

The Contribution of NGOs in Strengthening Malaysia-Palestine Relation

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Abstract

The Malaysian Government actively endorses and reinforces the endeavors of NGOs in aiding Palestine, viewing it as a momentous international humanitarian matter. Furthermore, the diplomatic connections maintained by NGOs with international organizations contribute to the effectiveness of their role in shaping Malaysia's foreign policy. Thus, our study sought to examine the contributions of NGOs in strengthening the interaction and bilateral relations between Malaysia and Palestine. We employed a qualitative approach, conducting interviews with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Aman Palestin, and Viva Palestina Malaysia. The findings indicate that the involvement of NGOs in addressing the Palestinian issue has played a significant role in reinforcing the communication channels between Malaysia and Palestine. These channels have positively influenced the bilateral relations between the two political entities through interaction, negotiation, and soft diplomacy. The collaborative efforts and cooperation between NGOs and the Malaysian Government have been crucial in fostering harmonious ties between Malaysia and Palestine and influencing foreign policy. However, the study criticizes the Malaysian Government for having limited perspectives on the role of NGOs in assisting the Palestinians. The Malaysian Government could broaden its perspective on the role of NGOs in supporting Palestine. Presently, the government's discourse primarily centers on how NGOs raise awareness about the Palestinian issue among Malaysians and serve as conduits for delivering humanitarian aid to Palestine. It would be advantageous to broaden this perspective, particularly in acknowledging how even smaller NGOs can amplify the voice of the Malaysian people in providing continuous humanitarian assistance to Palestine.

Keywords: bilateral relations, Malaysian Government, NGOs, Palestine.

Abstrak

Kerajaan Malaysia secara aktif menyokong dan memperkukuh usaha NGO dalam membantu Palestin, memandangnya sebagai perkara kemanusiaan antarabangsa yang penting. Tambahan pula, hubungan diplomatik yang dikekalkan oleh NGO dengan organisasi antarabangsa menyumbang kepada keberkesanan peranan mereka dalam membentuk dasar luar Malaysia. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji sumbangan NGO dalam memperkukuh interaksi dan hubungan dua hala antara Malaysia dan Palestin. Penyelidik menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, menjalankan temu bual dengan Kementerian Luar Negeri, Aman Palestin, dan Viva Palestina Malaysia. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa penglibatan NGO dalam menangani isu Palestin telah memainkan peranan penting dalam memperkukuh saluran komunikasi antara Malaysia dan Palestin. Melalui interaksi, rundingan, dan diplomasi lembut, saluran ini telah mempengaruhi secara positif hubungan dua hala antara kedua-dua negara. Usaha kerjasama antara NGO dan Kerajaan Malaysia adalah penting dalam memupuk hubungan harmoni antara Malaysia-Palestin, serta mempengaruhi dasar luar negara. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian ini mengkritik Kerajaan Malaysia kerana mempunyai perspektif yang terhad mengenai peranan NGO dalam membantu rakyat Palestin. Kerajaan Malaysia boleh meluaskan perspektifnya tentang peranan NGO dalam menyokong Palestin. Pada masa ini, wacana kerajaan tertumpu terutamanya pada bagaimana NGO meningkatkan kesedaran tentang isu Palestin dalam kalangan rakyat Malaysia dan berfungsi sebagai saluran untuk menyampaikan bantuan kemanusiaan kepada Palestin. Pada hemah kami, adalah berfaedah untuk meluaskan perspektif ini, terutamanya dalam mengiktiraf bagaimana NGO yang lebih kecil dapat menguatkan suara rakyat Malaysia dalam memberikan bantuan kemanusiaan berterusan kepada Palestin.

Kata kunci: hubungan bilateral, Kerajaan Malaysia, NGO, Palestin.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globalization necessitates countries to collaborate in safeguarding shared interests while simultaneously protecting specific interests, such as national sovereignty (Jones, 2022). This dynamic underscores the significance of cultivating robust international relationships, ensuring that in instances of crises, such as natural calamities or conflicts emerging within a specific nation, other countries come forward to extend humanitarian assistance. In the case of Malaysia, the country is recognized for its stability and robustness in terms of political, economic, and socio-cultural development. As a member of the United Nations, Malaysia is fully committed to multilateralism in advancing global peace, security, and prosperity. Malaysia's record in peacekeeping operations under the United Nations serves as evidence of its dedication to fulfilling the international community's mandate to promote global peace and security (Крупеня, 2023; Salleh & Idris, 2021). Foreign policy mechanisms play a significant role in maintaining Malaysia's stability. Ordinarily, a country's foreign policy mirrors the accomplishments and triumphs of the governing administration, which are shaped by the leader's stance and inclination toward foreign affairs during their tenure (Omar, Abdullah & Mukhtaruddin 2005). Hence, a country's foreign policy is contingent on the leadership style of the general administration. For instance, if a leader promotes peace, the country's foreign policy will likely reflect unity and an aversion to war.

Malaysia's unwavering commitment to denouncing Israel's conquest and oppression of the Palestinian people remains steadfast (Saleh, 2012). Even amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic and during the holy month of Ramadan in June 2021, when the world faced numerous challenges, the Malaysian people and their leaders never hesitated to condemn Israel's inhumane actions. The folks launched various initiatives to assist and support the Palestinians, including launching cyber-attacks on Israeli social media platforms, government donations totalling hundreds of thousands of ringgits, and organizing online discussions to raise awareness among the Malaysian population about the Palestinian issue. In parallel, social movements, especially Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), local celebrities, and humanitarian figures, have united under the banner of My Aqsa Defenders to collaborate and provide immediate aid to Palestine. The agility of Malaysian NGOs in facilitating the involvement of the Malaysian public in continuing to contribute to Palestine has once again demonstrated Malaysia's steadfast support for Palestine. Malaysian NGOs strive to engage all stakeholders, irrespective of individual backgrounds, to collectively support the Palestinian struggle, particularly in enhancing awareness of Palestinian land liberation (Nazri, 2022). However, we want to highlight that our research will not delve into the history, forms of colonization, and current situation in Palestine, as many articles have discussed before.

Harun (2009) states that NGOs have a vital function in championing the Palestinian cause, aligning with Malaysia's foreign policy goals concerning Palestine- these objectives are rooted in principles of self-determination, justice, and humanitarian values. The Malaysian Government actively endorses and reinforces the endeavours of NGOs in aiding Palestine, viewing it as a momentous international humanitarian matter. Furthermore, the diplomatic connections maintained by NGOs with international organizations contribute to the effectiveness of their role in shaping Malaysia's foreign policy. Consequently, NGOs' contributions are viewed as a representation of Malaysia's stance in advocating for the liberation of Palestinian territories. Therefore, based on the significance of NGOs, we are eager to illuminate how NGOs contribute to strengthening bilateral relations between Malaysia and Palestine. We assert the importance of NGOs in international advocacy and diplomacy, offering a more comprehensive view of how national stances are promoted on the global stage. The focus is on how NGOs contribute to

strengthening bilateral relations between Malaysia and Palestine and provides insights into the mechanisms through which non-state actors can enhance diplomatic ties. This is significant for policymakers, diplomats, and international relations scholars interested in the practical aspects of diplomacy.

2.0 NGO, IMPACT AND RESILIENCE

NGOs are non-profit organizations comprised of volunteer groups committed to tackling public welfare concerns locally, nationally, or internationally. Driven by a shared sense of social responsibility, the entities consist of individuals who unite around common interests- function as intermediaries, drawing governments' attention to societal issues, taking on roles that involve monitoring policy execution, and encouraging active engagement from various community stakeholders. NGOs cover a broad spectrum of thematic areas, including human rights, environmental protection, healthcare, and education. The involvement in global politics manifests in diverse ways, encompassing actions such as raising public awareness on relevant issues, engaging in lobbying efforts to influence both domestic and international policies, organizing boycott campaigns to instigate changes in unfavourable corporate practices, participating in international diplomatic negotiations, and contribute to the monitoring and implementation of international agreements (Betsill & Corell, 2001; Salleh, Samsudin & Mansor, 2019; Nazir & Sulaiman, 2020; Ishkanian & Shutes, 2021). Agbor (2009) acknowledges numerous NGOs have gained prominence due to advocacy endeavours, leading to successful outcomes.

Moreover, NGOs actively contribute to discussions surrounding new legislation addressing transnational issues, playing an integral role in the formal decision-making processes of governments (Kim, 2011; Beagles, 2023). As Marcinkutė (2011) criticized- NGOs are assuming additional functions that the state may lack the capacity or the inclination to address- demonstrates the significance of human rights NGOs as crucial contributors to social service provision and underscores their ability to shape societal dynamics. A compelling instance is provided by the human rights organization Amnesty International, which traces back to 1961 when it initiated letter-writing campaigns to secure the release of individuals detained for expressing their opinions through nonviolent means. Over the subsequent decades, with particular emphasis on the last two, Amnesty International has significantly expanded its capabilities for investigating, documenting, and analyzing global trends in human rights violations. This evolution has empowered the organization to assume the role of a reputable information source in United Nations (UN) sessions and national legislative arenas. It is essential to underscore that Amnesty International represents just one facet of a vast network of international and national NGOs actively engaged in human rights advocacy. Entities such as the International Commission of Jurists, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Human Rights Watch share the commitment to influencing governments by applying universal human rights principles to specific contexts. Simultaneously, an emerging environmental NGO network holds governments accountable for complying with international environmental standards. On another front, NGOs like OXFAM embark on initiatives related to economic development and oversee financial and humanitarian assistance programs funded by contributions from private individuals. A common thread among all these NGOs' activities is their propensity to engage governments on multiple fronts and occasionally supplement government-provided services, consistently operating in a complementary or opposing capacity alongside governmental actors (Clark, 1995).

NGOs also play a vital role in international relations- actively identifying and scrutinizing human rights violations- the activities encompass pressuring governments and intergovernmental

organizations (IGOs) to uphold their global commitments to promote and protect human rights. Furthermore, NGOs have a pivotal responsibility to ensure the recognition of human rights on the international stage. Demonstrating the effectiveness, NGOs have effectively wielded political influence over nations to uphold human rights and mobilize individuals in the enforcement of various human rights categories, including economic, social, and cultural rights (Pease, 2008). Given the substantial significance attributed to the roles and contributions of NGOs on the international stage, it becomes apparent that these organizations are responsible for advocating for human rights in Palestine through means such as financial support, medical aid, food distribution, education, and the execution of socio-economic initiatives (Awaresh, 2020; al-Modallal, Bahar & Lee 2023). Therefore, this study seeks to provide a distinctive perspective on the Malaysia-Palestine relationship with a focus on the roles and contributions of NGOs as its central aspect.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

We employed a qualitative approach to identify and investigate the research topic by analysing diverse sources of information. The findings presented in this study are derived from research conducted between 2014 and 2016 because, during this period, humanitarian NGOs have proliferated significantly. For secondary data- we encompassed an extensive literature review aimed at collecting vital information from a diverse array of written or printed sources, including but not limited to books, journals, scholarly papers, reports, and online materials (official websites of pertinent NGOs and government ministries were also employed). We chose who directly handles Malaysia-Palestine affairs to examine the topic, using NGOs as a sample: Aman Palestine and Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM), through interviews conducted with officials from the West Asia Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: Details of the informant

List of informants	Organization	Date	Method
Abdul Samad Othman	Middle East Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia	6 June 2015	Email
Awang Sufian Wang Piut	Aman Palestin	18 September 2015	Face to face
Shida Shahnan	VPM	6 May 2015	Face to face
Musa Mohd Nordin	VPM	8 October 2015	Email
Azra Banu	VPM	18 September 2015	Face to face

3.1 The Justification Selection of Aman Palestine and VPM

The selection of the NGOs was based on their active engagement in advocating for the Palestinian cause through various forms of assistance and collaboration with the government. The organizations have been actively involved in supporting the welfare and addressing the needs of the Palestinians, including initiatives related to education, healthcare, and economic development. We have limited time to study other NGOs participating in the Palestinian issue. However, we believe that the gap would allow future studies to develop research with different NGOs.

1. Aman Palestine

Aman Palestine commenced its activities in late 2004 under the initial name "Palestinian Security Initiative." Its establishment was driven by the goal of providing assistance and managing

the distribution of donations, all while safeguarding the fundamental welfare rights of the Palestinian population. On January 3, 2006, Aman Palestine achieved official registration as a non-profit organization under the jurisdiction of the Companies Commission of Malaysia (SSM), adopting the name Aman Palestin Berhad.

2. Viva Palestina Malaysia

The aftermath of Israel's attack on Gaza on December 27, 2008, resulted in the establishment of a coalition comprising 50 NGOs representing diverse ethnic backgrounds. The alliance was named COMPLETE, which stands for the "Coalition of Malaysian NGOs against Israeli War Crimes and Genocide in Palestine," and it was formed on January 5, 2009. In October 2009, COMPLETE met with George Galloway, a former British Member of Parliament and the founder of Viva Palestina. During this meeting, it was decided that COMPLETE would undergo a name change, becoming known as Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM) in October 2009. VPM's mission is to serve as a platform for global civil society initiatives to unite and advocate for peace, justice, and self-determination for the Palestinian people.

3.2 In-Depth Interview

The interviews conducted for this study were designed as in-depth interviews to gather unique insights from informants willing to share their experiences regarding direct involvement in humanitarian issues and bilateral relations related to Palestine. In-depth interviews aimed to gain a deep understanding of the informants' perspectives and experiences rather than to predict or control their responses. The findings from these interviews directly contribute to the overall strengthening of the phenomenon being studied.

While we had a predefined list of specific questions or topics to guide the interviews, often referred to as an interview guide, the informants could respond in their way. In-person interviews generally span from 30 minutes to one and a half hours. In addition to the questions outlined in the interview guide, the interviewer also asked follow-up questions and explored issues the interviewees raised. Throughout the interviews, particular emphasis was placed on how the interviewees framed the problems and what they considered important in understanding the events, patterns, and behaviours related to the topic.

3.3 Data Analysis Methods and Reporting Techniques

The data analysis methodology employed in this research follows a thematic approach, wherein we systematically identify interview data that directly relates to the research questions and objectives, ultimately identifying significant themes. These themes, derived from the interview data, are further reinforced through discussions supported by the analysis of secondary data, a technique commonly referred to as triangulation. This process enhances the credibility and reliability of the study's findings. Regarding the reporting method used for presenting the interviews, the actual names of the interviewees are incorporated in the documentation following their explicit consent.

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Malaysia's Stance on Palestine

Malaysia has actively championed human rights issues, with a specific emphasis on supporting Palestine. The Palestinian issue holds profound significance for Malaysian policymakers, as it is perceived as a struggle for national liberation (Saleh, 2021). Malaysia's commitment to the freedom of Palestine has remained unwavering and guided by a well-defined

foreign policy framework. In various international forums, the Malaysian Government, in conjunction with other Muslim countries, has consistently expressed concerns and shown sensitivity to this matter.

A pivotal moment in Malaysia's involvement with the Palestinian cause occurred when the country hosted the International Islamic Conference in 1969, attended by both Islamic and non-Islamic countries- The conference marked the inception of cooperation among Islamic countries. It led to the establishment of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) during the summit of Islamic heads of Government in Rabat, Morocco. The Israeli invasion of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in August 1969 became a significant focal point of discussion, prompting representatives to call for an extraordinary summit among Islamic countries to address the issue. Malaysia's participation in these events, with Tunku Abdul Rahman representing the nation, underscored its commitment to the Palestinian cause.

As highlighted by Othman (2015), Malaysia's policy towards Palestine has remained steadfast for over four decades, providing comprehensive support to Palestine. Malaysia recognizes the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the legitimate governing body of Palestine, a stance widely accepted by the international community. Interactions with Hamas, another Palestinian political entity, are primarily informal and facilitated through NGOs, with minimal involvement from the Malaysian Government. But, now leaders of Malaysia and Hamas are communicating regularly- for instance, the recent meeting between Anwar Ibrahim and Gaza leader, Ismail Haniyeh. Meetings with Hamas officials and government representatives are discreet to prevent sensitive issues with the PLO. Malaysia has adopted a clear stance regarding trade and diplomatic relations- there are no official diplomatic ties or trade engagements with Israel. Import and export permits related to Israel are subject to the jurisdiction of the Customs Department, governed by specific regulations that prohibit such activities. Any trade involving Israel is conducted through multinational corporations via international supply and distribution chains managed by these companies (Othman, 2015).

We argue that Malaysia's support for Palestine endures and transcends leadership changes. Past Malaysian leaders, such as Mahathir Mohamad and Najib Razak, have actively backed the Palestinian cause- this support was evident in large-scale demonstrations held in Kuala Lumpur in response to the United States' decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017. Prominent Malaysian politicians, including Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamad, played leading roles in these demonstrations.

In fostering relations between Hamas and Fatah, the two principal political factions in Palestine, Malaysia has adopted a balanced approach aimed at averting conflicts with any involved parties- this middle-ground approach seeks to promote unity and prevent exacerbation of the fraternal conflict between these factions, as identified in the study by Araj and Brym (2010). Furthermore, Malaysia's transparency in its foreign policy towards Palestine is evident in its absence of official communication and trade relations with Israel at the governmental level. While multinational companies in Malaysia may engage in business transactions with Israel, the Malaysian government itself maintains its non-engagement stance (Othman, 2015).

4.2 The Era of Mahathir Mohamad

Mahathir Mohamad consistently brought attention to the plight of Palestine at the UN, underscoring the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian populace in the Middle East. Mahathir Mohamad passionately contends that the Palestinian people must be granted their rightful rights, emphasizing the imperative for Israel to vacate territories that do not legitimately belong to them.

According to his perspective, those who oppose this stance lack valid reasons, as the land inherently belongs to the Palestinians (Rajendran, 1993).

Mahathir Mohamad's steadfast advocacy for the Palestinian cause can be attributed to a constellation of factors shaping his viewpoint. His experiences during the colonial era have instilled in him a profound sense of duty to represent nations and countries that have grappled with colonization and oppression, motivating them to champion the cause of nations facing analogous predicaments. Mahathir Mohamad vehemently chastises Western powers for their indifference and inaction concerning Israel, urging them to adhere to resolution 242, which call for Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly in 1982, Mahathir Mohamad boldly characterized Israel as a country oppressing Palestine with the backing of the United States (Wariya, 1989). He drew a poignant parallel between Israel's treatment of Palestinians and the atrocities perpetrated by Nazi Hitler against the Jewish people during World War II. In 1986, Mahathir Mohamad castigated not only significant powers but also the entire UN for their failure to address the suffering endured by the Palestinian population- decried Israel's acts of violence as abhorrent and called for an immediate cessation, stressing that justice in Palestinian lands is feasible with security and safety.

Mahathir Mohamad contends that the fundamental principle of human rights is at stake, asserting that when Palestinians resort to the use of force, it should be regarded as an act of self-defense rather than terrorism. He highlights the profound asymmetry in weaponry, with Israel possessing vastly superior firepower compared to the Palestinians. Therefore, if Palestinians resort to tactics like suicide bombings and harm Israeli civilians, it is primarily a response to their lack of helicopters, warships, and rockets to counter Israel's ground and air assaults. Despite this glaring power imbalance, the media often portrays Israel's actions as retaliatory measures against Palestinian aggression (Rajendran, 1993). The analysis underscores that in every international conference, Mahathir Mohamad underscores the urgent need for action, cautioning that without adequate resolution, the problem will persist, negatively impacting the Palestinian population and the broader Middle East region.

During the closing phase of Mahathir Mohamad's tenure from 2003 to 2004, he called for a global reassessment of the Palestinian issue- conveyed to George W. Bush that addressing the root causes of discontent among terrorist groups could contribute to resolving the challenge of international terrorism- emphasized the United States and other major powers should address conflicts in Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Libya, and other regions (Ahmad, 2015)- This underscores Mahathir Mohamad's belief that the issue of international terrorism is closely intertwined with the Palestinian cause, as oppression of Muslims worldwide fuels anger and resentment among extremist groups, compelling them to resort to acts of violence. Resolving disparities and the oppression of Muslims must take precedence when tackling international terrorism from various angles.

Concurrently, Mahathir Mohamad openly criticized the global community for unfairly associating terrorism exclusively with the Muslim community and Islam. He asserted:

"Acts of terrorism or even simple self-defense by Muslims in Palestine are always portrayed as Muslim terrorism. Terrorists, if they are terrorists and in many cases, they are not, are labelled as Muslim terrorists. Violence by others, by European ethnicities, by intolerant Christians and Jews, and by Buddhists is never associated with their religion. There are no Christian terrorists, or Jewish terrorists, or Buddhist terrorists, or Orthodox Christian terrorists, certainly not Serbs" (Mohamad, 2003).

n this statement, Mahathir Mohamad made it clear that he vehemently opposes the unfounded association of Islam with international terrorism, the aim was to rectify the misunderstanding and misinterpretation that inaccurately links terrorism to both the Muslim community and Islam. Yasser Arafat, who led the PLO, acknowledged Mahathir Mohamad's endeavors in advocating for the Palestinian cause and expressed, "In comparison to some Arab nations, Malaysia stands even closer to us" (Nair 2015).

4.3 The Era of Najib Razak

Malaysia's stance on Israel ties reflects its small-state pragmatism, leveraging principled contradictions to navigate international relations, emphasizing peace agreement prerequisites for diplomatic engagement (Cox 2023). One Malaysian leader who vehemently opposed Israel's actions against Palestine is Najib Razak. During a courtesy visit from Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri in 2009, Najib Razak underscored the Palestinian issue, emphasizing the imperative for influential world powers to intervene and put an end to Israel's harsh attacks. Despite Malaysia's limited capacity, Najib Razak affirmed the nation's unwavering support for the Palestinian people, and also highlighted the Malaysian public's call for boycotting Israeli products in light of the absence of diplomatic relations. In 2011, Malaysia continued its steadfast backing of the Palestinian people's rights by rejecting Israel's blockade in the Gaza Strip and expressing solidarity with the Palestinian National Authority's quest for full membership in the UN. The Palestinian issue has gained significant prominence among the Malaysian public and officials, with numerous civil society organizations and charitable groups demonstrating keen interest, particularly after Malaysians participated in the Freedom Flotilla to challenge the Gaza blockade (Saleh, 2015).

During a courtesy visit to Kuala Lumpur in 2011, Najib Razak engaged with a delegation of Palestinian parliamentarians led by Ahmad Bahr, the Deputy Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, a member of HAMAS. Ahmad Bahr acknowledged Malaysia's political, moral, and material support for the Palestinian people. Despite political disparities, Najib Razak underscored the consensus among Malaysian political parties in supporting Jerusalem and Palestine, and continued to advocate for Palestinian issues during visits to Europe and the United States, championing the right of return and opposing the Judaization of Jerusalem (Anon, 2011). Najib Razak demonstrated Malaysia's unwavering support for Palestine when he embarked on a one-day humanitarian visit to Gaza, accompanied by Foreign Minister Anifah Aman and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Jamil Khir Baharom. The visit symbolized Malaysia's unwavering commitment to the Palestinian cause, with Najib Razak expressing hope for more leaders from the Muslim world to follow suit- emphasizing that the struggle for Palestine transcends the Palestinian people alone; it extends to the broader Muslim community. Notably, this visit marked the first instance of a foreign prime minister from a non-Arab country visiting Gaza (with the HAMAS leadership). During the visit, Najib Razak also inspected a school project funded by Malaysia through the Malaysian NGO Aqsa Syarif (Anon, 2013).

Based on the information provided, it is evident that Najib Razak pursued a range of initiatives to bolster support for the Palestinian people, encompassing political advocacy and humanitarian assistance. Through official visits and engagements with political parties in Palestine, he aimed to strengthen diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Palestine. However, as we emphasized it is paramount to underscore the importance of maintaining uninterrupted continuity in the relationship established with the Palestinian Government without considering any party, HAMAS or FATAH.

4.4 Malaysia-Palestine Diplomatic Relations

In 1981, Malaysia decided to confer full diplomatic recognition upon the PLO, the recognition was further elevated in 1989, establishing the representation of Palestine on par with any other resident diplomatic mission in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia's position on the Palestinian issue is widely recognized for its unwavering support of international endeavors aimed at restoring and upholding the rights of the Palestinian people. On November 15, 1988, Malaysia officially acknowledged the status of the Palestinian state, subsequently formalizing diplomatic relations. Furthermore, the PLO office in Kuala Lumpur, initially established in 1974, was later elevated to "Embassy" in 1989 (Othman, 2015).

On November 29, 2012, Malaysia joined 137 other UN member states in voting to support UN General Assembly Resolution 67/19, which upgraded the membership status of Palestine from a Non-Member Observer Entity to a Non-Member Observer State. The status is equivalent to that of a small city-state like the Vatican City or Holy See in Italy. As a non-member observer state, Palestine possesses the prerogative to participate in deliberations by expressing its views; however, it is not endowed with voting privileges concerning the resolutions under consideration. Malaysia consistently expresses concern and condemnation over Israel's continued military incursions and the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories. Malaysia believes that a just and peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires compromise and facilitated negotiations. Othman (2015) argues that Israel's insistence on direct talks without preconditions does not reflect its willingness to act pretty and compromise on the future of Palestine while failing to recognize that the continued activity of illegal Israeli settlements will only exacerbate the conflict.

Motivated by humanitarian values and a strong sense of social responsibility, Malaysia maintains a steadfast commitment to providing assistance and aid to Palestine- this support takes various types, including monetary donations and material assistance, intending to alleviate the hardships endured by the Palestinian population living under illegal Israeli occupation. The contributions are channelled to Palestine through established avenues such as the UN and the OIC, as well as through bilateral Government-to-Government (G2G) collaborations or Malaysian NGOs such as MERCY Malaysia, Perdana Global Peace Foundation, and the Club of Putera 1 Malaysia (The Chairman is Abdul Azeez Abdul Rahim, member of United Malay National Organisation (UMNO)). The assistance provided encompasses a range of initiatives, such as bolstering the functioning of the Palestinian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, facilitating capacity-building training programs for Palestinian officials, and offering scholarships to Palestinian students pursuing higher education in Malaysia. The endeavours have enabled the Malaysian government to cultivate humanitarian partnerships with various governmental bodies, international organizations, and NGOs in Malaysia. Furthermore, Malaysia consistently pledges financial support to crucial entities- the UN and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), as the principal provider of education services among UN agencies for Palestinian refugees, plays a pivotal role in delivering social services, education, and humanitarian aid to Palestinian refugees. Malaysia also contributes monetarily and non-monetary assistance to the Palestinian cause through initiatives such as the Islamic Solidarity Fund (ISF) and the OIC (Othman, 2015).

On June 2, 2014, the prominent Palestinian groups Fatah and Hamas formed a Unity Government for the State of Palestine, indicating their commitment to improving relations, this government included 17 ministers, 12 from the West Bank and five from the Gaza Strip. Ismail Haniyeh, the Prime Minister of Hamas, resigned and dissolved the Gaza cabinet shortly after the

swearing-in ceremony. According to Othman (2015), Fatah and Hamas appeared to respect the Unity Agreement signed on April 23, 2014, this agreement called for the formation of a unity government within five to six weeks under the auspices of the PLO. The contract outlined a crucial step was holding general elections within six months. Currently, Rami Hamdallah serves as the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and continues to lead the Palestinian Cabinet. Notably, Fatah retains key portfolios within the government, such as the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

4.5 NGOs and the Malaysian Government: Collaborating on the Palestinian Issue

NGOs need to apply for permission to access Gaza and other Palestinian territories through the Malaysian embassy to ensure the smooth and safe implementation of the mission. According to Piut (2015), Aman Palestin has established close communication channels with the Malaysian embassy, especially in Egypt, facilitated through the Rafah border crossing. Aman Palestine has also fostered relationships with other agencies and trade organizations, such as the Inland Revenue Board Of Malaysia and the Employees' Provident Fund, engaging in discussions and activities related to the Palestinian issue within the workplace.

Despite being an NGO, the connections highlight Aman Palestin's success in building positive relationships at both governmental and non-governmental levels. Through its existing interaction with the Malaysian Government, it is evident that this NGO has made concerted efforts to involve various groups and government agencies in raising awareness about the Palestinian issue in Malaysia. The humanitarian foundation Aman Palestin established has garnered attention from all quarters, irrespective of political affiliations.

Similarly, VPM has cultivated harmonious relations with Malaysian ministries and has participated in joint meetings with these entities. As per Shahnan (2015), the Malaysian Government has extended support to VPM by, for instance, approving venues for programs like the Peaceful Rally in August 2014, which aimed to express solidarity with the Palestinian people during the July 2014 attacks. Additionally, Nordin (2015) mentioned that VPM, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the Ministry of Education Gaza, upgraded 13 schools in the Northern Peninsula of Gaza. At a higher level of cooperation, VPM administers scholarships for Palestinian students pursuing education in Malaysian universities, this accomplishment was realized through collaboration with the National Treasury and the International Islamic University Malaysia.

According to Banu (2015), VPM maintains ongoing interaction with the Malaysian Government and frequently extends invitations to government representatives to participate in its programs. For instance, on September 12, 2015, VPM organized a BDS seminar at the University of Malaya involving representatives from the Malaysian Government. Additionally, VPM consistently collaborates with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, and Wisma Putra. Banu explained that VPM frequently engages with various Malaysian government agencies, especially when sending humanitarian missions to Gaza. For instance, VPM cooperates with Wisma Putra to secure approvals and permits. Furthermore, VPM has partnered with the Ministry of Information, Communication, and Culture through the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) to launch the KL PFF from February 4 to 6, 2012 (VPM, 2013a).

Moreover, in 2013, a visit to Mahathir Mohamad's office, a Malaysian leader who is strongly in Palestinian rights, was made by Norma Hashim, the Treasurer of VPM, along with Abdul Rahim Shehab, a guest of VPM and the Director of the Islamic Society in Jabalia (VPM, 2013b). Information obtained from the VPM website reveals that on December 5, 2014, VPM

organized the Save al-Quds Global Campaign in Putrajaya in conjunction with several other non-governmental organizations. The primary objective of this campaign was to raise public awareness about the dire situation in Al-Quds and Al-Aqsa Mosque, as well as the sustained pressures imposed by Israel. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who served as the patron of the Save al-Quds Global Campaign, articulated that Malaysia intended to utilize its status as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for a two-year term commencing in 2015 to bolster efforts aimed at defending Palestine against Zionist transgressions. Additionally, the Malaysian Government resolved that Foreign Minister Anifah Aman would address Palestinian concerns during relevant meetings (VPM, 2014c).

We note that VPM maintains satisfactory interaction with the Malaysian Government. However, compared to Aman Palestin, VPM's involvement in joint programs with the government is relatively limited. In contrast, Aman Palestin has established extensive coverage and long-lasting connections with the Malaysian Government, particularly in the programs they organize. Upon analyzing the activities undertaken by Aman Palestin, it becomes apparent that they engage various agencies under the Malaysian Government, which is particularly evident when the NGO frequently conducts awareness programs on the Palestinian issue in government offices and schools. Nonetheless, both NGOs have made concerted efforts to foster a positive interaction and relationship with the Malaysian Government to elevate the prominence of the Palestinian issue.

4.6 Government and NGOs in Malaysia: The Insights to Palestine

Local NGOs within Malaysia have played a laudable role in raising awareness among the Malaysian populace concerning the hardships faced by the Palestinian people (Salleh et al. 2017). It is widely acknowledged that Malaysian NGOs extend their support to the Palestinians, particularly in response to Israeli military actions and the blockade of the Gaza Strip (Nazri, 2022). International NGOs, including those originating from Malaysia, have been actively engaged in protests and appeals to halt Israel's actions. Malaysian NGOs have taken proactive measures to assist and alleviate the Palestinian population's suffering by organizing various humanitarian activities, programs, and contributions- providing both financial aid and tangible resources to help ease the burdens borne by the Palestinian people. Despite the obstacles imposed, the NGOs have, to some extent, successfully distributed essential supplies to Gaza's residents.

The collaborative efforts of Malaysian NGOs in mitigating the hardships faced by the Palestinians deserve commendation, endeavours to raise public awareness on this issue exemplify a shared sense of responsibility. The grassroots movements initiated, coupled with the official foreign policy of the Malaysian Government, NGOs underscore a strong manifestation of support from the Malaysian populace in solidarity with the Palestinians and their aspirations (Othman, 2015). For instance, during the 51-day conflict (which commenced on July 7, 2014, marking one of the lengthiest conflicts of the century)- Aman Palestin and Aqsa Syarif provided humanitarian aid supplies to 11,500 individuals- including rice, soybeans, dried vegetables, and a blend of vitamins and minerals. Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, who also serves as the Federal Territories Minister, emphasized that the efforts of Malaysian NGOs and their voluntary engagement in delivering humanitarian aid to crisis-stricken nations like Palestine epitomize the optimal approach for demonstrating global humanitarian concern. Tengku Adnan encouraged the organization of similar future programs involving Malaysian NGOs and urged them to set an example for other NGOs (Kamarulbaid, 2014).

Nonetheless, it is apparent that the Malaysian Government broadly recognizes and values the sincere endeavours of NGOs in assisting Palestine. From our vantage point, NGOs have exhibited the capability to function autonomously, even as relatively small entities with constrained

financial means, as they steadfastly strive for the liberation of Palestinian territory. Despite the obstacles encountered, NGOs maintain their unwavering commitment to dedicating their resources and energy to this cause, propelled by humanitarian principles and with the overarching aspiration of witnessing the eventual liberation of Palestine.

4.7 The Efficacy of NGOs in Shaping the Malaysia-Palestine Relationship

The dedicated endeavours of Malaysian NGOs unmistakably signify their unwavering support for the Palestinian people, a commitment acknowledged and deeply valued by the Palestinian Government- the initiatives fortify the bilateral ties between Malaysia and Palestine and align with Malaysia's steadfast stance on the Palestinian matter. The grassroots movements led by NGOs, in conjunction with the proactive involvement of the Malaysian Government in international forums, stand as a compelling affirmation of Malaysia's unwavering support for the Palestinian people in their pursuit of statehood. As underscored by Othman (2015), the Malaysian Government has provided valuable support to NGOs, particularly in logistics and coordination, thereby facilitating their efforts to assist the Palestinian population. Prominent NGOs aiding Palestinians include the Perdana Global Peace Foundation, led by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and MERCY Malaysia. The organizations have significantly contributed to medical aid, equipment, and infrastructure support, exemplifying Malaysia's unwavering commitment to peace and security.

As highlighted by Othman (2015), a prominent illustration is the humanitarian mission conducted by the 1Malaysia Youth Club in 2010. In collaboration with the Malaysian Red Crescent Society and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this mission effectively delivered humanitarian assistance to more than 2,000 families residing in besieged areas of Gaza. The collaborative partnership between the Malaysian Government and local NGOs is a conspicuous manifestation of coordinated efforts to mitigate the hardships endured by the Palestinian populace, this cooperation is anticipated to strengthen diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Palestine further. The contributions of Malaysian NGOs in alleviating the suffering of the Gazan population hold a profound and esteemed position within the Palestinian community.

However, within the authentic pursuit of establishing an autonomous Palestinian state, Othman (2015) underscores the necessity for continual backing comprising all strata: the Malaysian Government, citizens, and the international community. While the tangible impact of NGO activities on the enhancement of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Palestine may lack comprehensive evidence, it is noteworthy that the influential work of Malaysian NGOs played a role in facilitating Najib Razak's official visit to Gaza. The visit materialized through the collective efforts of Malaysian NGOs and further underscored their influence in bolstering the diplomatic relationship between Malaysia and Palestine. During Najib Razak's visit, he also emphasized support for Hamas and Fatah and expressed readiness to mediate the formation of a unity government as soon as possible (Md Yusoff, Enh & Othman, 2021).

5.0 CONCLUSION

Adhering to democratic principles and a commitment to human rights, Malaysia strongly opposes any infringements on human rights, an unwavering stance has been evident since it acceded to the UN in 1957, with Malaysia consistently advocating against human rights violations in Palestine. As a nation dedicated to promoting peace, Malaysia condemns the oppression and injustice perpetrated by Israel in Palestine. Operating under a transparent foreign policy, the Malaysian Government actively pursues the recognition of Palestine as a sovereign state and explores various avenues to express its unwavering support for the Palestinian people's rights.

Despite leadership changes, Malaysia's steadfast backing for Palestine remains unshaken and guided by its well-established foreign policy framework. This support finds expression through diplomatic channels, including the UN, and extends to humanitarian aid initiatives, notably in the financial realm. The official visit of Najib Razak, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, to Gaza in 2013 exemplified Malaysia's enduring commitment to the Palestinian people's struggle for their national rights against Israeli occupation, further strengthening the positive bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Palestine. Ongoing communication, negotiation, and soft diplomacy between Malaysia and Palestine are concrete evidence of the robust bilateral ties between the two nations.

Moreover, the interaction and collaboration between NGOs and the Malaysian Government play a significant role in fostering a positive relationship between Malaysia and Palestine and shaping Malaysia's coherent foreign policy. NGOs effectively fulfill their roles as representatives of the Malaysian populace while actively cooperating with the Malaysian Government. However, we suggest that the Malaysian Government could broaden its perspective on the role of NGOs in supporting Palestine. Presently, the government's discourse primarily centers on how NGOs raise awareness about the Palestinian issue among Malaysians and serve as conduits for delivering humanitarian aid to Palestine. It would be advantageous to broaden this perspective, particularly in acknowledging how even smaller NGOs can amplify the voice of the Malaysian people in providing continuous humanitarian assistance to Palestine. Although the contributions of NGOs in supporting Palestine are generally evident, it is crucial for the Malaysian Government, especially at the ministerial level, to accord greater attention to their valuable contributions.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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