

National Interests are above International Affairs: Indonesian-Israeli Intelligence Operations on the Purchase of A-4 Skyhawks, 1978-1982

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Abstract

This study examines Operation Alpha, an intelligence operation conducted by Indonesia and Israel to facilitate the purchase and delivery of 32 Douglas A-4 Skyhawk aircraft from Israel to Indonesia between 1978 and 1982. Despite Indonesia's official policy of non-recognition towards Israel due to its support for Palestinian independence, the Indonesian government under President Soeharto pursued a pragmatic approach to address the urgent need for modernizing its aging military equipment. Through a series of negotiations involving the United States, Indonesia reached an agreement with Israel to procure the aircraft at a lower cost and with faster delivery compared to purchasing directly from the US. The successful completion of Operation Alpha not only bolstered Indonesia's defense capabilities but also marked the beginning of discreet military and economic cooperation between the two countries that continued until the reform era, despite the absence of official diplomatic relations. This study highlights the prioritization of national interests over international affairs in Indonesia's foreign policy during the Soeharto era and the role of intelligence agencies in facilitating clandestine cooperation between states with conflicting official stances.

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Introduction

This study examines Operation Alpha as an effort to bring 32 units of Douglas A4-Skyhawk aircraft from Israel to Indonesia. This operation was a continuation of arms sales negotiations between the Indonesian government and the United States after Vice President Walter Mondale's December 1978 visit to Indonesia. The urgency of this study is divided into two: to examine the Indonesia-Israel cooperation relationship and to examine the success of Operation Alpha in bringing the A-4 Skyhawk aircraft and training its pilots in Israel.

In international affairs, the Indonesian government officially does not have diplomatic relations with Israel because of its policy of supporting the Palestinian struggle for independence (Barton and Rubenstein 2005, 159). There are many factors that influence this policy. Based on socio-cultural factors, Indonesia as a Muslim-majority country shares religious ties with the Palestinian people. The support of the Muslim community has existed since the era of the national movement (1908-1942), where the topic of Palestine became a regular discussion among Muslim organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah (Barton and Rubenstein 2005, 159). Meanwhile, based on political factors and international relations, Indonesia is close to Arab countries, especially those with

socialism ideology. According to Muttaqien, Indonesia's support for the Arabs cannot be separated from the Arab countries' assistance in recognizing the independence of Indonesia and the struggle to liberate West Papua from the Netherlands (Muttaqien 2013, 61–62).

When Soeharto came to power, the government's view of Israel became more pragmatic than its predecessor. Following the Six-Day War (June 5-10, 1967), the Indonesian government encouraged direct negotiations between the two warring parties, while the majority of Arab countries considered such a move highly sensitive (Muttaqien 2013, 63). President Soeharto implemented pragmatic policies in his administration, and tended to be closer to the West, so it is not surprising that his approach to the conflict was passive (Muttaqien 2013, 63). However, the opening of diplomatic relations between the two countries also could not happen in this government due to various considerations both internal and external, especially from the Islamic community (Abadi 2004, 295). From the Israeli side, they approached Indonesia several times informally to open diplomatic relations. Later the two countries contacted each other through intelligence community to discuss the purchase of A-4 Skyhawk aircraft. This operation marks the beginning of "diplomatic relations" between Israel and Indonesia, which lasted until the reform era.

To examine this case, we can use the following research questions: First, why did the defense equipment transaction between Indonesia and Israel occur? Second, why does the United States want to help Indonesia in the defense equipment transaction with Israel? Third, how is the sustainability of the Indonesia-Israel defense equipment transaction cooperation after the operation is completed?

Method

This research uses the historical method with primary sources of archives of the US ambassador's report to their interior ministry regarding this operation dated 1979-1980 obtained through WikiLeaks. While archives originating from Indonesia are in the form of documents and reports from the TNI historical service and the historical subfield of the TNI AU lighting service regarding the A4-Skyhawk aircraft and the ABRI rejuvenation program. The last archive is various newspaper articles on the issue of Indonesian-Israeli diplomatic activities, especially those regarding the A4-Skyhawk aircraft with a temporal frame of 1978-1982.

Background of Indonesia's Air Force Military Equipment

The Indonesian Air Force (TNI AU) military equipment often purchases from foreign nation. During the Soekarno administration, the military had various types of defense equipment from the western and eastern blocs. This arms purchase followed the foreign policy of the ruling government. The arrival of defense equipment from Western Bloc countries, especially the United States, dates back to the early 1950s. After the Round Table Conference, ex-Dutch defense equipment was handed over to Indonesia as a result of the agreement. TNI AU became the largest recipient of equipment from The Dutch Air Force, Militaire Luchtvaart (ML), in the form of seven LJ-4 Piper Cub trainers, eight AT-6 Harvard trainers, 36 Cargo-47 (C-47) Dakota transport aircraft, twenty five Bomber-25 (B-25) Mitchel bombers, twelve Lockheed (L-12) transport aircraft, and P-51 Mustang (Ben 2011, 12–13). In the 1960s, the Soviet Union became TNI AU's largest supplier, providing 430 aircraft of various types (Central Intelligence Agency 1970). Since 1956, the Soviet Union has committed 100 million US dollars in credit assistance, which President Soekarno accepted during his visit to the country. The assistance was ratified by the Indonesian parliament in February 1958 (Pauker 1962, 216). Defense equipment worth 1,092 billion

US dollars from these countries, even the second largest after the United Arab Republic (2,135 billion US dollars) (Central Intelligence Agency 1971).

At the same time, Indonesia experienced massive inflation due to budget deficits in order to finance government projects, including defense equipment spending. President Soekarno's "guided economy" concept caused the economy to collapse because all economic activity was centralized in the government. The private sector, previously dominated by foreign companies, also collapsed after most of them were nationalized in 1956. Consequently, Indonesia dropped out of the international market due to political problems with the Western Bloc (Glassburner 2007, 4). Automatically Indonesia has no revenue at all, but government spending is huge. To finance their projects, the government printed a great amount of money. The same money was also used to finance the demands of the Indonesian armed forces, which at the time was in confrontation with Malaysia. As a result of these activities, the rupiah currency fell and inflation reached 600% (1966) (Wie 2012, 69). This hyperinflation caused the Indonesian government to struggle to repay the Soviet Union's defense equipment debt. Based on a CIA report, the Soviet Union had stopped its credit assistance in 1965 after the Indonesian government had failed to settle its debt, which had reached 800 million US dollars (Central Intelligence Agency 1970).

The consequences of the monetary crisis were evident during the Soeharto/New Order era, when Indonesia's defense capabilities were significantly compromised. Indonesia retained its Soviet-era defense equipment because it lacked the funds to buy newer models. However, in 1965, the supply of spare parts from the Soviet Union was terminated. This was a result of an economic embargo imposed by the Soviets after Indonesia failed to settle its remaining credit debt for military and economic aid. This combination of circumstances made it impossible for the government to purchase new defense equipment. All aircraft from the Soviet Union were grounded due to unfitness, which resulted in the disbandment of several squadrons (Subroto 2005, 7). A significant proportion of these Soviet aircraft were not operational for an extended period. The majority were in service until 1964 (*Angkasa* 2011, 40–41). Subsequently, these aircraft were either destroyed or traded for other aircraft from Western Bloc countries.

The 1970s was a period of rebuilding Indonesia's defense capabilities. Indonesia had gone through a dark period during the transition from the Soekarno to the Soeharto regime. President Soeharto chose to obtain defense equipment from Western Bloc countries, following his anti-communist political policy. Since the meeting between President Richard Nixon and President Soeharto on May 26, 1970, Indonesia has received a number of military aircraft and helicopters from the United States. These include the T-33A T-Bird jet and the UH-34D Sikorsky helicopter. Both aircraft were the result of an exchange with grounded MiG aircraft that were subsequently utilized as research subjects by the 4477th Test and Evaluation Squadron, also known as Red Eagle. This unit was tasked with researching Soviet aircraft (Davies 2008, 48). The *New York Times* reported that the Nixon administration prepared \$24.9 million in military aid to Indonesia to begin on July 1, 1970, two months after President Soeharto's visit to the US (Sterba 1971).

Massive defense equipment purchases were then launched by Defense Minister General M. Jusuf at the beginning of his term in 1978. This operation under the code name "Strategic Plan" (*Rencana Strategis*) was carried from 1978 to 1983, coinciding with the end of the general's term. During this time, Indonesia made various purchases of defense equipment for the three dimensions of the TNI. The majority of the defense equipment were replacements for Soekarno-era equipment that had become unusable and had been sold to other countries (Davies 2008, 48). The Indonesian Air Force is the main concern of the Minister of Defense. Since 1976, there have been no new aircraft after assistance from the United States and the Garuda Bangkit program that brought in ex-Australian Air Force and

Malaysian Air Force aircraft (Poerwoko 2011, 44). According to Chief of Staff of the Indonesian Air Force, Marshal Ashadi Tjahjadi's report, the Air Force had negotiated the purchase of several aircraft such as the F-5 E Tiger II through export credits, but an agreement had not been reached so the arrival time of the aircraft was uncertain. The complaint immediately caught General Jusuf's attention which led him to lobby the government through Prof. Widjojo Nitisastro, then head of Bappenas, to immediately execute the purchase contract in 1978 (Sumarkidjo 2006, 323). This defense equipment expenditure is in accordance with the budget of the Ministry of Defense and the government's economic credit, so the majority of aircraft are used or not the latest units. Although relatively old, it is estimated that the use of aircraft can be utilized for at least the next 10 years. If the funds are sufficient, more advanced aircraft such as the F-16 or Mirage will be purchased.

At least three types of equipment were targeted for procurement: the F-5E Tiger II, the A-4 Skyhawk, and the M-16 weapon. In a telegram dated February, 10, 1978, from the US embassy, General Maraden Panggabean (then Minister of Defense and Security) met with the US ambassador, Edward E. Masters, and conveyed Indonesia's military needs. He also stated that the development of this defense force was not used to threaten neighboring countries, but to modernize the Indonesian military equipment that had aged out of commission (U.S. Embassy 1978c). The report from the embassy was forwarded to Congress for further discussion, but Masters believes Panggabean's proposal will not be a problem when it is discussed.

Mondale Visit and Humanitarian Barter

The United States Vice President Walter Mondale's several-day visit to the Asia-Pacific region took him on a humanitarian mission to ASEAN countries, particularly Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines (Butwell 1979, 27). All three countries were led by military dictators and had poor human rights records in the eyes of the international community. As a beacon of human rights, Mondale was tasked with "cleaning up" these records while strengthening diplomatic relations with the US after the Vietnam War tarnished their international standing (Schmitz and Walker 2004, 113). In the case of Indonesia, there are at least two issues of international concern, East Timor and political prisoners. From the G30S to the invasion of the former Portuguese colony, the US never interfered with the Soeharto government's actions against "communism" in Indonesia. But the Carter government made these two issues its special concern. However, there were no major actions, only verbal warnings because they also needed to attract Soeharto's support in countering the influence of communism after the Vietnam War (U.S. Embassy 1977). During Mondale's two-day visit to Indonesia, the two officials discussed a number of issues related to relations between the two countries, particularly in the economic and military fields. In the military field, Soeharto requested approval for three types of defense equipment: F-5 Tiger, A-4 Skyhawk, and M-16 weapons. He then explained that Indonesia's current FMS (Foreign Military Sales) credit could only finance the purchase of one squadron of F-5s, so additional credit was needed for the other two. Mondale then informed that his government had approved the sale of the three defense equipment. However, for the FMS credit issue, further discussion was needed with President Carter and the Congress because government funds were tight. Nevertheless, the Senate has agreed that military aid in the form of credit will be extended.

In return of favor, Mondale on the same occasion also pressured President Soeharto to release prisoners of PKI members/alleged members detained since 1966, especially those who were tried in court and did not receive a clear verdict (Butwell 1979, 31). Since

December 1977 approximately 10,000 PKI members/suspected detainees were released to make a positive impression on the US Congress. The release was good news among human rights activists and members of the US Congress. Soeharto then promised 10,000 more would be released in 1978 and beyond on humanitarian grounds. Mondale explained that these releases created a positive atmosphere in his administration. Thanks to this atmosphere, the US government can easily obtain Congressional permission regarding the other two defense equipment. Based on information circulating in the newspapers, the majority of the released detainees were class B detainees aka "not directly involved in the G30S, but are PKI cadres" (*The News-Dispatch* 1980, 4). General Yoga Sugama said the majority of prisoners were released in the early 1970s, leaving only 33,155 class B prisoners as of 1975 still in government custody (*The News-Dispatch* 1980, 4). With Mondale's approval, Indonesia began procurement for the F-5 Tiger, A-4 Skyhawk, and M-16 rifles. Especially for the procurement of the A-4 Skyhawk, Indonesia received interesting information from the intelligence assistant of the defense and security department.

Skyhawk Negotiation

In an effort to modernize its military equipment and strengthen its air defense capabilities, Indonesia's decision to procure A-4 Skyhawk fighter jets was not unexpected. Nonetheless, this endeavor to realize national interests in air defense involved a complex negotiation process that included the United States, as the manufacturing nation, and, unexpectedly, also Israel. The imperative for these fighter jets arose amidst Indonesia's financial constraints and the inherent dynamics of international diplomatic relations. The Indonesian Air Force's (TNI AU) acquisition process for the Skyhawk was confronted with various challenges, ranging from financial impediments through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) mechanism to the pursuit of alternative negotiations involving third parties. The intricate trajectory of this fighter jet acquisition thus illustrates the complexities of defense diplomacy that a nation must navigate, frequently contending with dilemmas in balancing core national interests against the evolving dynamics of international relations.

Indonesia-United States

First Skyhawk negotiation begins in 1978 when General M. Jusuf discussed FMS credit for the purchase of the A-4 Skyhawk. Previously, Mondale had promised permission to purchase the aircraft, but the FMS credit was still under discussion among the congressmen. General M. Jusuf met with the US Embassy to discuss the availability of FMS and solutions offered by the Indonesian government (U.S. Embassy 1978). The 45-minute meeting discussed the issue of insufficient FMS credit for the purchase of A-4 Skyhawk aircraft and M-16 weapons. If it incapable, the government will have to use its own funds to cover the shortfall. However, this will make it very difficult for the Indonesian government to raise funds in the following years (U.S. Embassy 1978). According to a Foreign Ministry report, the total cost for the three defense equipment is 176 million US dollars. Indonesia also reported that they are short of US\$145 million so additional credit is needed (U.S. Embassy 1978).

The US Embassy in Indonesia reported that Indonesia wished to purchase 28 A-4C aircraft at an estimated cost of US\$33.7 million. However, the Indonesian government later expressed its inability to purchase the aircraft in 1978. The F-5 purchase transaction was the main reason why the purchase could not be implemented. The Indonesian government had submitted a credit request for fiscal year 1979 (started April 1979) for the purchase of the fighter. They also realized that delaying too long could make the price more expensive. Therefore, the US Embassy advised their government to postpone the deal until early 1979,

at least until June 30, 1979, and prepare a price estimate and the necessary funds. It is estimated that payments will be made over 3 years (fiscal year 1978-1980) for the three defense equipment (U.S. Embassy 1978).

Indonesia-Israel

About a year later, General Moerdani (intelligence assistant of the defense and security department) informed the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the US Department of Defense, Mr. Armacost, that the governments of Israel and Indonesia had reached an agreement to purchase 16 A-4 aircraft consisting of 14 single seat A-4Es and 2 TA-4F trainers for a total price of US\$25 million. This agreement came as a bit of a surprise from the US, especially from the state and defense departments. Based on a telegram from the US embassy to the two departments dated March 21, 1979, the embassy had asked about the handling of rehabilitation from the Lockheed Company as well as the 28 aircraft held for Indonesia in the agreement with them. Moerdani explained that the Israelis would take care of everything. They had made a scheme by appointing a European company to handle the management of the aircraft (rehabilitation and shipping) where the company would later transfer it back to Israel so that the company was officially recorded as the party that made arrangements to Indonesia. If buying from the US, the rehabilitation will be handled by Lockheed's Singapore branch at a cost "twice as expensive as from Israel", not including shipping costs by McDonnell Douglas which are considered longer than from Israel. It was estimated that by purchasing from Israel, it would save 900,000 US dollars per aircraft and was guaranteed to be ready for operation in July 1980 (U.S. Embassy 1979b).

However, The US maintains control over their defense equipment that belongs to other countries. According to Leon Mangasarian in his dissertation, Israel is a "substitute supplier" of US defense equipment, if the US is politically unable to sell their equipment to the buyer nation (Mangasarian 1993, 338-39). In some cases, Israel serves as an extension of the US in arms sales to countries such as Iran, South Africa and Angola. As a result, many countries around the world turn to Israel when seeking to obtain defense equipment made by Uncle Sam's country (Klieman 1985, 184). Therefore, Indonesia's A-4 Skyhawk procurement must obtain permission from the US as the manufacturer.

The defense department report revealed the US government had approved the purchase of a Squadron of the aircraft even though it had not yet notified Congress. The transaction is carried out on an "as is, where is" basis which means that the transaction items are sold in the condition in which the agreement occurs, and the seller is not responsible for any damage that occurs during delivery. Until it arrived in Indonesia, it was out of warranty. The Israelis were then informed that the US would cooperate with them, and even Lockheed Company was still interested in dealing with the Indonesian government so they were competing with Israel over this sale. Then regarding payment, the FMS credit transfer will be directed to Israel from the previous two companies that own the Skyhawk patent, thus requiring at least 30 days' notice to congress before the transaction is carried out. The Indonesian government itself has agreed not to make further moves until all conditions from the US have been met. The Israelis also inform the US that each aircraft costs 1.25 million US dollars, not including spare parts (U.S. Embassy 1979). Within a short time, the US Congress authorized the sale, as well as the transfer of FMS credits to Israel. Indonesia and Israel through their respective intelligence agencies planned an operation codenamed "Alpha" to bring A-4 skyhawk aircraft to Indonesia and send prospective personnel to Israel.

Post-operation Indonesia-Israel Relations

The procurement of A-4 Skyhawk fighter jets by Indonesia, initiated by the necessity to bolster its air defense and military power, culminated in the clandestine involvement of two nations that officially had no diplomatic relations: Indonesia and Israel. Following arduous negotiation processes with the United States, Indonesia subsequently explored opportunities for cooperation in the acquisition and delivery of these fighter aircraft with Israel as a third party. This collaboration marked the genesis of a deeper relationship, particularly within the military and intelligence spheres between the two countries. The operation, code-named "Operation Alpha," encompassed not only the aircraft delivery process but also included training for pilots and technicians in Israel. This post-operation phase is crucial for understanding that the Skyhawks' acquisition not only strengthened Indonesia's primary air defense system but also initiated non-official interactions between Jakarta and Tel Aviv, especially in the military and economic domains.

Operation Alpha I and II

Following the agreement on the sale of Israel's A-4 Skyhawk aircraft, Defense Minister General M. Jusuf asked Moerdani to design an intelligence operation to bring the aircraft to Indonesia, and to send pilots to Israel for training (Sumarkidjo 2006, 324). Major General Teddy Rusdy, Moerdani's right-hand man, was one of the parties involved in the operation. In his biography, Teddy explained that there was a team from Indonesia (led by Moerdani) and a team from Israel who designed the operation to bring planes from Israel and send pilots and technicians to Israel for training (Pandur 2009, 295). Indonesian intelligence agents involved in the operation came from the Intelligence Agency of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia (Badan Intelijen ABRI or BIA) (Poerwoko 2011, 83). Meanwhile, Israel sent agents from its intelligence service, Mossad, to assist the Indonesian team (Pandur 2009, 295). According to Teddy Rusdy, a Mossad agent named Jerry "Yorram" Hessel acted as a facilitator and was in direct contact with Teddy Rusdy during the operation. He was intensively involved in shipping the plane to the Air Force hangar in the Halim Perdanakusuma Airport area, Jakarta, and even later served in Indonesia as an Israeli-Indonesian liaison officer (Pandur 2009, 297). The planes were then sent by sea along with intelligence teams from both countries. The Israelis themselves brought several technicians who were in charge of unloading the aircraft when they arrived in Indonesia (Pandur 2009, 298–99). On the night of June 4, 1980, the Skyhawk arrived at Tanjung Priok Port with the label "F-5 E/F Tiger II" for camouflage. The trip continued to Halim Perdanakusuma Airbase to be prepared. The job of both the BIA and Mossad was complete after the aircraft arrived at Halim Perdanakusuma Airbase at 4 a.m. They were even welcomed by Defense Minister M. Jusuf and Air Force Chief of Staff Marshal Ashadi Tjahjadi (Poerwoko 2007, 94).

Within a year of the arrival of the first batch of 16 Skyhawk aircraft, a second Operation Alpha was conducted in 1981 to bring in 16 aircraft after Indonesia purchased the aircraft for a second time. This delivery was reported to the US Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CINPAC) on January 22, 1981 which was then forwarded to the US State Department on the same day (Command History Division 1981, 409). The CINPAC documents stated that the Government of Indonesia signed a Letter of Agreement (LOA) with Israel for 16 ex-Israeli Air Force (IAF) Aircraft for 26.8 million US dollars (USD) in April 1981. In the same report, the two parties signed another LOA specifically to replace 1 Skyhawk that was damaged in East Timor as part of the warranty on the previous purchase, resulting in 17 aircraft to be delivered to Indonesia (Command History Division 1981, 409). There is not much information about this operation, but according to the Stockholm International Peace Institute's (SIPRI) defense equipment transfer report, the delivery is

made through the US (“Trade Register Indonesia 1978-2022” 2023). However, the US itself will not be involved in the delivery according to the previous agreement, they will only serve as observers (Command History Division 1981, 409).

Besides aircraft deliveries, the BIA also participated in monitoring and guiding candidates of ground personnel and Skyhawk pilots to Israel and the US. Based on the autobiography of one of the pilots named Djoko Poerwoko, when they arrived in Israel, they were accompanied by a BIA agent and Mossad at Ben Gurion airport (Poerwoko 2011, 83). Based on the previous agreement, Indonesia will send 32 ground personnel and 10 pilots. Colonel (Ret.) Dr. Joseph Halim, the BIA's field agent in Singapore, arranged the route and the use of airlines and provided debriefings to the pilots. Based on his testimony, the trip from Indonesia to Singapore was organized by his team (Pour 2004, 27). The departure of the personnel and pilots was divided into seven batches with different routes. The flight routes for the first six batches were similar, namely Jakarta-Singapore-Washington D.C. before continuing on to Israel. These six batches were the 32 ground personnel, consisting of 12 officers and 10 non-commissioned officers, who were assigned the role of mercenaries without citizenship. Their passports and all things Indonesian were taken away and they were given new identities.

While the last batch of 10 pilots used the Singapore-Frankfurt-Tel Aviv route. These pilots are from 11th Squadron consisting of Flight Lieutenant Colonel (*Penerbang* or Pnb) Suyamto, Major Pnb. Irawan Saleh, Major Pnb. Donan Sunanto, Captain Pnb. Piter Arnold Lumintang, Captain Pnb. Faustinus Djoko Poerwoko, Captain Pnb. Suminar Hadi, Captain Pnb. Dwi Harmono, Captain Pnb. Teddy Sumarno, Captain Pnb. R. Supriyanto, and First Lieutenant Pnb. Edy Harjoko (Sulistiyowati et al. 2007, 78). They were the latest batch shipped to Israel in the early 1980s. Several testimonies from pilots and ground personnel show that the majority of them disguised themselves as citizens of Southeast Asian countries. Some personnel such as Djoko Poerwoko (pilot) and Soepriyatmo (engineering officer) acquired the names Jack and Charlie, they were Singaporean nationals and visited Israel as tourists (Pattisina 2017). During the trip they acted like foreigners until they arrived at the training site. All their activities were monitored by the BIA and Mossad when they arrived in Israel (Poerwoko 2007, 84–85).



Figure 1, Captain Pnb. Faustinus Djoko Poerwoko with Israeli Police in Jerusalem

Source: Book *Menari di Angkasa* by Djoko Poerwoko

Figure 1, which shows Captain Pnb. Faustinus Djoko Poerwoko with an Israeli police officer in Jerusalem, serves as visual evidence of the secret mission carried out by Indonesian pilots in the Middle East. This figure offers a glimpse into a highly classified operation, in which the pilots had to conceal their true identities to ensure the success of the mission. During their time in Israel, they trained at the "Eliat" air base, which is located in the nearby town of Eliat, among the mountains by the Dead Sea. The Israelis sent pilots from the reserve corps who already had a civilian life. In his autobiography, Djoko Poerwoko recounts that he was trained by a computer technician named Denny (Poerwoko 2007, 87). The training was carried out for 3 months, learning how to operate the A-4 aircraft as well as how to fly low through Syria's radar system. All exercises were conducted over the Dead Sea and its surrounding mountains (Sumbodo 2020). The pilots received 20 hours of flight training (Poerwoko 2004, 27). The training finished on May 20, 1980 with the awarding of A-4 Skyhawk brevets by the IAF to 10 Air Force Skyhawk pilots. The handover was witnessed by a number of IAF officers along with TNI officers in civilian clothes, and several BIA intelligence officers as liaison officers (Poerwoko 2007, 88). After the handover, the BIA officers immediately destroyed all the brevets and Israeli belongings of the pilots to eliminate traces (Sumbodo 2020). The pilots were then taken to a US Marine air base in Yuma, Arizona to create a camouflage story to make people believe they were training in the US, not Israel (Poerwoko 2004, 27). After arriving in Indonesia, the pilots went straight into military service in East Timor.

The Aftermath of Operation

The end of Operation Alpha did not end the Indonesia-Israel relationship. The pragmatism of the Soeharto government made their relationship "stronger", especially in the military and economic fields (Yegar 2006, 150–51). In the case of the Skyhawk itself, Indonesia is still in contact with Israel to rejuvenate the aircraft in order to maintain its expected operational age. A Few years after arriving in Indonesia or 1984 to be precise, it was Israel's turn to send its personnel to Indonesia to train Skyhawk aircraft operators as part of the Advanced Operational Combat Course (AOCC) program. Four years later, TNI AU sent its personnel back to Israel to study the Weapon Delivery Navigation System (WNDS) for several weeks (Poerwoko 2007, 101–2). Israel's involvement ended in 1992 following the successful installation of the WNDS system. This maintenance extended the service life of the Skyhawk to 2004 from an estimated 10-15 years (1990-1995). There are no records for the period 1981-1997 of defense equipment transactions between the two countries, except for the maintenance of Skyhawk aircraft which continued until 1992.

Indonesia-Israel relations experienced development in the 1990s. Israel took an informal approach through diplomats, academics, and entrepreneurs with the aim of opening official relations between the two countries. At this time, granting visas to Israeli citizens and vice versa was easier than in previous eras (Yegar 2006, 145). The climax was a meeting between President Soeharto, as Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Jakarta on October 15, 1993 (Barton and Rubenstein 2005, 165). At the meeting Rabin asked for support from Asian countries for the peace agreement between Israel and Palestine signed a month earlier. President Soeharto welcomed the agreement and would continue to support peace efforts in Palestine. Unfortunately, there was no discussion about opening diplomatic relations between the two countries, but cooperation between the two is still established in private (Barton and Rubenstein 2005, 169). Opening diplomatic relations is still very difficult due to the strong anti-Israel sentiment among the public. President Abdurrahman Wahid attempted to open these relations, but was met with rejection by politicians and the public.



Figures 2. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin meeting with President Soeharto
Source: Harvard Digital Library, 1993

Conclusion

Based on these events, the Soeharto government prioritized national interests over international affairs. This can be reflected in his government's policies towards the Palestinian and Israeli conflicts, which were more pragmatic than his predecessor. The military situation in Indonesia, which at that time lacked defense equipment and could not operate optimally, prompted contact with Israel to be initiated. Operations Alpha I and II were considered successful because they succeeded in achieving their main goal of bringing aircraft and Air Force personnel to their respective destinations. In the period from late 1979 to May 1980, the Bais and Mossad sent candidates A-4 Skyhawk aircraft personnel to Israel to carry out training, and brought Skyhawk aircraft to Indonesia. The arrival of the A-4 Skyhawk successfully filled the aircraft vacancies in Squadrons 11 and 12, until they were assigned to counter separatism movements in Papua and East Timor. Meanwhile, in terms of international relations, the impact of this operation opened trade relations between Indonesia and Israel in the field of defense equipment that lasted until the reform era. However, the issue of opening diplomatic relations is still not possible due to the strong anti-Israel sentiment in Indonesia, so the relationship between the two is still covered through the intelligence community. The Indonesian and Israeli intelligence communities became "diplomats" in carrying out their respective national interest missions. Both became liaisons to their respective governments. This was seen when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and President Soeharto met in which the Mossad and BIA organized their meeting.

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