

## **The Impact of Malaysian Foreign Policy on Palestine during Tun Mahathir's Era**

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### **ABSTRACT**

During the tenure of Mahathir Mohammed as Prime Minister, the Palestine issue was made a special cause to Malaysia. It was during Mahathir's administration that the government and the country became highly committed to helping to bring world attention to and to resolving the Palestine-Israel crisis. This paper discusses the impact of Malaysia's involvement in the Palestine cause during Mahathir's era and highlights the impact it had on Palestine, Mahathir as Prime Minister and Malaysia as a whole. Malaysia's pro-Palestine cause has helped the world gain in awareness of the Palestine issue; nevertheless, the conflict in Palestine continues, showing no sign of ending.

*Keywords:* Foreign policy, Mahathir, Malaysia, Malaysia Foreign Policy, Palestine

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since Malaysia's independence in 1957, the country has fought for the Palestinian cause and continues to do so today. During

the period of Tun Mahathir Mohamad's administration as Prime Minister (1981-2002), Malaysia was vocal in championing the cause on both the domestic and international front.

Through careful review of the literature, this paper presents a discussion of the extent to which Malaysian foreign policy has impacted Palestine with regards to helping the Palestinian cause and the impact it had on Mahathir and Malaysia on the whole. This discussion is presented in four sections, namely, 1. Method; 2. Results, which looks at the political and social impact of

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Malaysian Foreign Policy on Palestine; 3. Discussion; and 4. Conclusion.

## **METHODS**

The researchers began this study by looking at the historical roots of Palestine, which is the story of the origin of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. By looking at the historical records, the researchers hope to bring this conflict to the awareness of Malaysians.

This research depended on primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from various government institutions as well as the speeches of Malaysian ministers. Secondary data was derived from books, journals, magazines, reports and papers presented at seminar and conferences, local and foreign newspapers as well as diverse material from the Internet.

## **RESULTS**

### **Political Impact**

Since the administration of the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman up to that of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia, the country was consistent in championing the Palestinian cause. Although Malaysia's efforts did not bring an end to this conflict, it did, however, bring about significant awareness of people towards this issue on the local and international front.

It was, however, during the administration of Mahathir Mohamad, the fourth Prime Minister, that Malaysia took its commitment towards the Palestinian

cause to another level. He did what other Prime Ministers did not do, which was to speak openly on the issue. To a certain level, he even created controversies at any given opportunity on various international platforms to draw world attention to the issue, even condemning the major world powers including the United Nations. According to him, the Palestinians should be given their rights and Israel should withdraw from a territory that does not belong to it (Rajendran, 1993). Furthermore, those who opposed had no valid reason because the land belonged to the Palestinians (Rajendran, 1993). Perhaps his arguments were based on an open secret as he was the only one with the audacity to voice them aloud. In many international conferences, Mahathir insisted that something needed to be done because if it was not properly addressed, the problem would never be over for the Palestinians. Through Mahathir, the international community was made to realise that this issue revolved around the basic principles of human rights.

Mahathir also argued that when the Palestinians resorted to the use of force, it was not an act of terrorism but rather an act of self-defence. According to him, it was different for the Israelis because the Israelis possessed all the weaponry compared to the Palestinians. If the Palestinians detonated themselves and killed Israeli civilians, it was because they had no helicopter, gunship and rockets to respond to the Israeli ground and aerial attacks. Despite this unfair advantage, the media still described the Israeli attacks as responses to the Palestinian attacks on them

(Rajendran, 1993). Mahathir even urged the world to conduct a proper assessment on the issue of Palestine. In his argument, he included other conflicts faced in the world especially ones that involved the Muslims and global terrorism. In one of his letters to the then President of the United States of America, George W. Bush, he wrote:

While you should hunt down the terrorist and bring them to justice, an all-out war is unlikely to do this. The only effective counter to possible future terrorist attacks and to depleting the ranks of the terrorists is to eliminate the causes of their terrible anger and bitterness. The world must solve the problems of Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Libya and others. One can argue that the Muslims brought all these upon themselves but that is not going to get us anywhere. We have to sit down and tackle the problems, whether they are real or they are merely wrong perceptions by the Muslims. It is just as likely that the perceptions of others are equally wrong.... I should imagine that if there is a serious attempt to solve the Muslim problems, the danger of terrorist attacks would be diminished. (Abdullah, 2008)

It is apparent that Mahathir wanted the world, especially the major powers, to look into the problem of terrorism specifically as it affected Palestine and generally as

it affected the world from a different perspective. What he was suggesting was that the oppression of Muslims all over the world had made them angry and vengeful and that because they had no recourse to a solution, they opted for actions that were deemed violent. In many international conferences, Mahathir continuously mentioned that to solve the terrorist problems, issues such as inequality and Muslim oppression must first be addressed.

Through his vocal criticism, Mahathir presented to the world an alternative perspective of Islam. What Mahathir did with the issue of Palestine was not just to support the Palestinians' struggle to win their rights but also to serve as an opportunity for the Muslim world, as led by the initiative from Malaysia, to correct the perception and perspective of the world towards Islam. In one of his speeches (Mahathir, 2003), he criticised the world for associating terrorism with Muslims and Islam. He said:

But acts of terrorism or even simple self-defence by Muslim in Palestine are invariably described as Muslim terrorism. The terrorists, if they are terrorists and in many instances they are not, are labelled Muslim terrorist. Terrorism by others, by ethnic Europeans, by intolerant Christians and Jews and by Buddhists, is never linked to their religions. There are no Christian terrorists, or Jewish terrorists, or Buddhist terrorists, or Orthodox Christian terrorists, which the Serbs no doubt are. (p. 13)

Clearly, Mahathir was not impressed by people who referred to terrorism as acts by Muslims and Islam. This misconception and misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam was the very issue that Mahathir wanted to correct all over the world.

His outbursts came to be seen as common to him and expected of him. As a result, some developed countries did not favour Malaysia. In fact, the Western media also targetted him through their negative portrayals and reports. However, things did change when they began to understand Malaysia's policies. For example, they did not vote against Malaysia when Malaysia voluntarily offered its involvement in certain critical situations (Chamil, 1989). When Malaysia was selected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, no major powers vetoed this decision (Chamil, 1989). Again, this stands for proof that by being vocal, Mahathir earned for Malaysia a form of respect from the world. In addition, the reaction shown by the developing countries grew more encouraging. They supported Mahathir, which in turn made Malaysia and Mahathir more famous on the international stage. Even the Prince of Wales, Prince Charles, wrote a letter to him after Mahathir's lecture at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (Abdullah, 2008). The letter expressed his support of Mahathir and his criticism of the Islamophobic representations in the media. In the letter, the Prince of Wales wrote:

Believe it or not, I think I do understand some of the frustrations

that Muslims experience as a result of apparent Western misunderstanding and misrepresentation. I have, for a long time, despaired of the ignorant and thoroughly evil "role" of the tabloid media in deliberately misrepresenting Islam and in reducing everything to the level of absurd.... In an attempt to show how much we share in common and how much we can learn from each other, I have discovered how easy it is to be misunderstood and misrepresented. I have even received several letters accusing me of becoming a Muslim! However despite this, I am determined to continue the battle to spread the message that, as you say, proper fundamentalism is in the best interest of the future of our world – especially as we now face a world, in my part of it at any rate, which is increasingly without meaning, without roots, without a spiritual dimension and which worships the God of Technology. (pp. 36-37)

The attention given by Prince Charles proved that Mahathir's initiative to introduce the true image of Islam had successfully gained their attention through his speeches, lectures and blatant remarks on this issue.

Furthermore, Malaysia was recognised on the international front when the country was selected as the Chairman of the Organisation of Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement (Sanusi, 2008).

This was an honour for the small-sized country i.e. to be able to lead countries that are bigger than Malaysia in size. This recognition was also seen as a form of trust by other countries towards Malaysia, and would not have been possible without an inspired leadership and loyal followers and supporters. Therefore, it is not an overrated statement to say that Malaysia deserved to lead other countries because of its virtues as displayed on the international level when addressing the Palestine issue and issues concerning the Muslim world.

It is also interesting to point out that the support for Palestine put Malaysia in centre-stage to address issues concerning Muslim countries that were affecting Muslim unity and brotherhood. According to Mahathir, the Islamic world is suffering a crisis of confidence and despite possessing an abundance of resources, many Muslim countries are still poor and economically weak (Hng, 2008). Many Muslims live in poverty despite the many breakthroughs in sciences and technology. Therefore, what Mahathir wanted to bring about was an exemplary quality through Malaysia and provide some degree of leadership for a Muslim revival. In Mahathir's many speeches on Palestine, while he would fiercely and blatantly criticise Israel and its allies and supporters, he would also remind the Muslim countries of unity and cooperation that were needed to overcome the crises and improve the conditions of the Muslims.

Another impact on Malaysia as a result of supporting this cause was the image

projected that Malaysia is an Islamic country. Although this does not mean that the previous administrations did not portray the nation as Islamic, the effort was much more apparent during Mahathir's administration. Perhaps, this image was reflected when he treated this support as an intimate cause and that he was willing to do anything in his power as an individual as well as the Premier to support this cause. In addition, there was Mahathir's ability to govern Malaysia, a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious country, peacefully and harmoniously.

Perhaps one of the biggest impacts that Mahathir had by supporting the Palestinian struggle was on local politics. Murugesu Pathmanathan (1984) highlighted the strong link between internal political factors and external policy measures. While Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, saw this issue as an opportunity for the ruling party to win the support of the Muslims in Malaysia, it was Mahathir who took the government's involvement to a different level. During his tenure as Prime Minister, Mahathir intensified support for this issue by being active in various international organisations like the OIC. Mahathir, being a different kind of leader from his predecessors, saw foreign policy as an extension of domestic policy.

Thus, his support for the Palestinian struggle served as a formula for winning the hearts of Muslims in Malaysia. The people's support had always been divided and influenced by another Malay dominant political party, the Pan Malaysian-Islamic

Party (PAS), who were pro-Islam in their mission and vision. The intense competition between these two political parties was aroused during the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia. The underlying issue between these two rival political parties was the role of Islam in Malaysian society (Liow, 2003). Mahathir, during his administration, saw it as an advantage over PAS to pursue this course of action, which was exactly what he did.

By assessing the foreign policy of Mahathir's administration with regard to the issue in Palestine as well as a way to side-line the challenge posed by PAS, it was very important and effective in legitimizing as well as giving his administration the image of championing the cause of the *Ummah*. Earlier Premiers did have their hand in this issue but it was Mahathir who raised the level of Malaysia's commitment to the issue. Mahathir, at many international conferences lashed out at Israel for its actions towards Palestine. He also accorded full diplomatic status to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and hosted the UN-sponsored Conference on Palestine in Kuala Lumpur in May and July, 1983. He also invited Yasser Arafat to Malaysia, an offer that Yasser Arafat accepted. However, what he did in August 1984 was far more astounding. He cancelled a performance by the visiting New York Philharmonic Orchestra when the latter refused to remove the composition, "The Hebrew Rhapsody for Cello and Orchestra" from its programme (Liow, 2003).

In many of his presidential speeches at the UMNO General Assembly, the Islamic image of UMNO was vocalised and consistently highlighted. This proved to be beneficial for UMNO because it legitimised the party's religious identity (Nair, 1997). Hence, support from people continued for the ruling party since the time of the country's independence.

Through his efforts, on the international and domestic scale, Malaysia was always referred to as a model of a Muslim country by other fellow Muslim countries. This consequently strengthened Malaysia's relations with other Muslim countries. Visits from Muslim delegations were received so that they could observe the ideal model of a Muslim country. When Malaysia hosted several OIC meetings and summits, the foreign delegations were able to observe Malaysia's image as a Muslim country. Hence, cooperation of Malaysia with and among the Muslim states strengthened and as a result, a strong Islamic brotherhood was formed. Mahathir's intermittent criticism of Muslim countries for failing to provide for their own people was taken as constructive criticism instead of as destructive remarks.

Malaysia's foreign policy on Palestine as well as Malaysia's support for the Palestinian struggle later served as precedents for dealing with other Muslim countries that faced similar conflicts. The first example of such similar policies, actions and support shown was for Afghanistan. Prior to the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, Malaysia practised the

policy of non-interference (Nair, 1997). However, this changed when Russia began their invasion of Afghanistan. This policy change was seen in the Parliamentary debates over amendments to the Diplomatic Exclusivity Act 1966 when Members of Parliament drew the attention of the House to the similarity between the Afghanistan issue and the Palestine issue. The Members of the Parliament called for equal support for the plight of the Afghans (Nair, 1997). In reacting to this, the government established similar initiatives such as donations and programmes. By 1982, Malaysia had donated RM400,000 to a special fund for Afghan refugees and even designated 21 March as 'Afghanistan Day'. Furthermore, the voice of Malaysia was heard in defending the rights of the Afghans at international forums, seminars and conferences (Nair, 1997).

In 1991, the Muslims experienced conflict in former Yugoslavia between the ethnic Bosnians and the Serbs. The intensity of the conflict was parallel to the issue of Palestine and Afghanistan. The number of Muslims massacred reached hundreds of thousands, including the elderly and children. The Serbs aimed at wiping out the entire ethnic community from the world and they were very close to achieving this had the major powers not taken stern action. This conflict also saw the Malaysian government following the precedent it had taken on Palestine and Afghanistan in showing strong support for Bosnian Muslims.

The Malaysian government, NGOs and the public began to initiate donations

and funds to help the Bosnian Muslims. The level of commitment shown by the government at the time was heightened by the decision to dispatch Malaysian soldiers as part of the UN's peacekeeping forces, namely, the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) (Nair, 1997). Sending Malaysian soldiers into the conflict zone was unprecedented. Compared to the Palestine and Afghanistan issues, with the Bosnian Muslims, the Malaysian government went the extra mile by remaining in the conflict zone even after the UNPROFOR peacekeepers withdrew from some zones. During this period, the government bore the expenses of some 10,500 Malaysian troops (Abdullah, 2008).

### **Social Impact**

While Malaysia's support for the struggle of the Palestinians had various political impacts, it also brought significant impact on the social perspective. This was perhaps something inevitable and expected, especially when the Malaysian government attempted to bring some Palestinians to Malaysia.

In one of the humanitarian aid exercises given to the people of Palestine, one of the initiatives was different from the usual; it came in the form of scholarships for learning at Malaysian universities and places in various occupational training centres. This was an attempt at bringing vast improvement to the lives of the Palestinians (Nair, 1997). Through this initiative, many Palestinians were brought to Malaysia for education opportunities, which consequently boosted

the Palestinians' employment opportunities in and out of Malaysia. A number of Palestinians even became academics in some Malaysian universities. From this perspective, this effort is seen as significant because education not only equipped the Palestinians to compete in the job market, it also gave them hope of attaining the rights that they had lost in their homeland. This initiative was also boosted by the setting up of the Palestinian People's Fund by the Foreign Ministry in 1988 for educational resources to support the educational process of Palestinian children (Nair, 1997).

Another impact, which was equally important to the education of the Palestinians, was the awareness created by the government for Malaysians to understand the Palestinians' suffering and misery. The launch of the nationwide Palestinian Week was an important step in creating this awareness (Nair, 1997). This was a worthwhile effort, especially for educating the people that the conflict in Palestine went beyond the issue of religion. Although many of the Muslims in Malaysia supported the Palestinians because they empathised with their Muslim brothers and sisters, it was important that they knew that the conflict was also felt by the Palestinian Christians, and that the conflict was a humanitarian issue. Today, Malaysians from different ethnicities and religions have rallied against the cruelty of Israel towards the Palestinians. In events organised in conjunction with the Palestinians, Malaysians of Chinese, Indian and Malay ethnicities participate equally.

Therefore, the impact of this process of awareness as initiated by the government has been generally successful. The role played by NGOs in contributing to the change in behaviour of the people towards this issue should also be highlighted. Together with the government, NGOs have organised many awareness programmes for Malaysians.

Another significant impact of the continuous support for this issue was the way Malaysia was perceived by the Palestinians. Based on a narrative by Dolly Fong, a Malaysian volunteer who attended to Palestinian children who were injured in the conflict in Lebanon, the children perceived Malaysia as their good friend and they felt that Malaysia was arm and arm with them in the conflict. Fong said she often heard people who stayed in the refugee camp say, "Malaysia is beautiful, Malaysia is always with us" (Alijah, 2003). Malaysia also participated in a project that involved sponsoring more than 1,000 Palestinian children through a shelter called the Bait Atfal As-Samoud (BAS) (Alijah, 2003). One of the children who received aid from this centre was Hanan Al-Kott. She lost her mother and quit school to look after her siblings. It was BAS that offered help (Alijah, 2003). This was just one of the stories reflecting that Malaysia was perceived as a 'good friend' of the Palestinians.

The social impact of Malaysia's support for the Palestinians was also seen in a statement by the late Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO, who highlighted the impact of Malaysia's foreign policy on Palestine.

During his visit to Malaysia, Yasser lauded the long history of excellent relations and friendship between Malaysians and Palestinians. He also noted that "compared with some Arab countries, Malaysia is even closer to us" (Nair, 1997). This is proof that Malaysia had rendered adequate support in the Palestinian cause and struggle to reclaim their rights over their invaded homeland.

## DISCUSSION

Perhaps the reason why Malaysia was ever so willing to help the Palestinians was for the benefits reaped by the ruling party in local politics. It is a fact that the foreign policy of Malaysia is the extension of its domestic policy. This was not something new during the administration of Mahathir as it was pioneered by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia. However, only after Mahathir took office as Prime Minister did this particular conflict contribute greatly to this policy. When Mahathir took office in 1981, the people were still in the wake of an Islamic revivalism across the country. The support shown by the government for the cause of another Muslim country could not have come at a better time. Consequently, Malaysia was portrayed as fighting for the *ummah* (Muslim community), thereby solidifying UMNO's status as a political party that also fought for Islam. This consequently raised Mahathir Mohamad as one of the great Muslim leaders.

Malaysia's efforts have contributed towards a positive image of Malaysia. Indeed, the favour and support shown by Mahathir for the Palestinian struggle

have made Malaysia popular, while the criticism hurled by Malaysia, especially by Mahathir Mohammad, from various international platforms has also increased the popularity of Malaysia in the eyes of the world. Despite being a small developing country, Malaysia came to be regarded as a courageous country that wanted to influence the way things worked on the international front. This realisation also gave hope to other developing countries when they recognised Malaysia and Mahathir as their spokesperson and the man who championed their agenda.

As such, it was during Mahathir's administration that much recognition was given to Malaysia. This was shown in Malaysia's selection as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and the appointment of Tan Sri Razali Ismail as the President of United Nation General Assembly (UNGA). Malaysia was also selected by the UN and OIC to be a member of a committee in their discussion on the Iran and Iraq conflicts. Malaysia was selected as the Chairman of OIC as well as Chairman of NAM, which are two of the most important international organisations. Malaysia's selection for participation on the world stage shows that Malaysia was respected by other countries. Malaysia had gained the trust and confidence of the world because of its commitment to championing large causes despite its small size.

## CONCLUSION

The image of Malaysia as one of the models of a Muslim country was projected through

its support for the Palestinians. Since one of the reasons for helping the Palestinians was religion, Malaysia has been well received by other Muslim countries. When Malaysia went on to show more commitment to this cause than other Muslim countries, its popularity rose further and the country became a model for other Muslim countries.

However, the support and help rendered to the Palestinians by Malaysia, which brought much impact on Malaysia, has not helped to end this conflict. The suffering and misery of the Palestinians might have been reduced through the support and aid given by Malaysia and other countries. The conflict, however, does not show any signs of coming to an end. What Malaysia succeeded in doing is making the world realise that this conflict was concerned with humanitarian issues and that it was an issue that went beyond religion.

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