



Indonesian Cultural Diplomacy: The Role of Indonesian Schools in Saudi Arabia

Anis Fuadah Zuhri¹, Badrus Sholeh²

¹ Lecturer, PGMI, FITK, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia, email:

anisfuadah.zuhri@uinjkt.ac.id

ORCID: 0000-0002-5935-030X

² Lecturer, International Relations Department, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia, email:

badrus.sholeh@uinjkt.ac.id

ORCID: 0000-0002-7960-6093

Corresponding Author:

Anis Fuadah Zuhri, PGMI, FITK, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia, email:

anisfuadah.zuhri@uinjkt.ac.id

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Abstract

This study delves into the intricate dynamics of cultural diplomacy and nationalism as orchestrated by Indonesian Schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, emphasizing the strategic role of performance arts in fostering international relations and national identity. The research aims to elucidate the involvement of students and teachers from the Indonesian School of Riyadh in cultural performances, delineating its significance in the broader context of Indonesia's diplomatic outreach in Saudi Arabia. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the investigation centered on interviews with twenty teachers who participated in cultural events in Riyadh from 2022 to 2023. These interviews, conducted via Google Forms, illuminated the proactive engagement of the Indonesian educational community in cultural diplomacy through music, dance, and cultural festivals. The findings highlight that these cultural performances serve as a medium of cultural expression and a pivotal mechanism in reinforcing the diplomatic ties between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the study reveals that these activities are instrumental in instilling a sense of nationalism among Indonesian students abroad, providing them with a tangible connection to their cultural heritage. The performances have been strategically employed to showcase Indonesia's rich cultural tapestry, thereby facilitating a deeper cultural understanding and appreciation among the Saudi populace and the international community in Riyadh. The research acknowledges the limitation of its sample size and calls for broader studies to assess the long-term impact of cultural performances on diplomatic relations and national identity construction. In conclusion, the study posits that cultural diplomacy through educational institutions like the Indonesian School of Riyadh has emerged as an effective tool in the post-Vision 2030 diplomatic landscape of Saudi Arabia, suggesting a transformative shift towards more culturally nuanced diplomatic engagements.

Keywords: *Cultural Diplomacy, Nationalism, Indonesian Schools*

Introduction

Overseas Indonesian Schools (hereinafter referred to as SILN) are state schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Research and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) of the Republic of Indonesia. Attache of Education and Culture, Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Riyadh represents the Ministry of Education of Indonesia to manage SILN. SILN is an Indonesian state school where students of Indonesian citizens are studying. There are three SILNs in Saudi Arabia: the Indonesian School of Riyadh (SIR), the Indonesian School of Jeddah (SIJ), and the Indonesian School of Makkah (SIM).

The Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia states that Indonesian citizens have to go to school up to age 18. It is an obligation for the government to facilitate free school for 12

years from class I of elementary school to class XII of high school. The right of access to school also comes for Indonesian citizens in Saudi Arabia, who are able to study at Indonesian schools in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Makkah.

According to Saudi Arabia's 2022 census data, there are 175,342 Indonesian citizens (41,351 men and 133,991 women) residing in Saudi Arabia (Saudinesia, 2023). Children of Indonesian citizens who attend SILN in Saudi Arabia are divided into two; first, those who were born in Indonesia and then followed their parents to work in Saudi Arabia, and second, they are the sons and daughters of Indonesian citizens who were born and grew up in Saudi Arabia. Being 7,633 km from Indonesia is a challenge for Saudi Arabian SILN students. Different geographical conditions also make students, especially those who have never visited Indonesia, feel unfamiliar with the culture and natural beauty of their own nation. Therefore, the cultural mission developed by the school is an important concept for embedding nationalism among Indonesian children in SILN Saudi Arabia.

For SILN Saudi Arabia, the opening of activities after the COVID-19 pandemic is a new era, Mid-2022 was the beginning of history for the continuation of cultural activities in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian government through Vision 2030 provides more opportunities for school communities to perform the culture of their respective countries in various activities. Riyadh Season, for example, took place from October 22nd to March 22nd, 2023 with the title "Beyond Imagination" (Saudi Calendar, 2023). The event not only opens up opportunities for the entire community to witness lively and spectacular attractions but also opens up opportunities for Indonesian students to perform. Indonesian culture, shown in the form of traditional dances, typical Indonesian music, and regional traditional events, is one of the performances witnessed directly by people from various parts of the country. It was recorded that 10 million visitors and 1 million tourists attended the annual performance (Alessa et al., 2022; Rahman & Qattan, 2021).

This article will examine cultural diplomacy based on firstly, the Saudi Arabian government's 2030 vision of collaborating on international cultural performances; secondly, the existence of the Indonesian School of Riyadh in fostering Indonesian nationalism, and thirdly, the role of Indonesian schools abroad on Indonesia's cultural diplomacy mission (Santikajaya, 2015).

This article refers to the theory of nationalism and the concept of cultural diplomacy. The scope of this study will focus on the period after the COVID-19 pandemic, especially from 2022 to 2024, when the Saudi Arabian government opens wider opportunities for foreign schools in Saudi Arabia to showcase the culture of their country of origin through the Vision 2030 concept.

Methods

The research method is a qualitative approach. Three steps of the approaches have been conducted. Firstly, observation of the cultural events. Researchers attended and were involved in the events as participants or committees of the programs. They performed Indonesian dances and cultural exhibitions. They represented Indonesian cultural diplomacy. Secondly, data analysis through documents related to the topics, including reports from Saudi Arabia and Indonesian government. Lastly, by interviewing teachers involved in Indonesian performances from 2022 to 2023 in Riyadh season and other cultural events. The interview is through a Google form survey of twenty participants, and direct interviews.

Participants are involved directly in cultural diplomacy through cultural performance. They expressed how nationalism has also developed due to their participation in Riyadh Seasons and other cultural events from 2022 to 2023.

Result

This study will use two theories, namely the theory of cultural diplomacy and the theory of nationalism. Cultural diplomacy is an effort to develop and strengthen relations between countries and communities through cultural channels (Donelli, 2019). According to Donelli,

cultural diplomacy is a concept that shows the process that occurs when diplomats exchange cultures for the national interest (Donelli, 2019). Brown stated that cultural diplomacy is a new instrument for building relations between countries that are more open (Brown, 2021). Cultural appearance reflects the identity of the country. Therefore, the performance of Indonesian arts and culture in various activities, including the winter festival by performing dances and singing the Indonesian national anthem with other countries who also promote the culture of their respective countries.

Cultural diplomacy has also other terms such as arts diplomacy. Cohen uses arts diplomacy which is described as “an aspect or subfield of cultural diplomacy involving the strategic management and deployment of the arts in order for a nation or other political entity” (Cohen, 2019: 255).

Ernest Gellner stated that nationalism is a characteristic of industrial society that intends to unite national culture. Nationalism is an important part of the cultural atmosphere where various cultures are an important part of society and the state (O’leary, 1997). Cultural diplomacy through SILN in Saudi Arabia is part of an important policy for Indonesia to foster nationalism for Indonesian citizen students in Saudi Arabia. This is a representative mission in protecting and fulfilling the right to education for Indonesian students.

(1) *Indonesian Schools in Saudi Arabia*

SILN has a strategic role in developing Indonesian diplomacy. In Saudi Arabia, the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia facilitates three public schools for Indonesian citizens from kindergarten to higher school (from 5 to 18 years old).

There are 1991 Indonesian students studying in Indonesian schools in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Makkah from kindergarten to senior high school in 2023. The number of students is increasing after the Covid-19 pandemic. More Indonesian migrants come and continue their business in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, more Indonesian children join Indonesian schools in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Makkah. The schools run the Indonesian national curriculum, with additional subjects such as the geography of Saudi Arabia and the Arabic language.

In the Indonesian national curriculum, arts and culture become an important content of teachings inside and outside classes. Students practice Indonesian songs and dances in national competitions. They also perform in some Indonesian embassy events during the Indonesian independence ceremony and other diplomatic events by the Indonesian embassy in Riyadh and the Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia in Jeddah.

In addition, students also are invited to perform in events organized by the Saudi Arabian government and entertainment groups.

Table 1: Indonesian students in Saudi Arabia in 2023

No	Name of Schools	Kindergarten	Elementary School	Junior High School	Senior High School	Total
1	Indonesian School of Riyadh	43	187	56	36	322
2	Indonesian School of Jeddah	72	744	262	150	1228
3	Indonesian School of Makkah	52	267	76	46	441
	TOTAL					1991

(Database of the Attache of Education and Culture of Embassy of the Republic of



Indonesia, 2023).

Indonesian School of Riyadh also facilitates distance learning for Indonesian citizens around the Middle East and Africa. There are 80 students living in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Mozambique, Italy, Uzbekistan, Syria, Jordan, and Pakistan who join the class of distance learning at SIR.

Table 2 states that the Indonesian School of Riyadh's Distance Learning class has more challenges in introducing Indonesian culture to students living in 11 countries in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Table 2: SIR's Distance Learning Class in 2023

No	Origin of Living	Kindergarten	Elementary School	Junior High School	Senior High School	Total
1	Saudi Arabia	8	22	1	2	33
2	UAE	2	8	3		13
3	Kuwait		1	2		3
4	Qatar		3	1	4	8
5	Jordan		1	1	1	3
6	Oman			1	1	2
7	Mozambique		2	2		4
8	Italia		1			1
9	Pakistan		3	3	2	8
10	Uzbekistan		2			2
11	Syria		1		1	2
	TOTAL	10	44	14	11	79

(Database of the Attache of Education and Culture of Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023).

(2) Indonesian Cultural Diplomacy and Nationalism

Cultural exchanges have become the instruments of diplomacy since the early period of relationships among kingdoms and states in history. Cohen illustrated that Majapahit and Malaka kingdoms exchanged art performances during the visits in the seventeenth century Johor which has been written in *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay chronicles) (Cohen, 2019).

From President Sukarno to current President Joko Widodo, arts diplomacy has become the pivotal policy of diplomatic missions. Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have exchanged ulama, teachers, and students since the 18th century (Al Qurtuby & Aldamer, n.d.; van Bruinessen, 2021). The performance of students continued the exchange tradition between the state and society of Indonesia and Saudi Arabia.

Students and teachers of Indonesian schools in Saudi Arabia contribute to cultural diplomacy by performing arts and music and participating in showing the traditions of the country in the Middle East. From 2022 to 2023, they performed Indonesian dances and cultures at Indonesian and Saudi local and national events in Riyadh, Dahrn, and Jeddah.

According to the survey of the teachers of the Indonesian School of Riyadh who guided students during 2022 and 2023 cultural performances in general, teachers of SIR agreed that performance strengthens nationalism and Indonesian diplomacy.

Nationalism feeling comes from the performance and the traditional clothes of students and teachers. Nationalism also grows from arts and cultural performance. This practice also happens in Thailand where students of the Indonesian school of Thailand perform (Deviana & Sulistyani, 2019). Although in some regions nationalism threatens the unity of international organizations (Wellings, 2022).

In addition, the performance of Indonesian arts and music is important cultural diplomacy for Indonesia in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. The instruments of cultural diplomacy are also issued to the Indonesian school in Riyadh performance of Indonesian arts, music, and culture which is popular diplomacy of the Republic of Indonesia between Indonesia, India, and Burma (Wilcox, 2017). Communication among diplomats is effective through cultural performance (Fadillah et al., 2021). This is also important to diplomats to promote arts and culture through cultural performance (Dwida et al., 2021, Sari, 2018)

Discussion

The performance of SIR's students is a strategic form of cultural diplomacy. It represents the culture of Indonesia performed in some Riyadh Seasons from 2022 to 2023. Twenty respondents who participated in the cultural diplomacy expressed their arguments. The growth of nationalism also developed, especially among students, teachers, and participants in Indonesian cultural performances.

The performances are organized by the Ministry of Culture, the Kingdom of Arab Saudi, and the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia.

Students and teachers who performed at the Riyadh Season in 2022 expressed their arguments and feelings after their participation. It is based on Google Forms interviews in August 2023.

Rinto Zainudin, a teacher and performer said "my impression as a performer and visitor at the Riyadh season event is that I am very happy and enthusiastic because it can be an opportunity to showcase our country. I am proud to be part of the Riyadh season" (Zainudin, 2023).

Suryanto, a teacher and performer added "Riyadh Season 2022/2023 is held spectacularly. The organizers provide full support to each participant. Visitors were also enthusiastic, especially local Saudi and Middle Eastern residents. The enthusiasm of those who want to know about Indonesian culture, especially batik, helps ignite a sense of pride and gives new enthusiasm in carrying out the cultural mission, that batik is a cultural heritage of the archipelago that has gone international" (Suryanto, 2023).

Satria Adi Nugraha, a teacher and trainer of Indonesian traditional and modern music said that "the organizer of the Riyadh Season really gave a proud impression, which from the overall performances including dances, traditional music, bands batik exhibition, as well as performance of national bridal customs in Indonesia. Many of them were foreigners, not only Saudis but also other international visitors" (Nugraha, 2023).

Satria is a dedicated Indonesian music teacher training students and teachers of Indonesian citizens in Saudi. He also trained expatriates in learning gamelan and angklung.

Satria continued that "the visitors of the Riyadh Season enthusiastically enjoyed the performance, from the beginning to the end of the performance. They also gave applause to performances. Therefore students and teachers who performed had great feeling that it become something which is new for the audience to appreciate the diversity of Indonesian arts and culture displayed by the entire Indonesian School of Riyadh team involved" (Nugraha, 2023).

Satria said, "The Riyadh Season committee has invited the Indonesian School of Riyadh to perform this December 2023. It will be an even stronger and more interesting Indonesian art and cultural performance, and this is part of cultural diplomacy" (Nugraha, 2023).

Rinto, Suryanto and Satria are teachers of the Indonesian School of Riyadh who are active in practicing Indonesian traditional music instruments like gamelan and angklung. They also developed a music group that performed in regular diplomatic events organized by the Indonesian embassy in Riyadh. According to the UNESCO report, Gamelan is an intangible world cultural heritage that refers to "the traditional Indonesian percussion orchestra and to the set of musical instruments used. Consisting primarily of ornate,



percussive instruments made of hand-forged metal, the ensemble typically includes xylophones, gongs, gong-chimes, drums, cymbals, string instruments and bamboo flutes" (UNESCO, 2021).

In addition, UNESCO describes *angklung* as "an Indonesian musical instrument consisting of two to four bamboo tubes suspended in a bamboo frame, bound with rattan cords. The tubes are carefully whittled and cut by a master craftsman to produce certain notes when the bamboo frame is shaken or tapped. Each *Angklung* produces a single note or chord, so several players must collaborate in order to play melodies" (UNESCO, 2010). *Angklung* is also an intangible world cultural heritage from Indonesia.

Satria and other teachers of Indonesia have conducted cultural diplomacy by regularly performing Indonesian traditional musical instruments and other Indonesian cultural exhibitions in Riyadh Saudi Arabia. Saudi citizens and world diplomats in Saudi Arabia joined the training and enjoyed the performance. The training is facilitated by the Function of Information, Social and Culture, and Attache of Education and Culture of the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Besides teachers, students of the Indonesian School of Riyadh have also performed and represented Indonesian participants in the Riyadh Season in 2022. Among them are Riyadh and Wafa.

Riyadh, a student and dancer additionally said "Riyadh season 2022-2023 is very impressive and an unforgettable memory. I am very happy to be representative in introducing the nation's culture to the international world" (Riyadh, 2023).

Wafa, a student and dancer argued "I think it was very good and a great opportunity. The Riyadh Season is a place where I can show my culture to people, not just show it, I can even know what the culture is like in other countries" (Wafa, 2023).

Rinto, Suryanto, Satria, Riyadh, and Wafa have performed effective diplomacy through culture. Indonesian schools in other countries also take a strategic role in diplomacy (Jamnongsarn, 2014). Students and teachers of the Indonesian School of Bangkok also performed Indonesian culture and were welcomed by the public of Thailand. Students developed their nationalism through cultural performances. Riyadh and Wafa, both students of the Indonesian School of Riyadh, were proud to perform in Indonesian culture.

In addition, Cohen argued that cultural diplomacy has been a strategic diplomatic means from the period of President Sukarno to develop a global recognition representing developing countries. It was reflected at the Asia Africa conference in Bandung in 1955 (Cohen, 2019b).

Cultural diplomacy is the soft power of many countries. Japan developed cultural policy and cultural diplomacy in Asia and was influential in the identity of the country (Otmazgin, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the performance of the Indonesian schools in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Makkah is effective in generating nationalism among students and teachers. Many students are born in Saudi Arabia and have never been to Indonesia due to economic factors. Their participation in cultural performances at schools and outside schools contributed to arts and cultural events. This performance is strategic in cultural diplomacy among teachers and students. Diplomats at the Indonesian Embassy in Riyadh and Jeddah contributed to supporting facilities. However, Saudi Arabia cultural performance is limited to entertaining the citizens and expatriates. To Saudi citizens, arts and culture are still a new phenomenon. Although Arts and culture are intended to reduce the impact of radicalism (Hitman, 2018). Cooperation in building cultural diplomacy will help Saudi revitalize traditions, history, and venues for tourism as targeted at Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia. In addition, students and teachers of the Indonesian School of Riyadh developed nationalism through cultural performances. As expressed by respondents that they are proud to perform representing

Indonesia at Riyadh Seasons in 2022.

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