the remaining five countries fall within the authoritarian category, recording scores of 0.71 in Laos, 0.96 in Myanmar, approximately 2.62 in Vietnam, 2.7 in Brunei, and 2.94 in Cambodia. Collectively, these figures indicate that nearly 73% of the region’s population lives under a system that can be characterized as a flawed democracy.⁴



Despite the demographic and economic significance of this region, and although approximately 42% of its population is Muslim,⁵ Arab studies examining the political orientations of this group toward the Arab-Israel conflict remain insufficient. This gap hinders both a comprehensive understanding of the region's political tendencies and the ability to manage Arab relations with it on a scientific basis. This deficiency is particularly notable given that Israel has long paid attention to this area, dating back to the historical meetings in Paris in 1946 between Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh and David Ben-Gurion, then Chairman of the Executive of the World Zionist Organization (WZO) and later the first Israeli prime minister. During these meetings, Ho Chi Minh offered to set up a Jewish government in exile on Vietnamese soil. However, subsequent developments led Ho Chi Minh to denounce "Israel as a base for imperialist aggression in the Middle East."⁶ Nonetheless, Israel persisted in its efforts and communication with Vietnam, eventually succeeding in cultivating close relations with it, as will be elaborated later.



Ho Chi Minh



David Ben-Gurion

Israel maintains full diplomatic relations with seven member states of the organization, with recognition occurring in a gradual, sequential manner. Between 1949 and 1957, the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos each extended recognition in succession. In the 1960s, Cambodia and Singapore followed suit, while Vietnam established full diplomatic relations in 1993. By contrast, Israel does not maintain diplomatic relations with the remaining three member states; Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia. It is noteworthy that diplomatic ties with Cambodia, Laos and the Philippines had previously been severed at various points, only to be restored later. Thailand was the first state to recognize Israel de facto, whereas Myanmar was the first to grant de jure recognition in 1953.⁷

First: The Position of ASEAN Countries on the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The ASEAN countries can be divided into three groups based on their general stance toward the Arab-Israeli conflict and, more specifically, the war in Gaza Strip (GS):⁸

1. The Pro-Israel Bloc

It includes Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Myanmar. These states maintain diplomatic relations with Israel and support Israel's "right to self-defense."

Singapore, in particular, has consistently led pro-Israel positions within ASEAN since its independence in 1965. Officially, Singapore has been the most explicit in criticizing Operation al-Aqsa Flood, describing it as a terrorist attack. Nevertheless, Singapore also supported the vote to grant Palestine full membership in the United Nations (UN) in May 2024, based on its endorsement of a two-state solution while affirming Israel's right to defend itself.⁹ Singapore's decisions appear influenced by multiple factors, including its security, defense and technological ties with Israel on one hand, and its trade partnerships and energy needs with Arab states on the other.



With respect to the Philippines, it is essential to consider that the country maintains a mutual defense agreement with the US, which influences its stance toward Israel on one hand. On the other hand, the Catholic Church's strong presence in the Philippines, supported by certain civil society organizations, renders the position less overtly biased, a matter that will be revisited in subsequent sections.

It is noteworthy that some countries in this group have maintained diplomatic relations with Israel since 1953, as in the case of Myanmar, whereas Laos established diplomatic ties with Israel in 1961, severed them in 1972, and then restored them in 2019.

2. The Bloc Closest to the Palestinian Position

Countries with predominantly Muslim populations—namely Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei—are the closest to the Palestinian position. These states do not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, support Palestinian rights and the establishment of a Palestinian state, and consistently criticize Israeli policies. Malaysia is particularly clear in this regard, as reflected in the positions of its Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, who maintains frequent communication with Palestinian resistance leaders. However, this does not negate reports indicating modest trade relations between the parties, especially prior to Operation al-Aqsa Flood.¹⁰ Indonesia, by contrast, appears more pragmatic in its foreign policy toward Israel, driven by aspirations to access certain Israeli technological sectors, such as cybersecurity, water management, and agricultural development, as well as to leverage Israel's international relations for its own benefit. While Indonesia does not formally recognize Israel, it maintains trade and tourism exchanges, alongside reports of security-related communications between the two sides. Some reports also point to indirect trade relations, conducted through third parties, between Israel and both Indonesia and Malaysia.¹¹



Anwar
Ibrahim



In March 2024, Indonesia and Malaysia sought the intervention of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to declare Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands illegal, removal of Israeli troops, and payment of reparations to Palestinians. These proceedings at the ICJ are different from the South African case before the ICJ, which relates directly to the 7 October attacks by Hamas and charges Israel with violating the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Indonesian and Malaysian foreign ministers addressed the ICJ on the legal question of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories since 1967. They sought, in accordance with the ICJ's advisory opinion, that Israeli occupation be deemed illegal as a whole and brought to an end.¹²

Public opinion polls in the predominantly Muslim states of ASEAN indicate a growing popular interest in the developments of Operation al-Aqsa Flood. Some analyses attribute this primarily to the high proportion of Muslim populations in the region, and additionally to concerns regarding a potential shift toward religious extremism as a result of Israel's policies in GS, with possible repercussions for the stability of the wider region encompassing the ASEAN states.

3. The Pragmatic Group

At the forefront of this group stands Vietnam, whose significance can be outlined as follows:

- ▶ a. Vietnam ranks second among the countries of this group in terms of GDP based on PPP, amounting to approximately \$1.786 trillion. Furthermore, it ranks third in terms of population size, with around 98 million inhabitants.
- ▶ b. The historical ties between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Communist Party of Vietnam were particularly significant during the 1960s and 1970s. However, the Oslo Accords opened the door to Israeli-Vietnamese diplomatic relations in 1993. Although Vietnam has maintained its support for the Palestinians in the areas of the right to self-determination, the two-state solution, and calls for ceasefires in GS, the pace of Vietnamese-Israeli relations has been accelerating in economic, political and defense spheres. Yossi Beilin, who held several ministerial posts in Israeli governments, stated that over the past three decades, the bilateral relations between Vietnam and Israel “have developed robustly, particularly in the areas of trade and technology. Bilateral trade has grown from just tens of millions of USD to several billion USD nowadays, including numerous technological products, electric vehicles, and mechanical equipment shipped from Vietnam to Israel. In the meantime, Israeli companies have also intensified investment and technology transfer in smart agriculture and cybersecurity sectors to Vietnam.”¹³

The signing of the Vietnam-Israel Free Trade Agreement (VIFTA) in 2023 may be seen as an indicator of the Vietnamese Communist Party's pragmatic orientation. Vietnam has become "Israel's largest trading partner in Southeast Asia, while Israel is Vietnam's third-largest export market in West Asia."¹⁴ Furthermore, the two-way trade



valued \$3.24 billion in 2024, reflecting a rapidly growing relationship with an annual increase of 20%. In addition, Israel is Vietnam's second-largest Middle Eastern investor. Israel has also announced its need for foreign labor to address a shortage of approximately 260 thousand workers, a gap it hopes Vietnam can help fill, according to statements by Israeli Minister of Labor Yoav Ben Tzur.¹⁵

The roots of these shifts toward pragmatism in Vietnamese foreign policy can be traced to what is referred to in contemporary Vietnamese political literature as "Bamboo Diplomacy." This approach, articulated by the Secretary-General of the Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, in 2016, conveys the idea of "bending without breaking." It represents a move toward pragmatism at the expense of strict ideological commitment, as "'Bamboo diplomacy' may serve to project a 'Vietnamese way' that is neither pro-U.S. nor pro-China." This balancing act has also extended to China's relations with both the Palestinians and Israel. Moreover, Vietnamese statements concerning the genocide in the GS and the nature of Israeli measures reveal a mode of expression that remains open to interpretation by both sides of the conflict.¹⁶

Second: The Voting of ASEAN States on UN General Assembly Resolutions Concerning GS

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) voted on several resolutions relating to the GS war, in addition to a resolution supporting the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), following Western moves to suspend aid to the agency. The voting outcomes of ASEAN member states on these UNGA resolutions are presented in the following table:



Table 1: ASEAN States' Voting on UNGA Resolutions Regarding Operation al-Aqsa Flood in Relation to Global Voting Patterns October 2023–September 2025¹⁷

Resolution	For	Against	Abstain	ASEAN Countries
27/10/2023 Immediate and lasting humanitarian truce	120	14	45	For: 8 Against: 0 Abstain: 1 (Philippines)
12/12/2023 Immediate cessation of hostilities, unconditional release of hostages, and delivery of aid	153	10	23	For: 10 Against: 0 Abstain: 0
12/12/2024 (Regular Session) Immediate cessation of hostilities	158	9	13	For: 10 Against: 0 Abstain: 0
12/12/2024 Support for UNRWA	159	9	11	For: 10 Against: 0 Abstain: 0
12/6/2025 Permanent, immediate and unconditional ceasefire	149	12	19	For: 10 Against: 0 Abstain: 0
12/9/2025 Two-state solution	142	10	12	For: 10 Against: 0 Abstain: 0

Table 1 reveals a notable degree of consistency between the evolution of international support for a ceasefire in GS and the corresponding stance of ASEAN countries. Support for UNGA resolutions increased from 121 to 153, then to 158, followed by 159, before returning to 149. This rise in support among ASEAN states for these international resolutions is equally evident, increasing from 8 in the first resolution to full consensus in the last three resolutions, including backing for the UNRWA, which had faced significant pressure to halt its operations. It appears that the expansion of both popular and official protests, alongside rulings by international judicial bodies worldwide, exerted considerable pressure on most states to endorse a ceasefire, despite Israel's obstinate refusal to comply with these resolutions.



Third: ASEAN Statements Regarding Operation al-Aqsa Flood

ASEAN closely followed the developments of the war in GS and its regional ramifications in Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq, including the cycle of Iranian-Israeli attacks and the US strike on Iran during what became known as the 12-Day War in June 2025. The most notable statements issued by ASEAN were as follows:

1. First Statement 20/10/2023

Two weeks after the onset of Operation al-Aqsa Flood, the foreign ministers of ASEAN issued a statement stating:¹⁸

- ▶ 1. We, the Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are gravely concerned over the recent escalation of armed conflicts in the Middle East. We urge for the immediate end of violence to avoid further human casualties and call for the full respect of International Humanitarian Law. We call on all parties to create safe, rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian corridors.
- ▶ 2. We strongly condemn the acts of violence which have led to the deaths and injury of civilians, including ASEAN nationals. We reaffirm our support for a negotiated two-State solution that allows both Israelis and Palestinians to live side-by-side in peace and security consistent with relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. This will be the only viable path to resolving the root cause of the conflict.
- ▶ 3. We further call on all parties to protect and ensure safety and security to all civilians, including ASEAN nationals, and the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. We re-emphasize our commitment to provide emergency assistance to ASEAN nationals, in accordance with the ASEAN Declaration on the Guidelines on Consular Assistance by ASEAN Member States' Missions in Third Countries to Nationals of Other ASEAN Member State and the Guidelines for the Provision of Emergency Assistance by ASEAN Missions in Third Countries to Nationals of ASEAN Member Countries in Crisis Situations.(....)

It is evident that concern for the safety of ASEAN citizens in the conflict zone prompted the expedited issuance of this statement. Moreover, the statement addressed the commencement of operations independently of the underlying causes of the conflict, which were preceded by a series of Israeli aggressions since 2007, not to mention the economic blockade on GS. It is also noteworthy that Thailand and the Philippines lead the ASEAN group in terms of the number of workers in Israel, with approximately 60 thousand workers combined; around 30 thousand from each country.¹⁹

When a Gaza draft resolution calling for an immediate and sustained humanitarian truce was presented to the UNGA on 27/10/2023, eight ASEAN countries voted in favor, while Cambodia was absent from the vote and the Philippines abstained.²⁰



2. Second Statement 21/1/2025

ASEAN welcomed in this statement the ceasefire declaration issued on 19/1/2025. The statement included:

- ▶ 3. We call for the full and effective implementation of the ceasefire agreement from its initial phase to immediately end the violence, ensure the release of all hostages and detainees, some of whom are nationals of ASEAN Member States. (...)
- ▶ 4. We urge all parties involved to maintain conducive conditions for the full and effective implementation of the agreement, to adhere strictly to the terms of the agreement and to work collectively towards a comprehensive and enduring resolution that upholds international law in accordance with the UN Charter and the relevant UNSC resolutions. We also call for a full, safe, rapid, and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance for the Palestinians, including through the continuation of UNRWA's role and mandate, and for the immediate reconstruction in Gaza.
- ▶ 5. We urged all parties concerned to work towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict with a view to realizing the two-State solution in accordance with international law and the relevant UNSC and UNGA resolutions, including UNGA resolution A/RES/ES-10/23 on the Admission of New Members to the UN dated 10 May 2024 which we all supported.²¹



3. Third Statement 12/2/2025

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued the following a statement:²²

- ▶ 1. We reaffirm our longstanding support for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including the rights to self-determination, and to their homeland. We call on the international community to ensure respect for international law, international humanitarian and human rights law.
- ▶ 2. We urge all parties concerned to engage in meaningful dialogue to achieve a comprehensive and peaceful resolution to the longstanding conflict based on the

two-State solution in accordance with international law and the relevant UNSC and UNGA resolutions (...)

- ▶ 3. We call on all parties involved to build upon the momentum of the multi-phase ceasefire and hostage release agreement that came into effect on 19 January 2025, to maintain conducive conditions for the full and effective implementation of the agreement, and to work towards a comprehensive and durable resolution.
- ▶ 4. We also call for a full, safe, rapid, and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance for the Palestinians including through continuation of the UNRWA's role and mandate, and for the immediate reconstruction to ensure the livelihood for the people of Gaza.

Tracing ASEAN states' positions, both through their collective statements and through the evolution of their declarations consistently affirming Palestinian rights as stipulated in UN resolutions, highlights the potential for further development of these orientations. Such prospects could be advanced by leveraging factors including the weight of the Islamic bloc, the inclinations of certain elites, particularly within the Communist Party in Vietnam or the Catholic Church in the Philippines, among others.



4. The Joint ASEAN–GCC Statement with China

At the joint Arab-Asian meeting on 27/5/2025 in Malaysia, attended by China, participants affirmed their shared position on the war in GS:²³

- ▶ – Condemn all attacks against civilians and call for a durable ceasefire and for all concerned parties to ensure the most effective and efficient access for humanitarian aid, and relief supplies and other basic necessities and essential services, as well as the restoration of electricity, water, and allow the unhindered delivery of fuel, food, and medicine throughout Gaza;
- ▶ – Call on all parties to the conflict (...) to abide by international humanitarian law, particularly the principles and provisions of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1949;
- ▶ – Acknowledging the Advisory Opinion of the ICJ on 19 July 2024, which is of the opinion, among others, that the United Nations, and especially the General Assembly, which requested this opinion, and the Security Council, should consider the precise modalities and further action required to bring to an end as



rapidly as possible the unlawful presence of the State of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory;

- ▶ – Support the ongoing efforts to release all hostages and those under arbitrary detention;
- ▶ – Urge all parties concerned to work towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict with a view to realizing the two-state solution based on the pre-1967 borders; in accordance with international law and the relevant UN Security Council (UNSC) and UN General Assembly resolutions (....)
- ▶ – Support the efforts of the global alliance for the implementation of the two-state solution, and note the initiatives of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in cooperation with the Kingdom of Norway and the European Union towards realizing an independent Palestinian state; (....)
- ▶ – Welcome the Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly adopted on 11 December 2024, in which the General Assembly (....) called upon all parties to enable the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) to carry out its mandate, as adopted by the General Assembly, in all areas of operation with full respect for the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

Fourth: Public Opinion on Israel in ASEAN Countries

Surveys show that 36.7% of ASEAN publics prioritize the Middle East conflict after Operation al-Aqsa Flood over others like the South China Sea or Ukraine, though this view has declined in countries with smaller Muslim populations.²⁴ 41.8% believe Israel's October 2023 response to Hamas was excessive, rising to 79.2% in Brunei, 77.7% in Indonesia, and 64.4% in Malaysia, but only 46.2% in Singapore. Meanwhile, 7.5% view the resistance attack as unjustified, and 27.2% are concerned about the US support for Israel's stance in the Gaza conflict.²⁵



On the other hand, the survey results indicate that public approval of government performance on the Gaza war varies significantly, a matter that deserves careful attention and analysis to understand how it might be leveraged. According to the findings, the levels of public approval of government positions in each ASEAN country on this issue can be categorized as follows:²⁶

- ▶ 1. High Approval Countries: Indonesia, approximately 78.2%, and Brunei, approximately 65%.
- ▶ 2. Moderate Approval Countries: Malaysia, approximately 58.6%, and Singapore, approximately 57.2%.
- ▶ 3. Below-Average Approval Countries: The Philippines, approximately 40.4%; Vietnam, approximately 34%; Cambodia, approximately 33.9%; and Thailand, approximately 31.9%.
- ▶ 4. Low Approval Countries: Myanmar, approximately 10.6%, and Laos, approximately 18.8%.

This distribution of public approval of government policies is likely to influence official stances, particularly those publicly articulated, regarding the ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

Furthermore, the broad consistency of Indonesian policy, as the largest country in the ASEAN bloc, appears to have been mirrored in the role of religious authorities within Indonesian society. In November 2023, the Indonesian Ulema Council issued “a *fatwa* (edict) declaring Muslims must support the struggle for Palestinian independence through various means, including donations, almsgiving, or charity. Additionally, the fatwa prohibits any form of activity and support for Israel's aggression against Palestine.” Notably, a portion of Indonesia's non-Muslim population endorsed the content of this ruling. Most Indonesian Muslims expressed compliance with the *fatwa*, with 65% supported it, 9% opposed it, and 26% abstained from responding. Popular boycotts of economic establishments perceived as supporting Israel contributed to a 6.3% year-on-year decline in their sales in 2023 compared to 2022.²⁷



Conclusion

Israel seeks to penetrate the Southeast Asian region to ensure an expansion of its international support, particularly in light of the significant erosion of its global standing following international reactions to its regional policies. It aims to engage with powers



in countries with predominantly Muslim populations, attempting to entice some through technology, assistance in their relations with the US, or promises of diplomatic backing. An example is Israel's pledge to assist Indonesia in joining the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in exchange for Indonesia's engagement with the Abraham Accords.²⁸ Israel also seeks to capitalize on the region's increasing pragmatism, rooted in "bamboo diplomacy," to advance cooperation with Vietnam and overcome the "ideological barrier" in their bilateral relations, in addition to the other relations previously noted with the remaining ASEAN states.

The failure to mobilize Arab capabilities in such a strategically important Asian region expands the space for Israel to restore its normal relations with countries around the world, including those in this area. This reality necessitates that the Palestinian resistance diplomacy devote greater attention to the region by capitalizing on:



- ▶ 1. The substantial proportion of Muslims in the region, which constitutes approximately 42% of the total population.
- ▶ 2. The need to engage, particularly in Vietnam, with leftist forces that are less pragmatically inclined and more closely aligned with serious national liberation policies. Notably, this includes figures such as former Vice President and Foreign Minister Nguyen Thi Binh, who is recognized as one of the most prominent supporters of Palestinian rights.
- ▶ 3. There should be a greater effort to engage with the leadership of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, particularly given that Catholics comprised approximately 79% of the population in 2020. It is well recognized that the stance of the Philippine Catholic Church represents a progressive position in advocating for a cessation of hostilities, the protection of civilians and the rejection of using starvation as a weapon against civilian populations. The statements issued by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) exemplify this position. On 27/11/2023, the "biggest group of Christian churches urged their members to reject Israel's 'illegal occupation' of Palestine as they called for "peace based on justice." The resolution further emphasized that "Churches must not condone Zionist rhetoric among Christians who legitimize as a right of 'the chosen people' the illegal occupation of Palestinian properties and other violations of human life and dignity. These outdated and irresponsible claims must be rectified."²⁹

- ▶ 4. Establishing communication with Catholic Church leaders who support the Palestine issue is essential, particularly with figures such as Cardinal Pablo Virgilio David, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines.
- ▶ 5. It is essential to draw attention to ASEAN states' interests with the Arab world. It suffices to note that the remittances sent by ASEAN migrant workers in the Arabian Gulf account for approximately 4% to 8% of each member state's total GDP within ASEAN.³⁰
- ▶ 6. There is a pressing need to deepen Arab studies on this region in order to understand its political, social, economic and military structures and to develop strategies for engagement with these states based on a scientific and systematic perspective rather than mere impressions.



**Pablo Virgilio
David**



Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
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