

# THE ROOT OF THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE AND ITS REFLECTION ON THE MUSLIM UMMAH

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## Introduction

In the contemporary world, the Palestinian issue still remains explosive and unresolved. Its resolution is an urgent necessity as well as a major international concern. This is particularly so to all Muslims who view it not merely as a regional or an Arab problem, but more importantly a paramount religious issue. This sentiment is indeed shared by Malaysia. Malaysia can be classified as a Muslim country. With its Muslim majority and Islam as its official religion, Malaysia takes considerable pride for being part of the dynamic and progressive Islamic Ummah. Malaysia's preoccupation with the Palestinian issue is perhaps the earliest among other Islamic issues. This paper will give brief discussion on the historical root of the Palestinian issue and its reflection on the Muslim Ummah. It will specifically attempt to analyze the reflections of the Palestinian issue on Malaysia since independence in 1957 up to 1989.

## The Root of the Palestinian Issue: A Background

The history of the land of Palestine, and its people, is long and complicated. The Palestinians, who for long centuries belonged to a country with distinctive geographical, political and cultural identity, had ultimately been the victims of Israel's Zionist ideology by a mere accident of history, and were later on destined to be swamped and dominated by the aggressive and uncompromising Jews. However, despite the onslaught of Zionist persecution and suppression, the Palestinians, in their struggle for freedom and right of self-determination,

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have resorted to all means, ranging from military means to diplomacy, to establish their own legal rights.

In essence, the conflict between these two distinct groups, the Arabs and Jews, centers around a piece of territory over which they have conflicting claims and views, although there is enough historical, physical and legal evidences to show that the land in dispute belongs to the former. As a result, there has been a deep and cardinal disagreement between these two antagonistic groups about the very existence of each other in the region. Following World War II, the persistence and intensity of the problem, the recurring violence and turmoil it has caused, and its potential threat to international peace and security, has ultimately turned the conflict into one of the most explosive and destabilizing conflicts in contemporary politics.

However, the study does not intend to scrutinize the historical perspective of the Palestinians issue in details. The following part will only highlight the general picture of the historical root of the Palestinian problem, particularly in the contemporary world until 1967.

It is important to highlight that Jewish problem had overtly rooted from Europe due to the anti-semitism policy occurred at that time which the Jews to think of having their own national land. But it is really unfortunate that the Islamic Ummah had to bear the burden and sufferings. Another major landmark for the Palestinian issue was the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the weakness of the Islamic Ummah, especially in the post World War I period that witnessed the division of the Islamic world among various colonial powers. Great Britain, for some political and strategic reasons, accepted the nation by establishing a Jewish state in Palestine, located in the heart of the Islamic world, to ensure to constant weakness and disunity of the Islamic Ummah.<sup>1</sup>

During World War I, the Arabs revolted against the Ottoman Empire in return for a British promise of their complete national independence.

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1. This fact is somehow reflected in the London Conference of 1905, where Campbell Banerman was the Prime Minister of Great Britain at that time.

But the promise of the British soon turned into a betrayal of the Arab cause when in November 2, 1917, the Balfour Declaration for the establishment of a Jewish Homeland in Palestine was passed.<sup>2</sup> This declaration was viewed as the stepping-stone for British serious commitment in the establishment of a Jewish national homeland, simultaneously the main root of the Palestinian problem. In the declaration, Arthur James Balfour, the then British Foreign Secretary declared that;

His Majesty's government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of the objective...<sup>3</sup>

Later on the Allied Supreme Council allocated Palestine to Great Britain, and in July 22, 1922, Great Britain was formally confirmed as mandatory power by the Council of the League of Nations.<sup>4</sup> With this mandatory power, the British took over the total responsibility on Palestine; hence the establishment of the Jewish state was mobilized as the answer to the commitment in the Balfour Declaration.

This declaration was actually void and illegal because, on the one hand, it violated the rights of the original inhabitants of Palestine, and on the other it was made by a foreign government, which had no power or sovereignty in Palestine to qualify her to make a promise in favor of an alien people.<sup>5</sup> The Balfour Declaration became the cornerstone of British policy during the mandate, and served as a pretext to permit massive Jewish immigration into Palestine against the will of its original inhabitants. In thirty years of colonial administration, the British government transformed Palestine into a country divided against itself.

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2. George Lenczowsky, *The Middle East in World Affairs*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1982, pp. 391-396.

3. John Norton Moore, (ed), *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974.

4. *Op.cit.*, pg.391.

5. Henry Cattán, *The Question of Jerusalem*, London: Third World Centre, 1980, pg.17.

From 1918 to 1948 the number of the Jews multiplied thirteenth times, from 50,000 to 650,000, mostly immigrants from Europe.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the forced colonization, the number of Jews in Palestine, which did not exceed 8% of the population at the end of the First World War, grew to become about one-third (31%) of the total population in 1948.<sup>7</sup> However, due to strong resistance from the Palestinians, the acquisition of land by the Jews did not total during the period more than 6.5% (from 2% in 1918).

This implantation of an alien people in an almost exclusively Arab country, followed by their 1948 proclamation of an independent state in Palestine, and the eviction of the majority of its original inhabitants created one of the most explosive problems of the world. Indeed it has convulsed the Middle East during the last five decades, and is still far from being settled.

Since the early year of their mandate rule, British officials were confronted with Arab growing hostility towards Zionism, inspired by their awareness of the given dimension of Balfour Declaration. Senior British official had, however continued to back Zionism until Britain's imperial position was seriously threatened by the revolt of Arab, especially in the 1930's at the onset of World War II. After the end of the World War II in 1945, the British withdrew the obligations stated in the white paper on 1939.<sup>8</sup>

In view of the dangerous and chaotic situation created in Palestine as a result of the massive Jewish immigration and the fierce opposition of its original inhabitants, the British government referred in 1947 the question of the future of Palestine to the United Nations. The General Assembly adopted on 29 November 1947, against the will of the Palestinians, Resolution 181 that provided for the termination of the British mandate, the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states,

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6. Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, *Islam and the Problem of Israel*, London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1980, pg. 57.

7. John Norton Moore, (ed), *op. cit.*, pg. 279

8. George Lenczowsky, *op.cit.*, pg. 396.

and the establishment of the city of Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum* under a special regime to be administrated by the United Nations.<sup>9</sup>

The British then totally withdrew from Palestine in May 15, 1948, and handed over the establishment of the Israeli State on May 14, 1948. On the departure of British forces, a new phase of Arab-Israeli conflict occurred in which the Palestinian got the support from neighboring Arab countries to their struggle. In the war of 1948, the Jews managed to annex seventy eight per cent of the land while the remaining twenty two percent was left for the Arabs.<sup>10</sup>

The war of 1948 was really devastating especially for the Palestinians because the Israelis had since embarked on a policy of ousting them their own territories. Many were in dispersion into Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq. This resulted in the problem of Palestinian refugees in the United Nations where the number nowadays is near 15 million, and still remains as unresolved problem.<sup>11</sup>

During the inter-war period of 1948-1967, the Arab Palestinians vigorously supported Gamal Abdul Naseer and his Arab nationalism; looking assertively for the Arab support in their struggle. The rise of Naseer at this stage really enhanced tension among the Israeli as well as among the Great Powers who viewed him as a potential threat to their strategic interest in the Middle east, particularly after the latter nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. This led to the Suez invasion of October-November 1956, coordinated by Great Britain, France and Israel, and which sought to punish and eliminated Naseer.<sup>12</sup> By this invasion, it is clear that Britain once again played a major role in the politics of the Middle East as well as in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and, far worse, they conspired

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9. John Norton Moore, *op. cit.*, pg.311.

10. Ian J. Bickerton and Carla L. Klausner, *A Concise History of Arab Israeli Conflict*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995, p. 95.

11. Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, *Islam and the Problem of Israel*, London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1980, pp. 68-71.

12. *Op. cit.*, pg.123.

with Israel in the invasion. However, with the United States' intervention, the three aggressors were forced to withdraw.

Indeed, the Suez invasion and its failure signaled the end of Britain's role as the dominant imperialist power in the Middle East. This also weakened its allies in the area i.e. Iraq and Jordan and left them more vulnerable to Naseer's propaganda. The resultant vacuum in the Middle East was filled by the United States who embarked on a policy of direct intervention in Arab regional politics, especially Israeli affairs. In the post 1948 war, the Arab Palestinians who remained in their land under Israeli government fought to preserve their national identity and rights. Finally this led to the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964.

Consequently, by the spring of 1967, the Israeli and the Arabs were once again involved in a major crisis known as Six Days War of 1967. On 5 June 1967, under the false pretence of an Egyptian aggression, Israel attacked Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, and seized the Old City of Jerusalem, the West bank, the Gaza Strip, the remaining of Palestine as well as some of the territories of Egypt (Sinai) and Syria (the Golan Height).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the humiliating defeat in 1967 war was very painful to the Islamic *Ummah*, and in particular clearly signified the impotence of Arab nationalism as advocated by Naseer. On the other hand, the Jews became more determined to establish the 'Greater Israel'.

The defeat of Pan-Arabians sustained in 1967 had motivated the Palestinians to initiate their own revolution without any vigorous hope for Arab support. The disaster had also paved the way for the revival of the Islamic trend, which maintains that only all encompassing, accommodating and principled Islam is the mean for resolving the Palestinian issue. Consequently, a new phase occurred in the Palestinian struggle in which the Palestinians initiated their own revolution, and depended on their own energy.

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13. See Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992; Sydney D. Bailey, *Four Arab-Israeli Wars and the Peace Process*, London: Macmillan, 1990.

## Elements of the Zionist Colonization

The Zionist movement, initiated by Theodore Herzl's book "The Jewish State", published in 1896, is resolutely colonialist. The founder of Zionism had one essential aim, to create a Jewish State. In the first Zionist Congress, which was held in Basle, Switzerland in 1897, they came out in favour of Palestine. The objective declared by this Congress was the creation in Palestine of Jewish homeland guaranteed by public law. The major proposed means to achieve this purpose was the rational colonization of Palestine by the settlement of Jewish farmers, artisan and industrialists, while others included organizing and associating all Jews through the agency of local associations and general federations, which is necessary for the achievement of the aim of Zionism.<sup>14</sup> Ismail Raji al-Faruqi in his work "Islam and the Problem of Israel" asserts that;

The problem of Israel that is confronting the Muslim world today has neither precedent nor parallel in Islamic history. The Muslim world has tended to regard it as another instance of modern colonialism, or, at best, as a repetition of the crusade<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, the occupation with domination, the constant violation of the individual and collective rights of the Palestinian people, and the displacement of the Arabs demonstrate that the Israeli phenomenon is indeed a colonial phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> Among the remarkable features of the Zionist colonization are the building on Jewish societies, policy on expulsion and displacement on Arabs, institutionalizing on violence and injustice control on the economy.<sup>17</sup>

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14. John Norton Moore, op. cit., pg. 275

15. Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, op. cit., pg. 1

16. John Norton Moore, op. cit., pg. 275

17. For further details see Gershon Shafir, "Zionism and Colonialism: A Comparative Approach", in Ilan Pappé, (ed.), *The Israel/Palestine Question*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, pg.81-96. Also see Ilan Halevi, "The Violation of the Human and National Rights of the Palestinian People", *Islamic Herald*, Vol.10, No.6, 1986, pg. 12; Amer Obeid, *Zionist Savagery in Palestine*, *The Muslim World League Journal*, August-September 1994, pp. 38-39., Amer Obeid, *The West Bank Economy: Geared to Serve Israel*, *Islamic Herald*, Vol.10, No.4, 1986, pp. 20-22. Grace Halsell, "US Financing West Bank Colonization", *Islamic Herald*, Vol.8, No. 5&6, pp. 33-36

## The Reflections of the Palestinian Issue on the Muslim Ummah with Special Reference to Malaysia

The Muslim *Ummah* is now passing through a critical phase of history.<sup>18</sup> Obviously, Palestinian issue is one of the most critical and unresolved problems in the Islamic world. Indeed, this issue occupies much of the concern of the Islamists' political thought, being one of the most pressing of the many political problems.

Therefore, there is no need to overemphasize the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause, and their campaign to restore their rights. There are a number of crystal-clear facts. The Palestinian issue occupies the major concern of Muslims everywhere due to a number of reasons. Firstly, it was due to the nature of the land itself i.e. Palestine. Significantly, Palestine is a blessed and sacred land for the Muslims as mentioned in the Quran and Hadith. It is the land of the Prophets and *Isra'*, and in which are located Al-Quds and Al-Aqsa mosques. Secondly, the nature of the enemy also aroused deep resentment and enmity in the Muslim hearts. Moreover, the Quran and Hadith frequently highlight the historical enmity between the Jews and Muslims, thus made the latter highly sensitive and fully aware of this issue. Thirdly, the offending nature of Zionist-Western program in Palestine, articulated in the London Conference of 1905, and the Zionist policies of expulsion and expansionism had made the Palestinian issue the most sensitive and together to create among the Muslims an uncompromising admiration and support to the Palestinian struggle, and motivated them to encounter the challenge of the Jews.

Throughout the past decades, the Islamists have been looking at the Palestinian question through an Islamic perspective. The Palestinian problem is definitely Islam's problem not merely the Palestinians'. The Shari'ah opposes aggression and usurpation of other peoples' lands, and made it a religious duty on every Muslim in any part of the world to stand in the face of invaders, atheists, usurpers and aggressors. Moreover,

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18. Mozammel Haque, The Muslim Ummah in Crisis, *The Muslim World League Journal*, March 1995, pp. 25-27.



Islam orders its followers to be concerned with other Muslims problems. The injustices inflicted on the Muslim people of Palestine oblige every Muslim to remind himself of the prophetic tradition which states that "whoever wakes up without paying heed to Muslims' affairs, he is non-Muslims".<sup>19</sup>

Fully aware of the problem as a Muslim problem, the Muslims rushed to advocate, aid and support the Palestinian revolution. Discontent, wrath and uneasiness were bubbling over against British colonialism, Zionism and recently the Superpowers. Everywhere in the Islamic world, like in Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iran, the masses paid exceptional attention to the revolution. So were the newspapers that covered the news of the struggle. Muslims all over the world fed the struggle with the material aids they sent. Committees for the defence of Palestine were formed. They took on the task of collecting donations and sending them to Palestine. The Muslim cities witnessed more than one strike, and a lot of rallies were organized in solidarity with the Palestinians. Muslim men began to infiltrate into Palestine across the borders to fight with their brothers, mingling their blood with theirs. For instance, arson of Al-Aqsa Mosque August 21, 1969, triggered a sharp response and wrath in the Muslim world.<sup>20</sup> The burning became the top headline of all dailies, and the topic of Friday sermons in all mosques, where preachers and Imams called for *Jihad*.

Indeed, whatever happens in Palestine against its Muslim population would immediately trigger off a set of sharp reactions among the ordinary people, the political critics and the *Ulama'* all over the Muslim world. Islamic personalities and institutions always issue statements calling on the Muslims to side with the Palestinians in their tribulation, and wage *Jihad* to halt the 'Judaization' of Palestine.

These are some of the reactions from the Muslims all over the world in response to the plight of the Palestinians. Their response is certainly

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19 Quoted from Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, op.cit. pg. 2.

20. Ibid., pg. 92.

motivated by their conviction that Palestinian problem is actually the *Ummah*' problem that could best be resolved by a united Muslim action.<sup>21</sup>

The hope, pray and support of the Muslims will always be a stimulus to the Palestinians struggle. The teachings of Islam itself strengthen the power of the *Mujahideen*, boost their morale and blow the spirit of martyrdom and *jihad* among them, and unite all the Muslims against the aggressors. Only by holding fast to Islam can the Palestinian problem be resolved. Hundreds of millions of Muslims all over the world could be mobilized to aid the Palestinian people.

Malay-Muslims population in Malaysia, being an integral part of the Islamic *Ummah*, had, no doubt, have the same mentality and attitude of other Muslims towards the Jews. The Malays, who believe uncompromisingly in the Quran and Sunnah, are fully aware of the danger of the Jews as the arch-enemy of Islam. Thus, is their harsh and hostile attitude towards them.

Realizing the religious significance of the Palestinian issue, the Malays are deeply sensitive towards it, and would always respond assertively to it. Therefore, in many religious talks and conferences, the Malays emphasize the destiny of their Palestinian brothers and the liberation of Al-Quds from the evil Zionists, which they regard as part of their sacred duty. This religious sensitivity provoked the Malays to realize another Quranic injunctions that urged the Muslims to defend Bait al-Maqdis and to restore the dignity of Islam. The Malays, like their Muslim counterparts in the rest of the world, felt that the best solution to the malady of the Palestinians is Jihad. The concept of Islamic brotherhood really persuaded the Malay-Muslims to help and support their Palestinian brother morally, materially and militarily.

To Malaysia in general, the Palestinian issue in the pre-1967 period was quite marginal, and the role of the government in it was therefore

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21. Sheikh Kamel Al-Shareef, Palestine and Muslim Unity, *Islamic Herald*, Vol.12, No.3, 1988, pp. 34-38,

very minor. It was only later on, especially following the arson of Al-Aqsa mosque in 1969, that this issue has become a major concern for the Malaysian people and government. Since then, Malaysia has acted in concert with fellow Muslim countries within the OIC, and on several occasions took the cause of the Palestinian people to International forums such as the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Noticeably, the arson led to the reenergizing of Islam in the International arena through the holding of the first Islamic Summit Conference in Rabat. The Tunku himself attended the Islamic Summit. His speech on the occasion may suggest that Islam had already become an important pillar of Malaysia's foreign policy. In his address, Tunku stressed that The Palestinian issue was actually an Islamic issue. He stated that:

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 Muslim or non Arab Muslims, but simply as brothers in Islam. The future is not a matter between Israel and Jordan only, or even between Israel and the other Arab states only. It is a matter of deepest concern to us all as Muslims<sup>22</sup>

Malaysia's pro-Arab attitude in the Palestinian issue during Tun Razak was clearly manifested in its unreserved support for the Arab cause in the West Asian conflict. All the joint-communications, signed between Malaysia and the Arab states during the Premier's visit of January 1975, reiterated the conviction that the liberation of occupied Arab lands and the restoration of the right of the Palestinian people were pre-requisites for a lasting peace in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> They also reaffirmed their recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

The most significant event related to the Palestinian issue during the tenure of Tun Razak was the eruption of the Arab-Israeli War of

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22. Speech by Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman at the First Islamic Summit Conference in Rabat, Morocco, September 22-24, 1969. See also *The Malay Mail*, 26/9/1969.

23. See *The Straits Times*, 23 January 1975 and *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, March 1975, pp. 7-22

October 1973. In his statement, commenting on the outbreak of the war, Tun Razak pointed out that the root cause of the renewed fighting was the illegal occupation by Israel of Arab lands, and her continued intransigence in blocking all peaceful efforts to bring about a settlement in accordance with UN resolutions.<sup>24</sup>

The war received wide coverage in Malaysian dailies, thus aroused public awareness on the issue. The Middle East Graduates Association of Malaysia condemned Israel, and declared support for the Arab people. Its president Datuk Wan Abdul Kadir, who was also the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, urged all Muslims to support Egypt and Syria in the war.

The Malaysian government under Tun Hussein also consistently and firmly believed that any solution to the problem of the Middle East had to take into account the rights of the concerned Arab state to regain their lost territories. It further insisted that no solution in the Middle East could be achieved without full consideration to the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people, and their inalienable rights to return to their homes and properties, and to achieve self-determination, national independence and sovereignty.<sup>25</sup>

For example, at the 32nd Session of the UN General Assembly in New York, on September 30, 1977, the Prime Minister's speech contained an expression of regret for the failure of the UN to bring an effective solution to the Palestinian problem. Tun Hussein stressed his government's belief that "there will never be any peace and stability in the Middle East until Israel withdrawn from all the lands it took from Arab countries, and until it agrees to the establishment of a homeland for the Palestinians".<sup>26</sup> Tun Hussein furthermore asserted Malaysia's support for the convening of the Geneva Conference to resolve the problems in the Middle East. As the Palestinians are also affected, Malaysia viewed the presence of

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24. Foreign Affairs Malaysia, December 1973, pg. 48

25. Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, London: Routledge, 1997, pg. 72

26. Foreign Affairs Malaysia, December 1977, pg. 69

the PLO, whom it regarded as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, as mandatory.

Significantly, Islam assumed growing prominence under Mahathir's administration. The cause of Islam can rightly be said to constitute the second most important dimension in his foreign policy throughout the 1980's.<sup>27</sup> Tun Dr. Mahathir's high commitment to the Islamic cause and the Islamization policy is partly motivated by his desire of image enhancement at home and abroad, particularly to maintain the legitimacy of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) in the eyes of the Malay-Muslim populace. Tun Dr. Mahathir's commitment to the Islamic cause, particularly the Palestinian issue, has become even more pronounced and assertive with his co-option of Anwar Ibrahim, the former President of ABIM, into the government in 1982. Therefore, under the leadership of Tun Dr. Mahathir, Malaysia's pro-Palestinian attitude became even more vocal and positive than that adopted by his predecessors. In spite of the challenge of Islamic revivalism, Tun Dr. Mahathir's era witnessed increasing awareness among various civil society groups, thus motivated his government to be more assertive towards them. Hence, in analyzing the role of Malaysian government towards the Palestinian issue in the 1980's, one would not fail to note the increasing competition and collaboration between it and the civil society groups in Malaysia.<sup>28</sup>

Shortly after assuming office, in October 1981, Dr. Mahathir decided to upgrade the PLO representation in the country to full diplomatic status. Malaysia was thus the only country in Southeast Asia region, and the second country in the world, to do so. The Foreign Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, in his statement on the occasion of Al-Aqsa Day, in August 21, 1981, pledged Malaysian support for the cause of the Palestinian by saying that:

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27. Mohd. Yusof Ahmad, *Continuity and Changes in Malaysian Foreign Policy. 1981-1986*, unpublished PhD Thesis, submitted to the Tufts University, 1990, pg. 270

28. See Nor Azizan Idris, *A Historical Analysis on the Competitive Role of State and Civil Society Groups towards the Palestinian Issue*, paper presented at the 16th Conference of the IAHA, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, 27 - 31 July 2000.

Malaysia will continue to call on the International community to pressure Israel to withdraw from all Arab territories, including Holy Bait Al-Maqdis, until the rights of the Palestinian people to a sovereign state in their homeland is recognized and fulfilled.<sup>29</sup>

He also proudly referred to the recent decision to upgrade the status of the PLO representation in Malaysia by saying:

It gives a great pleasure for me to announce that, consistent with our policy on the Palestinian question and our desire to further strengthen relation with the PLO, the government has decided to extend full diplomatic status to the of office and the representative of the PLO in Kuala Lumpur, as accorded to other resident diplomatic missions here<sup>30</sup>

The increasing role of the Malaysian government in the Palestinian issue could be clearly noted throughout the 1980's. Apart from its annual contribution of US\$5,000 (in 1981) to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Malaysian government contributed M\$100,000 in 1982 to the camps' dwellers, following the Israel invasion of Lebanon.<sup>31</sup> Humanitarian aid came in other forms like medical assistance, scholarship for Palestinian students at Malaysian universities and occupational training centers.<sup>32</sup>

It is also interesting to note that awareness of the Palestinian issue had widely spread throughout the 1980's among the Malaysian public. It was largely spearheaded by the government itself, the Malaysian dailies, and the non-governmental movement such as ABIM and PERKIM. Further illustration on Tun Dr. Mahathir's commitment on the Palestinian

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29. Foreign Affairs Malaysia, Vol.14, September 1981, pg. 271

30. Ibid, pg. 272

31. Shanti Nair, op. cit., pg. 207

32. Foreign Affairs Malaysia, Vol.17, No.3, September, 1984, pp. 24-25.

issue could be best exemplified on his action to consistently commemorate Al-Aqsa Day on August 21 as a mark of solidarity with the Palestinian brothers. Special commemorative "Palestinian Day" postage stamps were also issued by the Malaysian postal authority in 1981 and 1982 as a show of symbolic support for the Palestinian cause.<sup>33</sup> One important event, which demonstrated Malaysia's aggressive posture on the issue of Palestine, was its successful hosting in Kuala Lumpur in May 1983 of the UN-sponsored Conference on Palestine for Asia and the Pacific. The five-day conference was attended by some 200 delegates from forty-one countries and International organizations. In his keynote address, Tun Dr. Mahathir had not only condemned the Israeli aggression, but also criticized its allies for hypocrisy and double-standards.

As mentioned earlier, the Palestinian issue had widely spread throughout the 1980's among the Malaysian public. For illustration, on July 4, 1982, ABIM and the Malaysian Muslim Scholars had organized the Palestinian Solidarity Day in Petaling Jaya. One of the resolutions adopted on the occasion was the call upon all Muslims to forge a united struggle to free Jerusalem from Israeli occupation, and to make fullest use of their resources, including influence, economic and military power, to create an independent Palestinian nation. On May 3, 1983 another mass rally took place in conjunction with the 5-day Conference on the Question of Palestine. In his address to a 5,000 crowd, Anwar Ibrahim, the UMNO-Youth Chief who was also Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister Department, stressed that Malaysians should continue giving moral and material support to the Palestinians to show Israel that its invasion of Lebanon is being condemned by the world. ABIM and many newspapers successfully launched a campaign to collect funds in aid of the Palestinians and other victims of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. A total of M\$1.29 million was handed over to Mr. Farouk Kadoumi, who headed the PLO delegation to the Asian Conference on the Question of Palestine held in Kuala Lumpur.

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33. Mohd. Yusof Ahmad, *op. cit.*, pg. 277

The religious significance of the Palestinian issue to ordinary Malay-Muslim is reflected in the frequency in which it becomes the topic of sermon in Friday prayers in Malaysian mosques. The Malays allergy and sensitivity to the Jewish people was best manifested during the Israeli aggression in the refugee camp of Shabra and Shatila in West Beirut in September 1982<sup>34</sup> and in the launching of protest demonstration that condemned the visit of Chaim Herzog to Singapore in November 1986. The demonstrators were comprised of various civil society groups in Malaysia including UMNO, PAS, ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), and PERKIM (Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia). Anti Singapore rallies were held in Johore, and effigies of Premier Lee Kuan Yew were burned by protestors. The rally organizers also submitted a memorandum to the government calling for stronger actions ranging from a break in diplomatic ties to a review of the water supply agreement with Singapore. Another bold and commendable step taken by the Malaysian government was its decision of January 12, 1989, to elevate the office of the PLO in Malaysia to a full fledged Embassy of the State of Palestine. This elevation was, in fact, yet another reflection of Malaysia's strong and unequivocal support to the just demands of the Palestinians for self-determination and independence.

## **Conclusion**

Significantly, in the contemporary world, the Palestinian issue still remain explosive and unresolved. Its resolution is an urgent necessity as well as a major international concern. This is particularly so to all Muslims who view it not merely as a regional or an Arab problem, but more importantly a paramount religious issue. This sentiment indeed shared by Malaysia.

In spite of the religious significance, the humanitarian perspective of the Palestinian issue had further deepened the Malay sympathy and support to the Palestinians. Obviously, the Palestinians have become

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34. Foreign Affairs Malaysia, June 7, 1982, pg. 154. Malaysia strongly condemned the massacre and held Israel and the Phalangists responsible for the wanton act of savagery. The government also regarded the massacre as "A Crime Equal only to the Horrendous Nazi Atrocity", see *The Star*, 21 September, 1982.



the victims of the Israeli Zionist who usurped their lands illegally and oppression, brutality and injustices. The tragedy of Palestinians, especially the problem of Palestinian refugees, is a paramount concern of the Malays. Fully aware of the concept of Islamic brotherhood, the Malays are persuaded to support the cause of their brothers assertively. The Malays realize that the Palestinian issue is neither Palestinian nor Arab, but it is rather an issue of Islam, which required the concern, and support of all.

From the above discussion one may infer that the sensitivity of the Malays towards the issue of Palestine, like that of their fellow Muslims, is actually embeded in the spirit of Islamic brotherhood. That definitely and uncompromisingly support the Palestinian Muslims. This reality guides the policy of successive Malaysian governments towards all issue affecting the Palestinians. They are bound to sympathize with them, and are sometimes pressurized to do so.

Since the Palestinian issue is not merely a religious issue but humanitarians as well, the Malaysian government could not neglect its vitality. The party in power, UMNO, being Malay-dominated, is highly sensitive to the issue, which is crucial for the maintenance of its legitimacy among the masses as the protector of Islam and the Malay community. Any attitude and policies that contradict the Malay-Muslims' stand will inevitably provoke reactions from the community. I venture to argue that the role of the Malaysian government in Palestinian issue was largely motivated by pragmatic considerations resulting from an interplay between various factors; political, economic, religious and humanitarian.

In Malaysian context, 'Islamism' has also come to be seen as a catalyst that could pressurize the government to be more sensitive and responsive to the Palestinian issue, since its claim to uphold democracy dictated due attention and consideration to public opinion in any policy formulation. Though many claim that Islam has never been an overriding factor in Malaysia's support of the Islamic issue, its role in this respect is indeed, highly commendable. It is hoped that in the near future Malaysia will engage more constructively in the Islamic issue, especially by giving its religious dimension top priority. This aspect of religiosity should, no

doubt, be seriously taken into account since Islam is the main political force in Malaysian politics. The ideals of Islamic brotherhood and solidarity, if understood properly, would motivate Muslims in Malaysia and elsewhere to assist their brothers in Palestine.