



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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MALAYSIA'S RESPONSES TO ISSUES PERTAINING TO PALESTINE

Mohd Faizal Musa

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Malaysia's Responses to Issues Pertaining to Palestine

By Mohd Faizal Musa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Malaysia's support for Palestinian independence has always been based on religion. Historically, Malaysia has had warm relations with Palestinian leaders including the Palestine Liberation Organization—during Hussein Onn's and Mahathir Mohamad's administrations—and Hamas since Najib Razak's administration.
- However, Malaysia's support is not just based on their affinity to Palestinians as fellow Muslims but is also a matter of domestic politics. Support for Palestine has been used as a political tool for various quarters to prove that they are more Islamic than the other.
- Malaysia is now led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, a former student leader who rose to prominence in the 1970s for his activism on issues regarding the Muslim *ummah*, including Palestinian independence. Over the years, Anwar has demonstrated consistency in his support for Palestinians, and this has especially been the case since the outbreak of Israeli aggression against Gaza which began on 7 October 2023.
- As a result, Malaysia has gained global prominence for its aggressive stand against Israel. Thus, this paper discusses the Malaysian government's responses to issues pertaining to Palestine over the years. In doing so, it illustrates that while Islam has been a crucial rallying point in supporting the rights and independence of the Palestinians, it is also arguable that Malaysia's foreign policy outlook is also influenced by domestic politics and the need for the government of the day to maintain its support from the Muslim voter base.

Malaysia's Responses to Issues Pertaining to Palestine

By Mohd Faizal Musa¹

INTRODUCTION

On 4 October 1956, the newly created state of Israel attempted to entice Malaysia to recognize its statehood by offering its own recognition of Malaysia a year before the latter's independence. An Israeli representative only known as Sharett had flown to Bangkok to meet Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman (henceforth, Tunku), in an effort to lobby Malaysia through the British, to open a consulate in Kuala Lumpur. On 26 August 1957, a few days before Malaysia officially gained its independence, Israel's President Ben Gurion sent Tunku a telegram, stating that they would support Malaysia's bid to be an official member of the United Nations. It was hoped that Malaysia would respond positively to this, and that it would foster diplomatic relations between the two countries.

However, this did not happen. At a meeting in Sydney on 10 November 1959, Tunku explained to Israeli cabinet minister Moshe Yovel that Malaysia could not recognize the state of Israel as it would be impossible to overcome the opposing voices from the Islamic party and Islamic NGOs. It was later additionally stated on 20 June 1960 that

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Malaysia would never recognize Israel for fear of rejection by the Arab states and other Islamic countries in general.²

Israel's efforts to establish diplomatic ties met with greater resistance as the years passed. On 13 November 1966, Israel attacked Samouat, a remote village in Jordan. This was met with anger by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Islamic party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). In fact, the attack only served to strengthen an already-existing campaign organized by the influential UMNO Women's leader, Aisha Ghani, who on 21 December 1965 lobbied that Malaysians should not be allowed to visit Israel (Abadi 2004, p. 402).

As Abadi explained, further attacks, such as the Sabra and Shatilla massacres in 1982, made it impossible for Israel to be considered a diplomatic partner. Yet, in 1994, it seemed the tides had turned:

What seemed to be a sudden breakthrough that astonished many observers occurred in June 1994, when the brother of the Malaysian King, Tengku Abdullah Abdul Rahman was reported to have met Rabin and Peres in Israel. Such a radical departure from Malaysia's hostile attitude toward Israel could not take place without causing uproar among the Muslims in that country, and pressure could be expected from the radical Arab countries as well. Therefore, the Malaysian government found it necessary to dampen the effect of that visit by stating that upon his return Abdullah would be punished for violating a law prohibiting visits to Israel. Abdullah's visit to Israel was the first by a high-level Malaysian official. Despite the angry response from Muslim quarters the visit was reported to have been a "political breakthrough" which could lead to an agreement "in principle" to establish diplomatic relations between the two countries. Mahathir

² A stark comparison to the Malays' reluctance to recognize the state of Israel would be the Indian community. As Jacob Abadi stated "of all ethnic groups in Malaysia the most open to Israeli overtures were the Indians, but these had little power or influence" (2004, p. 399).

remained passionately pro-Arab and an enthusiastic champion of the Palestinian cause. Nevertheless, Malaysian visitors began entering Israel with the knowledge of the Malaysian government (ibid., p. 408).

While what happened in 1994 certainly came as a surprise, it can be argued that the quote above is not entirely accurate in explaining Malaysia's position towards Israel, and by extension, Palestine. It should be stated that Malaysia has always been fully committed to Palestinian independence, and on many occasions was reminded to be the reason for Malaysia's existence.

Through a review of reports from Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, speeches by political figures, parliamentary Hansards, and the relevant secondary literature, this paper will analyse the Malaysian government's responses to issues pertaining to Palestine and will illustrate how its commitment to Palestinian independence at the international level also served as a catalyst to boost domestic political support from Malay/Muslim voters. On the whole, the Malays' fondness for Palestine, combined with domestic political issues, would make it almost impossible for Malaysia to establish any official ties with Israel lest Palestine be granted independence.

MALAYSIA–PALESTINE: A HISTORY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

An understanding of the Malaysian government's approach towards Palestine would be incomplete without an understanding of the Malays' attitude towards the land. This attitude was present even before Malaysia became independent.

The holy city of Jerusalem, as the rightful capital of Palestine (also referred to as Baitul Maqdis), and specifically Al-Aqsa Mosque, is ingrained in the mind of the Malays, as a central part of their faith. It is even mentioned in the Malay classical text *Hikayat Nabi Mikraj* (The Tale of the Prophet's Ascension to the Heavens) (Djamaris 1983, pp. 13–64). Malays had frequently visited Palestine since at least the 1930s. This was largely triggered by the 1917 Balfour Declaration which designated

Palestine as “a national home for the Jewish people” (Antonius 1939, p. 266). In the 1930s, Malay students residing in Egypt channelled their activism through al-Jam’iyyah al-Khairiyyah, an organization founded in 1923. While the organization was founded to deal with issues concerning the Malay community, the Palestinian cause was also included in their agenda. Its president and representative Abu Bakar Ashaari and Abdul Kahar Muzakkir travelled to Palestine in 1930. They went there again in 1931 to attend a conference hosted by the Mufti of Baitul Maqdis, Sheikh Amin al Husayni. Following the conference, Abdul Kahar Muzakkir was chosen as the secretary of a front named Mukhtar Alam Islami, which brought together leaders from the Muslim world (Abu Hanifah 2023, p. 8).

A notable Malay elite who visited Palestine in 1936 was PAS leader Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy (1956–69) who took part in a demonstration there against the Balfour Declaration and was consequently arrested by the British for a few days. In 1939 he published a journal entitled *Taman Bahagia* (Happy Garden) which promoted the rights of the Palestinians. The British banned the magazine soon after (ibid., pp. 9–10).³

Baitul Maqdis’ status as a holy city for Muslims is reflected even in Malaysia’s foreign policy. For example, in his welcoming speech during a state dinner organized for Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Malaysian King Tuanku Syed Putra ibni al-Marhum Syed Hassan Jamalullail (1960–65) spoke of Islam’s holy cities and said that Malaysians were committed to rallying behind Palestine. Later, Tunku’s

³ Muslims in Singapore such as Sayyid Ibrahim bin Omar Alsagoff joined the campaign by publishing a journal titled *Genuine Islam* (1936–1939) which strongly encouraged Muslims to be conscious about what was happening in Palestine at the time. From 1947 to 1948, many Muslims in Singapore were also very active in voicing out against the separation of Palestinian territory into Arab and Jewish quarters, which would later become the state of Israel. Donations were collected to support publications which highlighted Muslims’ sentiments about the matter (Abu Hanifah 2023, pp. 10–13).

speech at the Muslim Summit in Rabat, Morocco on 22 September 1969, emphasized that Malaysia saw herself as part of the greater *ummah* (global Muslim community) that, in the name of faith, chose not to betray solidarity:

I have come here as a brother in Islam moved by my very deep concern and anxiety for the holy places of Jerusalem. We are all here at this gathering not as so-called Arab Muslims or non-Arab Muslims, but simply as brothers in Islam. The future of Jerusalem is not a matter between Israel and Jordan only, or even between and the other Arab States only. It is a matter of the deepest concern to us all. Indeed it is a matter not only the concern for us present around this table but that rather the millions of Muslims not represented here whether they be in China or Russia, Thailand or the Philippines, Ethiopia, Yugoslavia, Albania or Cyprus, for it is in their interest for us to speak on their behalf as well. For they, like us, must feel equally as we do the pangs and sorrow caused by the events which had taken place in Jerusalem. This indeed must be the most important conference held so far in connection with this question and world attention must inevitably be focused and drawn to what is taking place here (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1969, p. 17).

Tunku also emphasized the status of Palestine as a site of important religious heritage which needed to be defended:

At the Muslim Conference held in Kuala Lumpur in April this year, which is the first conference of its kind ever held, the issue of Baitul Maqdis was discussed and the Conference passed resolutions some of which were:

1. This Conference condemns Israel for having usurped the Arab territories and in particular the Holy City of Baitul Maqdis, which includes the first Qibla and the third mosque of the Muslims and place of ascension of the Holy Prophet;
2. Appeals to all Muslim nations to hold as soon as possible a

Conference at high political level to discuss the issue of Baitul Maqdis in all its aspects.

The present conference may therefore be regarded as fulfilling the second paragraph in that resolution and what is more the mosque referred to in the first paragraph has been the subject of the worst act of sacrilege known to history and so what was said of the mosque is almost prophetic. The sacrilege of the holy mosque has brought us helter-skelter to a conference. In addressing the closing session of that Conference I referred to the situation in the Middle East as one fraught with danger. I said then that what was happening in the Middle East was a matter for serious attention of world powers but that sooner or later it must inevitably draw all the Muslim nations into the conflict because Muslims regard Jerusalem as their Holy City. Muslims everywhere had felt a sense of great loss and tragedy when as a result of the June 1967 war, Jerusalem fell into the hands of Israel. It is inevitable that Muslims everywhere should be profoundly concerned over such a severe setback with the loss of Jerusalem to the Israelis (*ibid.*, p. 18).

Reflecting Tunku's sentiments, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the arson attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in 1969 triggered a change in the Malaysian government's approach towards Israel (Anidah 2009, p. 52). These incidents perhaps marked a turning point which closed all doors for any potential relationship between Israel and Malaysia, as they had immensely angered the Malaysian people. In responding to these events and describing Palestine's situation, Tunku used strong words such as "occupation", "a forced humiliation", "insult to Islam", and "hold Israel responsible for the crisis" (*ibid.*, pp. 55–58).

Tunku's campaign for Palestine was backed by UMNO Information Chief Sulaiman Ahmad from Penang, who regularly gave fiery speeches on the matter and was consequently given the nickname Sulaiman Palestine (Abu Hanifah 2023, p. 17). However, Tunku and Sulaiman were not the only UMNO leaders who actively fought for the rights of the Palestinians. Among many others was former Prime Minister Hussein

Onn (1922–90) who participated in a military mission to Palestine during the Second World War while he was part of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment in India. Captain Hussein was reported to have joined military operations in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Palestine before returning to Malaya in 1945 to join the civil service and, later, politics (*ibid.*, p. 9). This helped to set up a strong basis for his administration's foreign policies against Israel and provided generous funding and assistance for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Kuala Lumpur (Dewan Negara Malaysia 1978, pp. 343–44).

Furthermore, Tunku's statement above revealed that religion also formed the basis of Malaysia's support for Palestine. The same can be said about Malaysia's emphasis on Baitul Maqdis as a holy city. This was understandable, as the newly independent state was seeking recognition from other Muslim countries at the time. However, the use of Islam as a basis for foreign policy was a source of confusion as Tunku was known to be an avid supporter of secularism and rejected any notion of Malaysia as an Islamic state (Alima 2008, pp. 155–56; Harding 2012, pp. 369–70).⁴

Tunku's unconditional support for Palestine was continued unequivocally by succeeding premiers. In fact, official support was enhanced and emboldened from time to time. For instance, following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Malaysia, under Tun Razak's leadership, began to fund Palestine through many civil society groups (Anidah 2009, p. 77). Malaysia also supported the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa at the time which rallied against the evilness of colonialism, imperialism and racism (*ibid.*, p. 76).

⁴ Tunku's position as head of government cannot be separated from his role as the first Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1970. He was also the man behind the Islamic Welfare Society of Malaysia (PERKIM), where he aggressively promoted the concept of brotherhood in Islam. It is this concept that formed the core of Malaysia's non-negotiable support for Palestine (Adib 2021; Wan Norhasniah 2016).

However, Malaysia's unwavering support for Palestine was not just evident in its foreign policy but was also intertwined with domestic politics. This also explains why Malaysia has become a fruitful ground for many pro-Palestinian NGOs outside of the Palestinian territories since 2009 (Koss 2019, p. 3). Thus, it was both the government and civil society who grew to be staunch supporters of Palestine.

CHAMPIONING PALESTINE: SUPPORT FOR THE PLO AND HAMAS

According to Nurul Norfatihah, Azlizan, and Al Amril (2021, p. 17), four factors or aspects have shaped Malaysia's foreign policy in fighting for the rights of the Palestinians. Firstly, since Islam is the religion of the Malay people, Palestinians are considered to be their brothers in faith and, therefore, must be supported and defended. This sentiment has influenced Malaysia's foreign policy since the era of Tunku Abdul Rahman. In other words, the *ummah* is a central part of defining Malaysia's relations with other Muslim nations. The second factor would be the "idiosyncratic Malaysian leadership", which, as will be explained later, was very much visible in Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim's choices in their foreign policy. Thirdly, the never-ending conflicts, wars, aggressions and massacres that occur in the Middle East, in particular in Palestine, have always encouraged the Malaysian leadership to come up with a solution for peace in the region. Finally, Malaysia has also been spurred by the weakness and hesitation of certain major powers in dealing with the Palestinian conflict.

Malaysia's support for Palestine is channelled through many platforms, such as the Non-Aligned Movement Consultant Meeting and the Non-Aligned Ministers' Conference (NAM), of which a meeting took place in Kuala Lumpur in 1970 (ibid., p. 20). Malaysia has also pushed for support through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) when they issued a Joint Press Statement of the Second ASEAN-GCC Ministerial Meeting in Singapore on 1 June 2010, right after the 31 May 2010 flotilla raid during which Israel attacked the Mavi Marmara ship which was carrying humanitarian aid for Gaza (ibid.).

As a founding member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC),⁵ Malaysia also takes advantage of its active participation in the organization to respond sternly against Israel's aggression in Palestine.

Malaysia's Support for the PLO

Malaysia's diplomatic recognition of the PLO is a crucial example of its support for Palestine. As stated earlier, former Prime Minister Hussein Onn was part of a military expedition to Palestine during his younger days. This coincided with "the rise of transnational *dakwah* activity", during which Malaysian Muslims started to get involved in *dakwah* organizations such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), Tabligh and Al-Arqam (Anidah 2009, p. 92). Shortly after Malaysia observed Palestinian Solidarity Day on 2 April 1976, ABIM, under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, started to establish a relationship with the PLO (ibid.). Thus, on 22 October 1979, PLO special envoy Khalid Al-Syakh arrived in Kuala Lumpur to brief ABIM leaders on the "struggle of the liberation of Palestine" (ibid., p. 101). Throughout the 1970s, ABIM, under Anwar's leadership, had repeatedly voiced out against Israel's aggression towards Palestine and made efforts to bolster unconditional support for the PLO.

PLO's efforts to achieve diplomatic recognition had begun as early as 1967 when Fatah (the party linked to the PLO) sought to set up an office in Kuala Lumpur (ibid., p. 59). The PLO was allowed to open its own office in Kuala Lumpur in 1981 (Koss 2019, p. 2), which by 1989 was recognized as Palestine's embassy (Anidah 2009, p. 142). This bold move by the Malaysian government was motivated by the First Intifada and was a manifestation of Malaysia's recognition of the state of Palestine.

That same year, Malaysia became one of the earliest nations to recognize the Palestinian state when Mahathir declared Palestine as an independent nation. It was the first in Southeast Asia, and the second

⁵ Formerly Organization of the Islamic Conference.

in the world to declare such recognition (Koss 2020, p. 758). In fact, since 1985, Mahathir has tirelessly lobbied for other countries, such as Yugoslavia, to accept the PLO as Palestine's sole representative at the international level (Bernama 1985).

Mahathir's commitment towards the PLO and its leader Yasser Arafat scored the government a point in the competition of domestic politics. The early 1980s was a period of great change in Malaysian politics: Mahathir's administration had just introduced "Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam" (The Inculcation of Islamic Values) as a government policy; Anwar Ibrahim as an infamous student and leader of civil society had just joined UMNO; and PAS was becoming increasingly harsh towards the government, criticizing it for not being Islamic. Thus, to overtly champion the Palestinian cause was a strategic move to silence the government's Islamist critics. As some observers had put it:

Perhaps the last factor that motivates his policies towards Palestinians is the most important one. It should be noted that Mahathir's administration had always met with a challenge from the opposition party especially PAS and especially in the matter concerning Islam. His administration had been called "un-Islamic" by these people. It was a serious challenge for him because the opposition party together with a few NGOs can pose a threat especially in the election. The opposition will use this issue in order to get support especially from the Malay Muslim. In order to survive in politics, several initiatives need to be taken by him and one of them is through the Palestinian issue (Abdul Majid, Abdullah Ayoade, and Mohd Afandi 2017, p. 1775).

When Anwar joined UMNO in 1981, the Palestinian struggle was naturally given more spotlight (Nur Atika and Norhafizah 2020, pp. 2–5). In the 1980s, the PLO was seen as the only influential front representing Palestinians despite its "terrorist" activities and armed struggle against Israel and the West (Interactive Encyclopaedia of the Palestine Question 2002). Thus, Mahathir used the opportunity to invite PLO leader Yasser Arafat to Malaysia, consequently creating overwhelming excitement among the Malays.

Arafat's first visit to Malaysia from 23 to 25 July 1984 was considered a success, with Malaysia reaffirming support for the PLO through military and political means, with the aim of liberating Palestine from Israel's occupation and colonization (Ahmad Rithaudden 1984, pp. 5289–90). The PLO chairman attended a state banquet hosted by the king, and also addressed a mass rally at Stadium Negara.⁶ Arafat travelled again to Malaysia in March 1990 and July 1993 and was consistently welcomed by the Malaysian government as the head of state (*Utusan Malaysia*, 27 July 1993).

Mahathir's approach to this particular issue was considered highly effective in pushing PAS into the corner and silencing its claims of being the only legitimate voice of Islamic movements in Malaysia. The only chance the party had to criticize Mahathir's administration was in 1999 when Syed Hamid Albar, as Malaysia's foreign minister at the time, sat together unofficially with Israeli foreign minister David Levy in New York. Seeing that the meeting drew backlash, the foreign ministry explained that the meeting took place to give Malaysia a chance to directly tell Israeli leaders how they felt about their actions in Palestine. Nevertheless, PAS tried to portray it as representative of Mahathir's hypocrisy (*Berita Harian*, 7 October 1999).

Malaysia's undeniable acceptance of Arafat and the PLO, and the country's general support for Palestine, was not just articulated in foreign policy but was also explicitly communicated to the people. For example, newspaper reports illustrated a positive picture of Palestine and the PLO. In other cases, the English-language media which had affiliations to the government were careful to use an appropriate tone, especially when

⁶ There is an archive video which shows how electrified the audience was when Yasser Arafat gave his speech at Stadium Negara. See *British Pathe* (1984). For the record, the only ASEAN countries that had given the PLO full diplomatic recognition in 1984 were Malaysia, Laos and Vietnam (UPI News 1984). They were only given observer status at the United Nations in 1975 (United Nations General Assembly 1975).

promoting Palestine's first election in 1996 (Mohamed Fadel, Chang, and Emma 2019, pp. 143–60).

The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 did not slow down Malaysia's efforts to fight for the rights of the Palestinians. In fact, Mahathir's administration repeatedly criticized the agreement and called it a failure on many occasions at the international level, including at the tenth OIC Summit in 2003 in Putrajaya, Malaysia (Anidah 2009, p. 146).

Malaysia's Support for Hamas⁷

By the late 1990s, the influence of the PLO and Fatah—a dominant player within the PLO—gradually faded. Hamas had come to replace the PLO, and Malaysia's ruling government was quick to engage with them.⁸ It is safe to say that Malaysia has close relations with Hamas, and that their relationship is not seen as something out of the ordinary. In 2011, the Palestinian Cultural Organization in Malaysia (PCOM) was established in Kuala Lumpur at the direct request of then Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi during his visit to Gaza (Koss 2020, p. 4). PCOM is arguably close to and serves as a strategic partner of Hamas. In fact, it is PCOM who arranged the attendance of Hamas leaders at UMNO's general assemblies (ibid.). Top Hamas leaders attended UMNO's general assembly in 2015, 2016 and 2017 (Koss 2019, pp. 2, 5), and they also met with PAS leaders in 2016 (Koss 2020, p. 765). These Hamas leaders include Osama Hamdan, Izzat al-Rishaq, and Khaled Meshal, the former head of Hamas' political bureau.

UMNO ministers and leaders are also on PCOM's Board of Trustees. One such leader was Shahidan Kassim, who served as a minister in the Prime Minister's Department from 2013 to 2018. Zahid Hamidi was also

⁷ The acronym for its Arabic name Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya.

⁸ Hamas won the 2006 legislative elections in the Gaza Strip, while the secular Fatah-led Palestinian National Authority controlled the West Bank. Although both parties do cooperate with one another, they have clear ideological disputes (Asseburg 2007).

elected as PCOM's patron. He attended all of PCOM's main events and advocated for Palestinian rights (Koss 2020, p. 767). In 2018, right after the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government came to power, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Anwar Ibrahim's wife and the deputy prime minister at the time, replaced Zahid as patron (*ibid.*, p. 770).

The most important development in Malaysia's relationship with Palestine was in January 2013 when Najib Razak and his wife Rosmah Mansor became the first of Malaysia's top leadership to step foot in Hamas-controlled Gaza. During his visit, then Prime Minister Najib was welcomed by Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh. This visit was initiated by Najib himself (Astro Awani 2012). However, while Najib's visit might have been perceived as Malaysia's official support for Palestinian rights, it is worth stating that Malaysia engaged in a significant amount of trade with Israel during Najib's administration:

Official data published by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) tells of a booming, but very discreet, trade relationship that is blossoming between the two countries, despite a hawkish prime minister in Jerusalem and Razak's Islamist and proudly pro-Palestinian government in Kuala Lumpur. Total trade between the two countries in 2013 reached \$1.529 billion, almost double that of 2012, according to the CBS. That figure consists mostly of Israeli exports, at \$1.457 billion. Trade continues to accelerate: Between January and July this year, Israeli exports to Malaysia soared to \$884.7 million, a 27% jump over the same period last year. By contrast, Malaysia's foreign trade figures don't carry any mention of Israel at all. In its annual data for 2012, for instance, trade with Israel is included in an entry for "Other Countries." A significant chunk of the trade boom can be traced to Kiryat Gat in Israel's sandy southern plains, where global giant Intel has a plant churning out computer chips. It exports these to a second assembly plant in Malaysia. Every shipment is duly recorded in Israel's foreign trade statistics but studiously ignored by Malaysia. Intel is a US-based company, but the Israeli government promised a 5% co-investment in its Kiryat Gat plant that could amount to one billion shekels (\$290 million) (Atkins 2014).

Thus, Najib’s visit—which was perceived by onlookers to be a courageous one—was not necessarily seen as a sincere move. Rather, it was seen as a “political ploy aimed at winning Malay Muslim support in what is expected to be a close election” that same year (Cheney 2013). Bridget Welsh, an associate professor of political science at Singapore Management University, and Joseph Liow, associate dean of the School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore argued that the timing of the visit was predictable as “there is a lot of awareness and sympathy among Malaysian Muslims for the plight of the Palestinians, and Malaysia has always been a vocal champion of the Palestinian cause”. More specifically, he could have been “looking to secure the support of Muslim voters, particularly after corruption scandals that have hurt his image” (Cheney 2013).

It was also pointed out that if he really cared about Palestine, he would have also visited the West Bank. Records show that Najib’s historic trip to Gaza in 2013 did not sit well with Fatah, who initially tried to prevent him from going to Gaza. However, because of Najib’s insistence, relations between the two soured. The Palestinian National Authority stopped paying respect to UMNO, and leader Mahmoud Abbas avoided visiting Malaysia (Koss 2020, p. 764).

However, Malaysia’s relations with Fatah and Abbas improved during Ismail Sabri’s administration, and this was symbolized by a meeting between the two at the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2022 (*Harian Metro*, 24 September 2022). Abbas also responded to Anwar Ibrahim’s phone call in 2023 (*The Star*, 20 October 2023).

Going back to Hamas, Malaysia’s unconditional support for them was also evident during Muhyiddin Yassin’s brief reign, during which he stated Malaysia’s “commitment to seeking ways to extend appropriate assistance to ease the sufferings of Palestinians” (*New Straits Times*, 16 May 2021). The good relations between Hamas and Malaysia continued when Anwar became prime minister and emphasized his support for Palestine:

Since assuming the role of prime minister, Anwar has purposefully postured himself as a Muslim statesman, having adopted an assertive stance on “Muslim issues” globally, notably the

Palestinian cause. This became particularly prominent following the recent Israel-Hamas conflict, during which he defended the Malaysian government's relations with Hamas, asserting that despite Western officials urging Malaysia to condemn Hamas in meetings, the government did not agree with the West's "pressuring attitude." Subsequently, Anwar had an official phone call with Ismail Haniyeh, the head of the Hamas political bureau to express Malaysia's unwavering support for the Palestinian people (Togoo 2024).

Later in the Malaysian Parliament, Anwar shared that he was under pressure from Western countries who had repeatedly asked Malaysia to condemn Hamas in international meetings. Anwar ignored their appeals, stating that Malaysia would continue to support Hamas vehemently:

I said that we, as a policy, have a relationship with Hamas from before and this will continue. As such, we don't agree with their pressuring attitude, as Hamas too won in Gaza freely through elections and Gazans chose them to lead (Rozanna 2023).

Over the years, Malaysia's growing support for Palestine manifested in the establishment of several educational and humanitarian projects in Gaza. These include kindergartens, Malaysia Quranic Schools, Masjid Imam Shafe,⁹ the Malaysian Hall in Gaza,¹⁰ Cinta Gaza Malaysia and the Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organizations (Majlis Perundingan Pertubuhan Islam Malaysia, MAPIM). In Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia, which was established in 2011, set up the Institute of Excellence for Islamic Jerusalem Studies (IEIJS) which focuses on issues pertaining to Palestine (Naeem Ashraf and Ibrahim Saqir 2020).

⁹ It is one of the biggest mosques in Gaza and is able to accommodate about 2,000 congregants.

¹⁰ It is aided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and run by the Malaysian Cultural Centre.

THE MADANI GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSES TO THE CONFLICT

On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched an attack on Israel, killing over a thousand Israelis and taking over 200 others hostage. Israel retaliated by committing a full-scale genocide¹¹ in Gaza which is ongoing at the time of writing. To date, more than 32,000 Palestinian civilians have been killed by Israeli fire.

Given Malaysia's long-standing support for Palestine, it was only natural that the current Madani government under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim felt the need to respond to Israel's unrelenting bombardment of Palestine. After all, "Malaysia's foreign ministry has highlighted that the concept of Malaysia Madani (Civil Malaysia), which seeks to place emphasis on the country's humanity, will also be promoted internationally" (Parameswaran 2023). Furthermore, continuing their support for Palestine would be a continuation of their two-pronged approach of supporting their brothers in faith and ensuring electoral support from the Malay-Muslim community at the same time.

¹¹ While the applicability of the term "genocide" to Israel's actions in Gaza is still being debated, it has been given much consideration by analysts. As Marie-Olivia Badarne (2024) has explained, "the court's [International Court of Justice, ICJ] ruling on genocide could take years, but ICJ has already ordered Israel to take action to prevent acts of genocide in the Gaza Strip". Furthermore, "the ICJ's ruling sends a clear signal to political decision makers that the killing must stop, and any further support for Israel's combat operations, for example in the form of arms supplies or other assistance to Israel's actions in Gaza, must from now on be weighed from the point of view of possible aiding and abetting genocide or potentially punishable omission". For further reading on why Israel's actions ought to be considered a genocide, see Center for Constitutional Rights (2024), El-Affendi (2024), and Perugini (2024). The latest development on the issue was when United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories Francesca Albanese released her report titled "Anatomy of a Genocide—Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied Since 1967" (2024).

During his days in ABIM, Anwar was actively involved in issues pertaining to Palestine. While he has distanced himself from radical approaches since establishing his political party Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR), he is still passionate about issues related to the *ummah*.

Within the framework of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's political trajectory, which traces his evolution from leading the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), a prominent student-led religious organization inspired by the ideological and structural principles of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, he ascended to prominence as a significant figure in Islamist politics in Malaysia. During this period, Anwar openly articulated both support and admiration for the 1979 revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. This trajectory marks a notable transition to his role as the founder of the multicultural People's Justice Party (PKR). In this capacity, Anwar went on to advocate for a moderate form of Islam. However, it is noteworthy that Islamic perspectives have consistently constituted an integral component of his political discourse. This religious orientation extends notably to his approach to foreign policy, particularly in matters pertaining to the Arab and Muslim world (Togoo 2024).

As prime minister, Anwar has the chance to prove to the *ummah* that he is a Muslim statesman. While he initially supported the PLO in the 1980s, he now unsurprisingly supports Hamas:

Outside of Iran, no Muslim leader has taken a harder line on Palestine than Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who has personally addressed rallies and loudly voiced support for not just Palestinians but also Hamas. Anwar took a call with Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas's political bureau, on Oct. 17, and has also resolutely opposed US efforts to ramp up sanctions against Hamas. None of this is surprising. Anwar entered Malaysian politics as a student Islamic activist. His patron (and later rival), former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, frequently castigated

Israel and its Western supporters and vociferously supported the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Rachman 2023).

Furthermore, Anwar's support for Palestine in the face of ongoing Israeli aggression was merely an extension of the commitment he made to Hamas leaders when he became prime minister in 2022:

soon after taking office, Anwar thanked two leaders from the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas for their congratulatory messages and reaffirmed Malaysia's long-standing support for the Palestinian people and their struggle. His response not only highlights his close association with the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which spawned Hamas, but also serves to enhance his legitimacy among Malay-Muslims (Han 2022).

Overall, Anwar's responses to the war have manifested through four major moves which are also tainted with domestic political goals.

Mass Rallies

With the help of ABIM, the Malaysian government organized a mass rally at an indoor stadium on 24 October 2023 in a show of protest against Israel's actions. According to reports, more than 16,000 people, including Anwar himself, were at this rally. The rally-goers were of various ages and backgrounds and even comprised of Palestinian refugees in Malaysia. It is important to note that this official rally was held after a series of rallies hosted or attended by opposition leaders. Earlier on 13 October 2023, crowds consisting of a few thousand, including former prime ministers Mahathir Mohamad and Muhyiddin Yassin, along with politicians from across the political spectrum, gathered at the National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur to protest the ongoing genocide. Mahathir himself then appeared with 1,000 people outside the US Embassy on 20 October 2023, with protesters chanting slogans condemning the US for being complicit in the genocide (Bedi 2023).

It is worth noting that Malaysia's holding of mass rallies goes back as early as the 1960s. For example, the government held one such rally

on 18 September 1969. The national television station also organized a live forum entitled Forum Palestin. Immediately after that, on 19 and 20 September 1969, 670 mosques in peninsular Malaysia participated in Palestine Day by conducting lectures on Palestine. Protesters at Subang International Airport also erected exhibitions on the plight of Palestinians (Abu Hanifah 2023).

Palestine Solidarity Week

On top of mass rallies, the Ministry of Education commemorated Palestine Solidarity Week from 29 October to 3 November 2023, which involved all schools, teacher training institutes, and vocational and matriculation colleges across the country (Jeevita 2023). According to the ministry, “the primary objective of this initiative is to instil humane values, encompassing human rights and courtesy, in students. This includes fostering attitudes of empathy and concern for the suffering of individuals, irrespective of their race, religion, or social status” (ibid.).

However, while the intentions were good, the event grew to be a cause for concern as some schools reportedly displayed elements of violence and extremism in their activities. For example, a video that made its rounds online showed a school assembly during which an individual who was dressed in protective gear was equipped with a toy gun while riling up teachers and students. Apart from the video, there were also photos of students at another school carrying toy guns and wearing green bandanas with “Save Palestine” written on their foreheads (Aliza 2023). Such footage angered parents, and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a component party in the unity government, also emphasized that dialogue and multicultural understanding must be emphasized, and shows of violence avoided. PAS however was in view that the toy guns ‘help to raise awareness of Palestinian struggle’ (Alyaa, Hariz, and Shamz 2023).

Responding to concerns, the Ministry of Education issued guidelines for schools partaking in the event. These guidelines warned of actions to be avoided, such as: (1) the usage of extremist rhetoric; (2) blaming individuals or religions; (3) using inaccurate information; (4) engaging in partisan politics; (5) subscribing to monolithic perspectives instead of a balanced portrayal of the situation; and (6) using controversial symbols

that may be offensive. The guidelines also encouraged the following: (1) highlighting the humanitarian dimension; (2) promoting understanding through activities such as lectures and documentary screenings; (3) having open dialogue through Q&A sessions and forums; (4) collaborating with NGOs to organize programmes; (5) organizing a “Charity Campaign” to gather humanitarian aid; and (6) promoting peace, justice, and harmony in all activities (Nehru 2023).

Using the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum as a Platform

Following Israel’s attack on Palestine on 7 October 2023, there were calls for Malaysia to boycott the US-led APEC forum held in San Francisco, California from 11 to 17 November 2023. Wan Ahmad Fayhsal, a Member of Parliament from the opposition party Bersatu, proposed that the government boycott the 21-country economic forum as a sign of solidarity with Palestinians, as well as in protest of US support for Israel (Kumar 2023). In an act of defiance, Anwar used the forum as a platform to criticize Israel’s aggression in Palestine, thus stealing the spotlight away from the opposition’s criticisms. He spoke about the need for the international community to intervene and stop the killing in Gaza, and referred to the war as a “humanitarian crisis” (*New Straits Times*, 19 November 2023). Furthermore, he emphasized that “the humanitarian crisis in Palestine is poised to affect not just Palestine or the broader Middle East, but also leave an imprint on global relations for many years to come” (*The Star*, 17 November 2023b).¹²

¹² Anwar continued to raise the issue beyond the forum: “In his subsequent visit to the U.S. to participate in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in San Francisco, Anwar visited the Islamic Center of the city. During this visit, he convened a meeting with technology experts and businessmen representing the Muslim community. Beyond deliberations on investment prospects in Malaysia, Anwar, in a post on Facebook, articulated, “We also discussed the question of Muslims in the U.S. as well as the situation affecting Palestinians”. These examples underscore the consistent integration of religious dimensions into his diplomatic engagements on the global stage” (Togoo 2024).

Although Anwar managed to silence his opponents for participating in the APEC forum, he was still criticized by Mahathir for delivering a speech that was weak and not critical enough. He said Anwar was too careful as he “did not even mention Israel by name ... despite his supporters’ attempts to show him as a courageous leader who spoke in defence of Palestinians in front of major powers” (*Malaysia Now*, 23 November 2023). Even if that was the case, Mahathir conveniently ignored Anwar’s earlier and direct criticisms of Israel and the US. In an interview conducted on the sidelines of the ASEAN-GCC Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on 20 October 2023, “Anwar pointed to his country’s firm position on the Palestinian issue and denounced Western duplicity by supporting the Israelis and disregarding the violations of civilians’ rights in the enclave” (Yousif 2023).

On the whole, the criticisms that Anwar invited both before and after the APEC forum demonstrate that any foreign policy with regard to Palestine or the Middle East cannot escape domestic politics.

Docking Ban on Israeli Ships

Although Mahathir’s criticism was not entirely fair, Anwar retaliated. As an act of defiance against Israel, and in a move celebrated by supporters of Palestine worldwide, Anwar announced that Malaysia had banned all Israeli-flagged cargo ships from docking at its ports because of its “massacre and brutality against Palestinians” (*Al Jazeera*, 20 December 2023).

This decision to “impose the maritime ban on Israel-affiliated vessels—singling out ZIM, Israel’s largest shipping firm” was made “amid growing alarm over disruptions to global shipping as a result of attacks on cargo ships in the Red Sea”. Malaysia also decided to immediately restrict “ships using the Israeli flag to dock in the country and ban any ship on its way to Israel from loading cargo in Malaysian ports” (ibid.). This move by Anwar stunned Mahathir as it was the latter who, in 2002, permitted Israeli ships to dock in Malaysia. Anwar’s decision was thus a reversal of the former government’s decision (*New Straits Times*, 20 December 2023b).

Causing Mahathir's embarrassment, Anwar's strategic move led him to defend his decision. Caught off guard, Mahathir explained that in 2002 his administration had allowed Israel-based shipping company, ZIM Integrated Shipping Services Ltd, to dock at Malaysia's ports as Malaysia was hoping "that the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be resolved by the peace process at the time". Mahathir was also pushed to clear the air adding that in 1997 "the Malaysian government had at the time also allowed the Israeli cricket team to participate in an international tournament" in Malaysia "to show Malaysians that they can co-exist with those from other faiths" (Tan 2023).

Thus, Anwar's move was evidently shaped by domestic political competition. His decision to disallow Israeli ships docking in Malaysian ports was a strategic move to boost his international credibility, and at the same time gave him the opportunity to shame his political foe. It is worth stating that this decision was made around the same time the Houthis began their operations in the Red Sea, which Anwar acknowledged was clearly due to "the Israeli occupation's aggression against Gaza" (Marwa 2024).

CONCLUSION

As the situation in Gaza continues to worsen, and as more countries gradually acknowledge the genocide of the Palestinian people, it would be interesting to see how Anwar will play this international game domestically, especially since the political situation is not in his favour. This can be partially attributed to the fact that former Prime Minister Najib Razak's jail term was halved to six years via a royal pardon, under Anwar's nose. Anwar will thus need to find a way to balance his political image as a "progressive Muslim leader" (Choong 2022) who is strongly committed to the global *ummah*.

In comparing Malaysia's and Indonesia's responses to issues pertaining to Palestine, Syed Imad Alatas explained that "the vilification of Jews and criticism of Israel is far more aggressive in the Malaysian context as it is a source of greater political expediency stemming from a greater politicization of Islam" (2020, p. 153). In other words, Malaysia's

approach towards Palestine is best explained by understanding its domestic background:

In Malaysia, Islam is politicized at the domestic and international levels with regard to the Palestine issue so that the state is able to garner electoral support. On a related note, preserving an Islamic image is crucial in silencing Islamic opposition that it is not “Islamic” enough. Opposing Israeli actions in Palestine goes hand in hand with caricaturing Jews as conspirators hell-bent on taking over the world. Malaysian governments, especially under Mahathir, do not shy away from anti-Semitic statements (ibid.).

Malaysia’s approach to the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine has been characterized by the perceptions and emotions of the majority Malay-Muslim population who see the need to stand with their Palestinian brethren. However, this should not be read as completely genuine support for the Palestinians. While it is true that the Malaysian government has an emotional and religious connection with the Palestinian people, the country is still engaged in trade with Israel. Even Mahathir, who is a staunch critic of Zionism, continued to trade with Israel when he was prime minister. As reported in 2023, there has been trade “for the past twenty-eight years from 1995 up to present day, with 2018 being the highest at US\$304 million in terms of import from Malaysia”. At the same time, “Israel steadily exports to Malaysia, with the highest was in 2013 with US\$1.46 billion” (Selvam 2023).

While Israel does not have an embassy in Kuala Lumpur and while there are various Palestinian organizations in the country, this should not be considered as altruistic support for Palestine, as such support gives the government of the day an opportunity to boost its Muslim support base. In other words, if one day other Muslim nations—especially the Arab states—decide to recognize the state of Israel, it would not be entirely surprising if Malaysia followed suit. Perhaps the only factor stopping Malaysia from doing that at the moment is its historical and religious camaraderie with the Palestinian people.

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