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Indonesian Food Diplomacy and Diaspora Soft Power in Madinah

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Abstract. This study posits that the Indonesian diaspora in Madinah particularly its students is pioneering a transformative model of 'everyday diplomacy' that is fundamentally reshaping Indonesia's influence within the Muslim world. Moving beyond state-centric gastrodiplomacy, this research illuminates how grassroots culinary practices in the sacred city from campus food festivals to local eateries near the Prophet's Mosque serve as a potent, decentralised soft-power network. In the unique socio-religious milieu of Madinah, where millions of pilgrims converge, each shared plate of rendang or soto operates as a compact cultural performance, building affective bonds that formal diplomacy cannot easily replicate. This paper argues that this bottom-up, diaspora-led engagement is not merely cultural exchange but a strategic foreign policy asset, directly fueling national economic objectives like the 'Indonesia Spice Up the World' initiative. These commonplace acts lead to tangible outcomes: greater spice exports, better educational linkages, and increased tourism appeal. This study concludes that Indonesia's success in Madinah offers a blueprint for how emerging Global South powers can leverage non-state actors and cultural affinity to build sustainable, resilient influence in the 21st century, one plate at a time.

Keywords: Everyday Diplomacy, Diaspora Networks, Culinary Soft Power, Sacred Geography, Spice Diplomacy.

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1. Introduction

In Madinah's sacred geography, where historic trade routes once transported spices and faith, a new, powerful form of diplomacy is simmering one that bypasses presidential palaces and unfolds in bustling student kitchens and lowly restaurant kitchens. While traditional statecraft grapples with the complexities of a multipolar world, Indonesia is orchestrating a quiet revolution in soft power, leveraging its most relatable asset: the profound, memory-laden comfort of its cuisine. This study argues that the Indonesian diaspora in Madinah particularly its students are not merely cultural ambassadors but are active agents of a sophisticated "everyday diplomacy" that is strategically repositioning Indonesia within the Muslim world and the broader Global South. In an era where trust in institutions is fraying, the authentic, person-to-person connections forged over a shared meal represent a form of diplomatic capital that is both more resilient and more profound than many state-led initiatives (Marsden *et al.*, 2016).

The geopolitical context makes this culinary front critically important. As the world's most populous Muslim-majority democracy and a rising mid-power, Indonesia is navigating an increasingly contested international landscape. Its leadership role in ASEAN and its G20 presidency have demonstrated its ambition, yet its true, enduring influence may be cultivated in the intimate spaces

of cultural exchange (Satria, 2025). The city of Madinah, a global crossroads receiving over 10 million pilgrims and visitors annually (Saudi Press Agency, 2024), serves as an unparalleled living laboratory for this form of engagement. Here, the Indonesian student community the largest foreign contingent at the Islamic University of Madinah acts as a decentralised network of cultural envoys. Their culinary practices constitute a powerful, grassroots-led nation-branding campaign that consistently outperforms the efforts of many nations with far larger diplomatic budgets.

This study matters now because it illuminates a paradigm shift in how influence is built in the 21st century. The Indonesian case demonstrates that soft power is no longer the exclusive domain of government programs; it is increasingly co-created by non-state actors whose credibility stems from their authenticity (Melissen, 2023). When an Indonesian student shares a plate of rendang a dish CNN Travel (2017) crowned the 'World's Most Delicious Food' with Saudi colleagues or pilgrims from Africa and Central Asia, they are doing more than serving a meal. They are weaving a subtle narrative of Indonesian cultural sophistication, hospitality, and modernity. This "gastro-diplomacy from below" creates affective bonds that can translate into tangible outcomes: increased tourism, stronger educational exchanges, and a more favourable environment for trade and investment (Cheng *et al.*, 2025). For Indonesia, which seeks to double its spice exports to $2 billion (van der Meulen, 2021), these daily interactions in Madinah are a critical demand driver, creating a global palate for its agricultural products.

Furthermore, this study is vital for understanding the evolving nature of South-South cooperation. Indonesia's culinary diplomacy in a pivotal Arab nation challenges Western-centric models of soft power and demonstrates how non-Western cultural assets can be leveraged to build bridges across the Islamic world and beyond. Examining the menus, festivals, and informal meetings organised by the diaspora allows us to interpret a new grammar of international relations—one in which the perfume of spices and the act of breaking bread together become a universal language of peace and mutual understanding. This paper, therefore, is not just about food; it is an urgent exploration of how a nation can harness its people and their passions to secure a more prominent and respected place on the world stage, one plate at a time.

2. Methods

This study employed a robust qualitative methodology centred on an immersive ethnographic approach, combining semi-structured interviews with Indonesian diaspora students and business owners in Madinah, participant observation at cultural festivals and eateries, and focus group discussions to capture the lived experiences and nuanced strategies underpinning their culinary diplomacy. This multi-method design allowed for triangulation, ensuring the findings were deeply grounded in the authentic voices and practices of the diaspora. The data was subsequently analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns and generate insightful themes, enabling a rich, context-driven discussion that moves beyond mere description to interpret the significance of these grassroots actions in reshaping Indonesia's soft power landscape. This methodology is firmly supported by the work of Braun and Clarke (2006), whose framework for thematic analysis provides a systematic yet flexible tool for interpreting complex qualitative data derived from personal narratives and observed cultural practices.

3. Results and Discussion

Indonesia the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation wields a vibrant diaspora that increasingly acts as a cultural ambassador for the archipelago. Through cuisine and hospitality, Indonesian migrants and students abroad have become "active ambassadors" of their culture, using food and cultural ventures to weave soft-power bonds between nations (Li & Mok, 2025; Policy Center for the New South, 2025). In Saudi Arabia's holy city of Madinah, this dynamic is particularly striking. Hundreds of Indonesian students and workers in Madinah celebrate their heritage by serving rendang, satay, soto and other iconic dishes, building goodwill and deepening bilateral ties. For example, according to Saudinesia (2024), the Islamic University of Madinah recently enrolled over 1.488 Indonesian students – the largest contingent from any one country in its history – and these students routinely showcase Indonesian culture at campus festivals (through traditional dress, crafts and food) that draw wide local interest. As one commentator notes, diaspora communities engage in

culinary and cultural business ventures that make them 'active participants in soft power and smart power', effectively serving as grassroots cultural bridges (Policy Center for the New South, 2025).

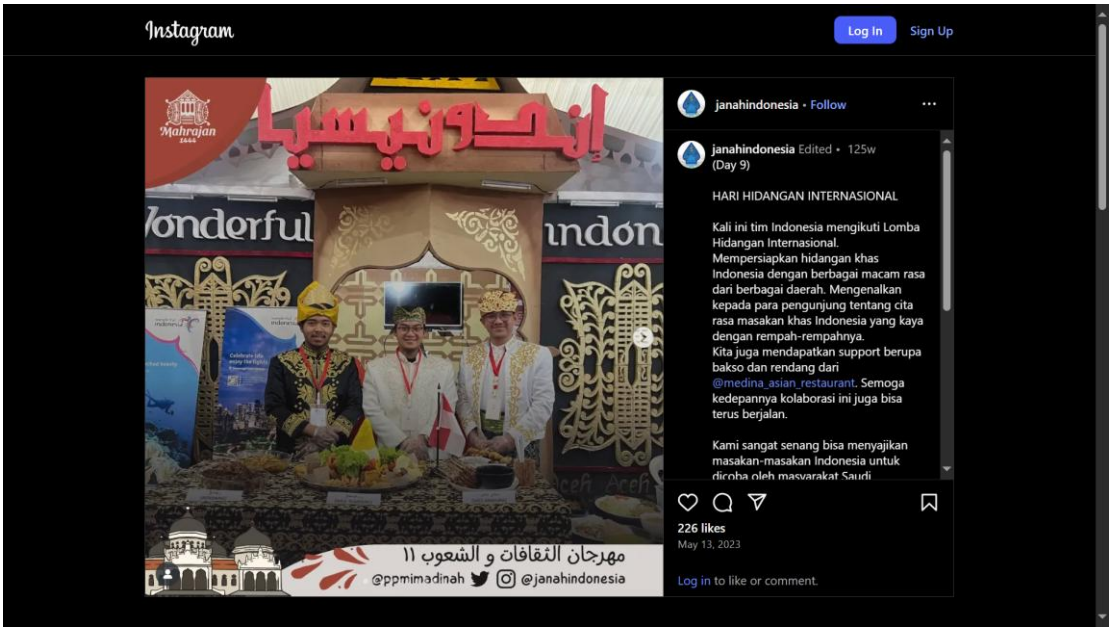

Figure 1. Janah Indonesia participated in the International Dish Day competition, serving regional Indonesian specialties with support from Medina Asian Restaurant's bakso and rendang to introduce Saudi visitors to Indonesia's spice-rich cuisine and foster ongoing collaboration (Janah Indonesia, n.d.).

Gastrodiplomacy the strategic use of national cuisine as a foreign policy tool – provides a useful lens for understanding this phenomenon. In International Relations theory, food diplomacy is recognised as a form of public diplomacy and soft power: 'the easiest way to win hearts and minds is through the stomach' (ANTARA News, 2024; Li & Mok, 2025). By introducing foreign publics to appealing national dishes, countries can shape positive attitudes and foster long-term relationships. Indeed, Indonesia has explicitly mobilised gastronomy in its foreign policy: under President Joko Widodo it launched the "Indonesia Spice Up the World" initiative, aiming to double spice exports by 2024 and establish 4,000 Indonesian eateries abroad (Ulung, 2025; van der Meulen, 2021). Foreign Minister Sugiono underscored that *"culinary is one of the soft power diplomacy strategies that has proven effective as a cultural bridge"* with 'great potential to improve the economy, trade, and international relations'. This approach aligns with Nye's soft-power paradigm: cuisine is leveraged not through coercion, but by cultivating emotional ties and mutual appreciation (Chiconi, 2025; Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2016; Nye, 2024).

In practice, Indonesian gastrodiplomacy in Saudi Arabia has taken concrete form. Recent research finds that Jakarta's strategy is implemented 'through two primary strategies: opening various Indonesian restaurants and organising Indonesian food events' in the Kingdom (Renta *et al.*, 2024). Indeed, Indonesian restaurateurs have set up eateries in Jeddah, Makkah and Madinah, and cultural missions and student groups hold Indonesian food festivals for local and international visitors. These activities serve multiple aims: they promote Indonesia's national interest via soft power, generate goodwill among Saudis and pilgrims, and create demand for Indonesian food exports (spices, condiments, etc.). For example, an Antara (state news) report notes that Indonesia is tracking over 1,200 Indonesian restaurants overseas as part of this effort (ANTARA News, 2024). By tasting Indonesian staples (rendang, bakso, sambal, etc.), Saudis and foreign residents are introduced to Indonesia's 'archipelago of flavours', reinforcing a positive nation-brand image far beyond the realm of formal diplomacy.

Key Soft-Power and Economic Dimensions

Diaspora food diplomacy functions as a quietly powerful vector of soft power, turning everyday meals into persuasive acts of cultural outreach: Indonesian cooks, restaurateurs, students and workers abroad act as decentralised 'frontline messengers', using cuisine to build emotional bonds, open markets, and signal national identity in ways formal diplomacy often cannot. In cosmopolitan settings like Madinah where pilgrims and residents from many countries converge each

plate of rendang, satay, or gado-gado becomes a compact cultural performance that communicates hospitality, shared values, and familiarity across differences, while diaspora networks extend that influence back to Indonesia through trade links, remittances, and demand for spices. These culinary ties not only bolster nation branding and pride but also generate concrete economic opportunities for migrant entrepreneurs and upstream agricultural producers, creating incentives for more sustainable spice and agroforestry practices that align with cultural diplomacy with rural livelihoods and environmental goals.

Soft Power and Cultural Bonding: Diaspora food diplomacy aligns with Joseph Nye's soft power concept: countries attract others by projecting appealing cultural traits. Indonesian diaspora acts as "frontline messengers" of culture – small-scale, decentralised but powerful. As one study observes for the Netherlands, *"Indonesian diasporas, through representation in restaurants, could be a 'frontline messenger' in introducing Indonesian foods… and [become] the anchor of gastrodiplomacy"* (Li & Mok, 2025; van der Meulen, 2021). In Madinah's cosmopolitan pilgrim milieu, each bowl of Indonesian curry or satay effectively 'says what words cannot' – a message of hospitality and unity that resonates across ethnic lines. Indeed, diaspora gastronomes often *win 'hearts and minds'* simply by sharing the comforts of home (Gulf Asean Exchange, 2020; Nugroho & Field, 2023).

Diaspora Networks: Indonesian students and workers in Madinah also maintain transnational ties that amplify food diplomacy. They often facilitate trade (sending remittances and purchases back home) and supply chain links (importing Indonesian ingredients). Studies of diaspora broadly emphasise that, beyond remittances, migrant communities contribute knowledge, skills, and cultural influence to their homelands (Rahman & Prasetyo, 2020). In Indonesia's case, diaspora restaurants not only introduce local cuisine to Saudis and other visitors, but also create new markets for Indonesian spices, rice, coconut milk, and seasonings. Surveys show that the Spice Up the World program expects Indonesia's spice exports to rise markedly (from $1.2B to $2B by 2024) thanks in part to global interest stoked by such diaspora-driven demand (van der Meulen, 2021).

Nation Branding and Identity: Globally, Indonesian cuisine has gained renown: CNN Travel polls (2011 and 2017) twice crowned *rendang* as the world's most delicious food (CNN Travel, 2017). Such accolades – widely circulated by Indonesian media – bolster national pride and provide talking points in cultural diplomacy. Diaspora restaurants reinforce this by serving rendang, nasi goreng and satay, making them as recognisable abroad as "Paris is for romance" or "Tokyo is for sushi." In Madinah, where Indonesians form a sizable expatriate community, seeing fellow countrymen preparing beloved national dishes sends a powerful message of identity and solidarity. Through every plate of *gado-gado* or *gado sayur*, Indonesian values of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and hospitality are on display, subtly advancing Indonesia's cultural appeal.

Economic and Sustainable Impact: Food diplomacy also has tangible economic outcomes. Indonesian restaurants in Saudi Arabia and beyond create jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities for migrants, often recruiting Indonesian chefs and staff, thereby representing a diaspora-driven *creative industry* export. More broadly, promoting Indonesian gastronomy supports agricultural sectors at home: increased global demand for cloves, nutmeg, ginger and pepper can incentivise sustainable farming. International initiatives like aGROWforests (Sustainable Supply Chains Initiative, n.d.) even work with Indonesian farmers on agroforestry for spices, aligning the spice trade with environmental sustainability (for example, intercropping pepper with shade trees to boost resilience). Thus, Indonesian food diplomacy dovetails with sustainability goals by valuing local ingredients and livelihoods.

Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives

Madinah is not unique: other cultural or religious hubs similarly witness diaspora food diplomacy. For example, Southeast Asian expatriates in the Gulf – Indonesians, Thais, Filipinos and Malaysians – have quietly woven their cuisines into Middle Eastern dining scenes. In places like Dubai or Doha, *nasi goreng*, *pad thai* or *chicken adobo* have become as common in menus as shawarma or falafel. This mirrors Indonesia's strategy: neighbouring Malaysia likewise promotes its cuisine (satay, nasi lemak) as part of its brand abroad, and countries like Thailand and Korea have state-sponsored programs building on their diaspora chefs. The common thread is that diaspora communities can turn food into diplomatic capital, often with minimal official intervention (Gulf Asean Exchange, 2020).

From an international relations standpoint, this phenomenon touches multiple frameworks. Soft power theory (Nye) clearly applies: food appeal is a non-coercive power resource (Li & Mok, 2025). Public diplomacy is in play, as embassies and ministries now tally restaurants (e.g. Indonesia's new Gastrodiplomacy Dashboard reports over 1,200 outlets abroad) and coordinate events. Transnationalism and network theory matter too: Indonesian diaspora form cross-border communities whose loyalties extend to the homeland. Scholars suggest that small and middle powers like Indonesia rely on 'cultural resources' instead of military might; indeed, the diversity and **affordability of Indonesian dishes make them an ideal soft-power lever.**
A summary of these international relations dimensions:

- Soft Power & Nation Branding: Food builds an "apolitical and positive facet" of a country's image, broadening Indonesia's appeal.
- Track II Diplomacy (Diaspora Networks): Migrant communities act outside formal channels, yet shape international perceptions through everyday cultural exchange.
- Economic Diplomacy: Culinary interest boosts tourism, trade and foreign direct investment; diaspora restaurants often form nascent trade networks (e.g. bulk spice orders).
- Social Cohesion & Development: At home, the diaspora's success stories (restaurants, festivals) feed back into national narratives of progress, while in host societies they foster multicultural understanding and inclusion.

Diaspora Food Diplomacy in Madinah: Practices and Policies

In the Madinah context, Indonesian food diplomacy takes tangible form in local gatherings. The annual *Mahrajan Tsaqafat wa Shu'ûb* (Festival of Culture and Nations) at the Islamic University of Madinah often features an Indonesian pavilion. Here Indonesian students don traditional batik and kebaya, perform dances, and (critically) serve authentic Indonesian meals that become the festival's highlight. Local attendees eagerly sample *rendang*, *ayam goreng*, *bakso*, and treat these offerings not merely as cuisine but as a window into Nusantara culture. Although we lack formal statistics on these events, eye-witness reports emphasise that Indonesian food booths are perennially the most crowded and applauded, underscoring the success of this grassroots diplomacy.

Beyond festivals, the proliferation of Indonesian eateries near the Prophet's Mosque attests to this trend. Supermarket shelves in Madinah import Indonesian staples (rice, coconut cream, spices) to supply these venues. Pilgrims from Indonesia and beyond often report feeling at home in Indonesian-run restaurants, further amplifying Indonesia's warmth and hospitality in the holy city. In short, dining in Madinah frequently becomes a simultaneous act of religious devotion and cultural exchange, with Indonesian students and expatriates at the counter facilitating a meeting of people over common tastes.

Governments have taken note. Indonesian officials now actively support these diaspora initiatives. The Foreign Ministry's *Gastrodiplomacy Dashboard* (launched 2024) maps out Indonesian culinary presence worldwide, including in Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Creative Economy co-hosts 'ASEAN Cultural Days' abroad, where Indonesian food is featured alongside batik and gamelan. Such top-down efforts complement bottom-up diaspora activities. Crucially, analysts point out that synchronising these levels (embassy programs with community events) is key to sustainable success.

Economic and Sustainable Outcomes

Indonesian diaspora food diplomacy yields concrete economic and developmental dividends. Trade data suggest that global demand for Indonesian spices is rising. The Spice Up the World program alone targets doubling spice exports to $2 billion by 2024 (van der Meulen, 2021). Diaspora restaurants drive this demand: they order ingredients, advertise them in shops, and familiarise foreign consumers with Indonesian tastes. This has knock-on effects: international cooking schools and gourmet importers are increasingly sourcing Indonesian palm sugar, turmeric, and chilli peppers. In turn, Indonesian farmers benefit – especially when supported by sustainable practices (e.g. agroforestry for spice crops) that projects like aGROWforests champion.

On the sustainability front, food diplomacy can promote ecological consciousness. Indonesian cuisine's reliance on rice, vegetables and herbs dovetails with healthy eating trends abroad. Diaspora ventures often use local farming (sometimes even hydroponic or organic) to supply fresh produce. Moreover, by showcasing indigenous ingredients (tempeh, sambal, guava, and coconut), diaspora chefs raise awareness of biodiversity and traditional foodways. In this way, Indonesian food

diplomacy supports SDG goals by encouraging responsible consumption (SDG 12) and sustainable agriculture (SDG 2), even as it fosters cultural understanding.

Economic sustainability is also evident in tourism (Maspul, 2023). Madinah's hospitality sector benefits from Indonesian tourism, and vice versa. When Saudis and other pilgrims enjoy Indonesian cuisine, they become more likely to visit Indonesia or invest in joint ventures. Cultural interest sparked by food can translate into business: Indonesian food festivals often coincide with trade talks or tourism expos (e.g. special flights for pilgrims). Thus, "one plate at a time," Indonesia builds durable ties that could lead to sustainable partnerships in education, trade and even co-development projects.

Policy Pathways for Indonesia's Diaspora-Led Food Diplomacy in Madinah

The Indonesian presence in Madinah most visibly through students, community festivals and a growing cluster of eateries around the Prophet's Mosque represents a strategic and under-exploited vector of foreign policy influence. The accompanying paper already demonstrates how food, hospitality, and diaspora networks operate as low-cost, high-trust channels of nation-branding and economic linkage in a city where millions converge each year. Policy should now shift from ad-hoc celebration to systematic stewardship that amplifies impact while safeguarding sustainability and social responsibility.

First, Indonesian food diplomacy must be reframed in governmental structures as an integrated tool of foreign policy and sustainable development rather than as a series of cultural events. A dedicated, small cross-ministerial unit reporting jointly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy should be mandated to craft a strategy, pool resources and operationalise partnerships. From an international relations lens, this institutionalisation translates individual soft-power wins into durable national leverage: it converts constructivist cultural capital into measurable public-diplomatic outcomes, aligning normative influence (shared values, hospitality, religious affinity) with economic diplomacy (export growth, tourism flows, halal supply-chains). The unit's remit should include embassy support functions in key pilgrimage nodes, coordination of diaspora engagement strategies, and a resilient monitoring mechanism to evaluate public sentiment, trade linkages and sustainability indicators.

Second, policy must close the gap between the anthem and practice by investing in capacity building for diaspora entrepreneurs and student associations. Practical support grant co-funding for compliant food businesses, subsidised food-safety and business training, and mentorship in digital marketing and halal certification will professionalise the diaspora's culinary presence and protect reputational capital. Such investments are relatively modest but have multiplier effects: run well, they elevate food safety standards, generate formal employment for migrants and local hires, and produce traceable demand for Indonesian agricultural products. In sustainability terms, this creates virtuous loops: increased, quality-driven demand at the other end of the value chain incentivises climate-smart farming practices and agroforestry techniques that protect biodiversity and rural livelihoods.

Third, a sustainable supply-chain strategy must link Madinah's restaurants and supermarkets to ethical, climate-smart Indonesian producers. Governments and development partners should co-design programmes that finance aggregation centres for spices and speciality ingredients, provide technical assistance for post-harvest handling, and underwrite small-scale certification (organic, fair-trade, sustainable spice) where feasible. Embedding these measures within the Sustainable Development Goals framework ensures food diplomacy also advances SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 8 (Decent Work) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). From the viewpoint of human security, such an approach reframes food diplomacy as a vehicle for resilient livelihoods rather than a simple cultural export.

Fourth, measurement and evaluation must be central. The soft-power effects of cuisine are real but often intangible; to translate anecdote into policy, embassies and the new cross-ministerial unit should deploy a combination of visitor surveys, trade analytics and social-listening tools to capture changes in perceptions, repeat patronage and ingredient demand. Quarterly dashboards that track metrics such as festival attendance, sales of Indonesian staples in host-market supermarkets, and the number of diaspora-run licensed eateries will allow continuous refinement. Academic partnerships with universities both Indonesian and host-country institutions such as the Islamic University of Madinah can provide rigorous evaluation and strengthen the evidence base for scaling successful pilots.

Fifth, policy must be explicitly comparative and adaptive. Indonesia should commission rapid policy audits that distil lessons from other successful gastrodiplomacy models including how nations have tied diaspora culinary networks to broader trade and cultural diplomacy and adapt those lessons to the unique religious and social norms of pilgrimage cities. Comparative learning supports nimble policy design that respects host-country sensitivities, ensures halal compliance, and avoids the pitfalls of cultural commodification. At the same time, the Indonesian state should resist heavy-handed centralisation; the power of this diplomacy lies in authenticity, and excessive bureaucratic control risks erasing the very informality that makes diaspora kitchen diplomacy persuasive.

Sixth, ethical and rights-based safeguards must accompany expansion. Labour protections for migrant staff, transparent business practices, and non-exploitative franchising models are essential to avoid reputational risk. Equally, cultural diplomacy must be reciprocal: Indonesian programmes should create platforms for local Saudi voices and other pilgrim communities to participate, fostering two-way exchange and preventing tokenisation of culture.

Finally, digital storytelling and public diplomacy should amplify the sensory diplomacy performed in Madinah's kitchens. High-quality narrative campaigns leveraging short films, chef profiles, and pilgrim testimonials can magnify grassroots activity into global narratives that invite tourism, investment and cultural affinity. Integrating these digital campaigns with commercial platforms selling verified Indonesian ingredients will create an ecosystem where culture, commerce and sustainability reinforce one another.

If implemented, this architecture turns scattered culinary encounters into structured foreign-policy assets: it preserves the authenticity of diaspora-led hospitality while scaling benefits across trade, development and international relations. In a world where power is increasingly exercised through attraction and networks rather than force, Indonesia's chefs, students and restaurateurs in Madinah are already doing the heavy lifting policy should now give them the durable scaffolding needed to translate every plate into long-term national advantage.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation/Policy Implication

The case of Indonesian food diplomacy in Madinah exemplifies how diaspora communities can amplify a nation's soft power in a unique milieu. In the sacred precincts of the Prophet's Mosque, cultural and culinary exchange reinforce the unity of the global *ummah*, with Indonesia's spicy curries and sweet desserts becoming emblems of goodwill. As a novel frontier of public diplomacy, this form of soft engagement deserves continued support.

Policy-wise, recommendations include: building formal channels to support diaspora-run restaurants (e.g. training in food safety and marketing); incorporating food-promotion targets into embassy cultural plans; and assessing impacts systematically (as scholars suggest, by surveying local perceptions and tracking trade flows). For Indonesian authorities, learning from others is valuable too: comparators like Malaysia or Turkey which also have extensive pilgrimage-linked diasporas could inform best practices. Conversely, global powers have long engaged diasporas via cuisine (e.g. curry diplomacy in the UK or taco diplomacy by Mexico), highlighting that Indonesia is part of a growing trend of culinary cosmopolitanism.

Moreover, Indonesian diaspora in Madinah are not just passive guests; they are ambassadors at the dining table. They portray Indonesia as a diverse and welcoming country by sharing rendang and demonstrating ramah-tamah (hospitality). This grassroots, people-to-people diplomacy supplements formal foreign policy, delivering long-term benefits in the economy, culture, and international relations. As Nye's dictum suggests, to win hearts and minds, sometimes all that is needed is a great meal – and Indonesia's diaspora chefs are delivering just that, plate by plate, in the very city where worlds converge.

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