

## Forschung und Lehre

# ***Berbahasa Indonesia di Yerusalem — Speaking Indonesian in Jerusalem — A language encounter funded by the Small Grants Programme of the DGA***

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*Kelihatannya sepele, cuma bahasa, tetapi konflik dan perang terjadi karena "lost in translation." Sewaktu acara ini dilaksanakan, saya terharu sekali bertemu orang Israel yang bisa berbahasa Indonesia. Semoga acara ini terus bisa berlanjut dan pesertanya bertambah banyak.*

It seems trivial, just language, but conflicts and wars occur because of being "lost in translation." When this event was held, I was very touched to meet Israelis who can speak Indonesian. Hopefully this event can continue, and the participants will increase.

(Arif Maftuhin, Indonesian participant in the project)

## **Introduction: Getting together in a “Warung Bahasa”**

Language can build bridges and, particularly in regions in which everything seems to be said and done, switching to a third language might open new pathways of understanding, as the quote above indicates. Speaking Indonesian in Jerusalem can broaden students’ horizons beyond their study of Indonesia in regard to transregional encounters. This was the initial thinking when planning a transcultural online encounter in the Indonesian language with Israeli, Palestinian and Indonesian students.

The special constellation of Indonesian, Israeli and Palestinian students revealed the influence of the relationship between language and power. For instance, Hebrew is seen as the “language of the occupation” by most Palestinians and Arabic is considered the holy language of the Qur’an for Muslims around the world, granting the language a superior status, including in Indonesia. Opting for Indonesian as the language of encounter created a more neutral atmosphere in a context where meeting people from the other “side” is often complicated.

During the academic year 2021/22, seventeen students and four lecturers from Israel, Palestine and Indonesia met for online encounters in the Indonesian

language. The project was named “Warung Bahasa,” meaning “language booth.” The Indonesian term *warung*, referring to an informal food kiosk, was meant to underline the flexibility and informality of getting together. Speaking *Bahasa Indonesia* in this constellation was new for the participants, who would usually resort to more dominant languages such as English, Arabic or Hebrew in their communication with one another.

For Israeli and Palestinian students, it was a welcome opportunity to practice their language skills with Indonesian people, whom they rarely meet, and for Indonesian participants it came as a surprise that people in the Middle East, which is widely seen as the historical center of Islam, learn the language of Indonesia—a perceived periphery in the Muslim world and a country that shares no diplomatic relations with Israel.

Naturally, conversing in a foreign language also fosters understanding of different cultural customs for expressing oneself. As the quote above indicates, the participants experienced “understanding” beyond the literal meaning of a specific vocabulary. Moreover, the Warung Bahasa supports the ability to speak in the language of one’s study/research area. This ability is also supported by a new Indonesian language study book for speakers of Palestinian Arabic. In addition to the personal encounters on the online meeting platform Zoom, the students were invited to lectures about Indonesian culture and society. The following report gives some background information and insights about the project.

## **Indonesian Studies in Israel and Palestine**

Since 2012/13, the Hebrew University’s department of Asian Studies has been offering courses on Indonesia and since 2013/14 Indonesian language courses as well. Having Indonesian studies in Israel is remarkable since the two countries share no diplomatic relations. Prof. Ronit Ricci has built a fruitful community of students and researchers, including an ERC project on interlinear translations in Javanese manuscripts.

At the same time, students on the other side of the separation wall, in Bethlehem and Hebron, study Bahasa Indonesia as well. An academic institution that must remain anonymous here offers language courses as part of their tourism studies program.

My own research on Indonesian religious tourism to Israel and the West Bank made me aware of the increasing interest in Indonesian language and culture in the Middle East. While one can find Indonesian cultural centers in Cairo and Amman, for people in and around Jerusalem creating connections with Indonesia and Indonesians remains a complicated matter and many Indonesian language students have never visited Indonesia.

The Small Grant Program of the German Association of Asian Studies (DGA) enabled an experimental language encounter between Israeli, Palestinian and

Indonesian students and the completion of an Indonesian-language study book for speakers of Palestinian Arabic. The fact that the funding came from a third unrelated party was helpful in light of the controversies about normalizing relationships with Israeli institutions. It is therefore important to note that even though the participants are members of specific institutions, the event was detached from institutional frameworks and several participants emphasized that they were participating as individuals and not as representatives of an institution or nation.

## **Project Activities**

On the one hand, the project allowed the completion of an Indonesian-language study book for speakers of Arabic, referring specifically to the Palestinian context. Mahmoud Abu Arqoub had worked on this book for more than two years with an Indonesian colleague and was now able to finish his work on it. On the other hand, the core of the project were online meetings for students from Israel, the West Bank and Indonesia. The aim of the meetings was to offer room for personal encounters and conversations in the Indonesian language.

Because of the COVID19 pandemic, the project had been planned as an online encounter from the beginning. The online format also meant that participation was free from concerns about entry permits or visa regulations, even though several students said after the meetings that they would like to meet in person one day. Participating in an online event is an easily accessible option to experiment with one's language skills, not demanding any further commitments. Most importantly, students established personal relations between one another and their language study was filled with life.

The participating students came from the disciplines of Asian Studies, Tourism Studies, Social Anthropology and Islamic- and Middle Eastern Studies from Jerusalem, Yogyakarta, Bethlehem and Hebron. The online meetings and the accompanying lectures were facilitated by Betty Susiarjo (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), Mahmoud Abu Arqoub (from Hebron), Nor Ismah (Universitas Islam Negeri Yogyakarta) and Mirjam Lücking (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

The first online meeting started with a round of introductions and was followed by short presentations about everyday life in Israel, Palestine and Indonesia, which were further discussed in smaller groups in "breakout rooms." Since the second meeting took place on 28 October, which is the day of language in Indonesia, we discussed the significance of Indonesian language for Indonesian independence. In the second part of the meeting, students gave short presentations on music in Israel, Palestine and Indonesia.

The meetings were a platform to create ongoing connections between individual students. Moreover, the project activities motivated students of Indonesian language in the Middle East to pursue their studies and to reach out to fellow

students on both sides of the separation wall between Israel and the West Bank, and to students from Indonesia who study the Middle East.

For the project facilitators, the honorarium from the Small Grants Program funding was an important symbolic remuneration for their continuous endeavor to create fruitful relations at eye level between Indonesians, Israelis, and Palestinians. Bahasa Indonesia was elevated as a useful language for encounters in this constellation. The increasing interest in Bahasa Indonesia also shows acknowledgement of the growing (economic) relevance of Indonesia for the Middle East, in particular in the field of incoming tourism.

The project facilitators described their experiences as follows:

Original in Indonesian	English Translation
<p>Pengalaman saya di warung bahasa Indonesia, yang pertama saya sangat tertarik untuk acara-acara yang seperti ini biar membuat Palestina dan Israel lebih dekat dengan bahasa Indonesia dan budayanya, dan karena saya bukan orang asli Indonesia lebih bagus membuat saya lebih lancar berbahasa Indonesia. Semoga tetap terus menerus ke depan dan membesarkan warungnya menjadi toko, demikian terima kasih banyak kepada semua yang mengikuti program ini.</p>	<p>My experience at <i>Warung Bahasa Indonesia</i> is that firstly I am very interested in events like this so that Palestine and Israel get closer to the Indonesian language and culture. And because I am not a native Indonesian speaker, it is important to become more fluent in Indonesian. Hopefully we will continue and move forwards and grow from a small <i>warung</i> into a big shop (<i>toko</i>). So thank you very much to all who participated in this program. (Mahmoud Abu Arqoub)</p>
<p>Warung Bahasa Online itu ide yang menarik dan kreatif. Meskipun dalam situasi pandemi Covid, kita tidak terhalang untuk membangun jaringan dan kerja sama, terutama antara mahasiswa Indonesia, Palestina dan Israel. Acaranya juga seru karena Warung Bahasa Online membuka ruang bagi para peserta untuk berani berbicara dan bertanya dalam bahasa Indonesia, berbagi pengalaman dan pengetahuan tentang budaya masing-masing negara. Bahasa bisa menjembatani sekat, jarak, dan perbedaan budaya di antara mahasiswa. Semoga program ini tetap bisa dilaksanakan dan diikuti oleh mahasiswa yang lebih banyak lagi.</p>	<p><i>Warung Bahasa Online</i> is an interesting and creative idea. Even in the Covid pandemic situation, we are not hindered from building networks and cooperation, especially between Indonesian, Palestinian and Israeli students. The event was also fun because <i>Warung Bahasa Online</i> created space for participants to dare to speak and ask questions in Indonesian, share experiences and knowledge about the culture of each country. Language can bridge barriers, distances, and cultural differences between students. Hopefully this program can still be implemented and followed by more students. (Nor Ismah)</p>
<p>Bagi saya, tantangan terbesar menjadi seorang guru Bahasa Indonesia di Israel, adalah kurangnya interaksi dan kesempatan untuk mahasiswa-mahasiswa saya melatih berbicara bahasa Indonesia secara langsung. Sedangkan pemahaman sebuah bahasa itu terjadi bukanlah sekedar melalui pelajaran di kelas atau melalui teks, tapi dengan seringnya keterlibatan kita dengan interaksi dan percakapan bahasa tersebut dengan orang lain. Acara Warung Bahasa Indonesia di wilayah Israel dan Palestina ini memiliki posisi yang penting</p>	<p>For me, the biggest challenge of being an Indonesian teacher in Israel is the lack of interaction and opportunities for my students to practice speaking Indonesian directly. The understanding of a language depends not only on lessons in class or through texts, but on interactions and conversations with speakers of that language. The <i>Warung Bahasa Indonesia</i> event in Israel and Palestine has a very important meaning for all of us who live here. The experience of sharing stories, knowledge, culture, or just greetings and</p>

sekali untuk kita semua yang tinggal di sini. Adanya saling membagi sebuah cerita, pengetahuan, budaya, atau sekedar sapaan, perkenalan antara satu dan yang lain, cukup memperkaya pengalaman mereka yang sedang belajar bahasa ini dan juga dalam membuka diri mendengar, menerima, mengetahui tentang negara masing-masing. Saya tidak bisa berhenti mengatakan betapa unik dan berartinya pertemuan kita di Warung Bahasa. Dalam hal ini, saya merasa apa yang sudah dimulai, harus tetap dipertahankan, demi kebersamaan dan persahabatan kita di masa depan.

introductions between one another, is enough to enrich the experience of those who are learning this language and also open themselves to hearing, accepting and knowing about their respective countries. I can't stop saying how unique and meaningful our meeting at *Warung Bahasa* was. In this case, I feel that what has been started must be maintained, for the sake of our togetherness and friendship in the future.  
(Betty Susiarjo)

## Outlook

One presumption of the project was the existence of language hierarchies. Bahasa Indonesia is a language with one of the largest number of speakers in the world and yet, in international research on Indonesia, research results are more widely discussed and published in English, even if foreign scholars' work on Indonesia includes research in local languages. Creating a room where Bahasa Indonesia is the language of discussion and representation in an international context is an important step. For the participants, it was an enriching experience and the project partners aspire to realize future in-person meetings.

The DGA funding for the Warung Bahasa meetings and the Indonesian-language study book for Arabic speakers laid a meaningful foundation for future encounters between the Palestinian, Israeli and Indonesian participants of the program and for further academic analysis on the role of language in inter/trans-cultural encounters.

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