

AN EVALUATION OF MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS HAMAS IN THE BARISAN NASIONAL ERA

Muslim Imran, Roy Anthony Rogers, and K. S. Balakrishnan¹

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Malaysia's evolving relationship with Hamas during the Barisan Nasional era (1957–2018), focusing on the interplay of domestic politics, international pressures, and Islamic solidarity. Historically, Malaysia has been a steadfast supporter of the Palestinian cause, with varying degrees of engagement with Hamas. Under Prime Minister Najib Razak, Malaysia's approach was characterised by humanitarian assistance and diplomatic support for Palestine, including visits to Gaza and interactions with Hamas leaders. Malaysia refrained from recognising the Western designation of Hamas as a “terrorist organisation”, maintaining diplomatic relations with the Palestinian Authority as well as Hamas, and supporting Palestinian unity. This study analyses how Malaysia's Islamic identity, domestic political considerations, and other foreign policy constraints influenced its stance towards Hamas. It also explores the implications of Malaysia's position on its international relations, particularly with Western nations that classify Hamas as a terrorist entity. The findings suggest that Malaysia's policy towards Hamas was a balancing act, aiming to uphold Islamic solidarity and domestic political interests while navigating complex international dynamics.

Keywords: Malaysia, Hamas, Barisan Nasional, foreign policy, Palestinian cause, Islamic solidarity, international relations

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's policy towards Hamas, and the broader Palestinian cause, has seen notable developments in recent years, especially under the leadership of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The events following October 7, 2023, when Hamas's military wing, Izzuddin Al-Qassam Brigades, launched an unprecedented military attack on Israel, and Israel launched an unprecedented genocide in Gaza, have placed Malaysia's stance under intense international scrutiny. Anwar's administration has maintained Malaysia's longstanding support for Palestine while facing Western, especially American, criticism for not distancing itself from Hamas, a stance that differs in tone and emphasis from the previous

¹ Muslim Imran is a PhD candidate (macademic14@gmail.com) at the Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya. Assoc. Roy Anthony Rogers (rarogersum.edu.my) is a lecturer at the Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya. K. S. Balakrishnan (ksbalakrishnanum.edu.my) is a lecturer at the Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya.

administrations. During Najib's tenure (2009-2028), the focus was more on humanitarian assistance and vocal condemnations of Israeli policies, with relatively less explicit rhetoric in solidarity with Hamas's struggle and geopolitical manoeuvres. Meanwhile, during Mahathir's second premiership (2018-2020), Malaysia was very critical of Israel and maintained good ties with Hamas, but without the intense rhetoric about supporting the Palestinian movement. Under Anwar Ibrahim (2022-now), Malaysia continues to position itself as a strong advocate of Palestinian rights and a good friend of Hamas. The escalating geopolitical tensions in the Middle East continue to underscore Malaysia's challenging diplomatic balancing act: affirming its Islamic solidarity and commitment to the Palestinian struggle while navigating the broader implications for its foreign relations. While recent developments and foreign policy postures might explain some dimensions of Malaysia's foreign policy towards Hamas, only a deeper examination of the historical roots of this relationship can capture the full picture. This paper seeks to analyse Malaysia's relation with Hamas during its earliest phase of development: the Barisan Nasional era. By examining idiosyncratic, domestic, and external dynamics, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Malaysia's approach towards Hamas and the larger Palestine struggle has evolved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Malaysia's relations with Hamas frequently feature in media reports, this topic has received very little academic attention. A survey of academic works on the topic will feature glimpses of writing on the topic in works with a wider scope, such as studies on Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine. Although this genre of work has gained momentum in recent years, the total number of academic works on this topic remains very limited. These few works include Anidah Robani's book on Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine, which offers a chronological overview of Malaysia's historical relations with the Palestinian issue from independence to the end of Mahathir's first premiership (1957-2003) (Robani, 2010). Another early work is K.S. Nathan's assessment of Malaysia's approach to the two-state solution, which focuses on Malaysia's role and options on the diplomatic front (Nathan, 2004). Shanti Nair's *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy* (1998) provides an early exploration of Malaysia's support for Palestine, linking it to Islamic identity and solidarity with the Ummah. Abdul Majid Hafiz Mohamed focuses on the era of Mahathir Mohamad, arguing that Malaysia's strong advocacy under his leadership helped raise international awareness of the Palestinian cause (Hafiz Mohamed, 2017). More recently, Nurul Norfatihah Md Yusoff and colleagues highlight four main drivers of Malaysia's policy towards Palestine: Islam, leadership, developments in the conflict, and the failures of major powers (Yusoff et al., 2021). However, most of these studies are descriptive and barely touch on Malaysia's policy towards Hamas. A more relevant work on Malaysia's foreign policy towards Hamas is Maren Koss's paper on relations between Hamas and UMNO during Najib Abdul Razak's tenure (Koss, 2020). While this work sheds some light on the topic of concern, it gives more attention to the role of civil society in advancing Malaysia's relations with Hamas than to the actual development of these relations or to the considerations of Malaysian foreign policy decision-makers. Hence, this paper attempts to fill a significant gap in the literature on

Malaysia's foreign policy towards Hamas by offering an empirical analysis of Malaysia's relations with Hamas in the early years of its formation, i.e., during the Barisan Nasional era.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH FOR MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS HAMAS

Taking up the study of foreign policy analysis (FPA), one should attempt to tackle the concept of 'foreign policy'. However, one will stumble into the fact that 'there is no consensual definition of what a foreign policy actually is' (Morin & Paquin, 2018). While the concept of foreign policy is constantly evolving due to changes in practices and theories, Jean-Frederic Morin and Jonathan Paquin offer a broad definition that can be utilised in the process of foreign policy analysis. For them, foreign policy is 'a set of actions or rules governing the actions of an independent political authority deployed in the international environment' (Morin & Paquin, 2018). Meanwhile, Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) as a field is conceptualised by Vendulka Kubalkova as 'a complex, multilayered process' (Kubalkova, 2015). Such a process is sought to answer various questions about the international interactions between political actors and institutions. It is noteworthy to mention that while FPA has been regaining prominence in recent years, not all recent studies on foreign policy identify as direct derivatives of the traditional FPA literature, 'many more theories are involved [other] than those covered by FPA' (Smith, Hadfield, and Dunne, 2016). This understanding opens the door to intermarriage between the traditional approaches to the study of foreign policy and the wider literature of the social sciences. A good approach to studying Malaysia's foreign policy would synthesise these diverse approaches and would examine the different sources of the country's foreign policy. Foreign policy analyst Binnur Ozkececi-Taner suggests that countries vary in their foreign policy making and decisions due to differences in their size, socioeconomic development, type of political regime, political institutionalization, societal structures, military and economic capabilities, strategic cultures, public opinion, national role conceptions, decision making rules, belief systems, and personality traits of their political leaders (Ozkececi-Taner, 2020). Such differences can be conceptualised as among the factors or variables influencing a country's foreign policy.

In the case of Malaysia, although the literature on Malaysia's foreign policy is not scarce, few works adopt an overtly analytical approach. Most studies on the topic use a single-factor or a single-cluster of factors in their analysis of the sources of Malaysia's foreign policy. Some studies focus on the impact of leaders' idiosyncrasies on Malaysia's foreign policy (Wariya, 1989; Silcock, 1963; Zaheruddin Othman, 2013; Balakrishnan, 2016), others analyse Malaysia's foreign policy from a single dimension (Nair, 1997; Kuik, 2013; Kuik, 2015), yet fewer studies offer a multi-level analysis combining various factors (Dhillon, 2009; Saravanamuttu, 1983; Saravanamuttu, 2010; Khalid, 2011). One good example of the latter type is Karminder Singh Dhillon's study of Mahathir's foreign policy, which deploys a sophisticated FPA that integrates multiple levels of analysis. This approach, he suggests, was motivated by 'the beliefs that the sources of foreign policy are mixed and multifarious; that both the external and internal environment of the state as well

as personality factors are important in the explanation of foreign policy; and that it is the interplay of these factors that produces a particular foreign policy output' (Dhillon, 2009). The works of Johan Saravanamuttu also offer a model that identifies various sources of foreign policy: internal sources, external sources, eco-historical sources, and idiosyncratic/elite sources (Saravanamuttu, 1983; Saravanamuttu, 2010).

Inspired by the aforementioned multi-levelled analytical approaches, this paper examines various sources of foreign policy at different levels of analysis. Attempting to explain what being theoretical means, James Rosenau wrote: 'In order to cope with the enormous variety of phenomena that may be relevant to the study of foreign policy, one has to select some of them as important and dismiss others as trivial insofar as one's enquiry is concerned. This process of selection is what being theoretical means' (Rosenau, 1996, p. xvi). Realising that being theoretical requires a tremendous effort of interweaving different inputs that represent real-life phenomena, the author had to make a choice and decide on a final set of inputs. These inputs, which may or may not be easy to represent, stem from an extensive survey of theoretical and empirical literature on Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine. The theoretical works of Valerie Hudson (2014; 2016), Steve Smith et al. (2016), Jean-Frederic Morin and Jonathan Paquin (2018), and Binnur Ozkececi-Taner (2020), among others, were used to identify the relevant factors examined in this paper regarding Malaysia's foreign policy towards Hamas. The paper also relied on extensive fieldwork on Malaysia's foreign policy conducted by the main author, including more than 15 interviews with Malaysian and Palestinian decision-makers, diplomats, and civil society leaders. A thematic methodology was then used to deduce the factors and to conduct the full analysis.

While many sources/factors can be assumed to affect the country's foreign policy, this paper identifies several that can be grouped into two levels of analysis: internal and external. The internal factors shaping Malaysia's foreign policy towards Hamas are: the leaders' idiosyncrasies; domestic politics; the roles of culture and religion; the roles of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society; and the roles of the media and public opinion. The external factors are: Malaysia's national role conceptions, great power rivalry (especially between the United States and China), international developments in the Middle East (such as the Arab Spring and the Deal of the Century), and the Malaysian attitude towards Israel. These different sources/factors have influenced Malaysia's foreign policy towards Hamas in varying degrees across the period of this study (1987-2018). While some factors change with changes in actors, such as the different idiosyncrasies and personalities of different prime ministers, other factors, such as the role of culture and religion or national role conceptions, have a relatively more consistent influence over time. The different factors will be further explained whenever they are introduced in the relevant sections. The following analysis offers an empirical examination of Malaysia's foreign policy towards Hamas, based on the factors highlighted above.

MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS HAMAS IN THE BN ERA: A CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

Since its independence in 1957, Malaysia has consistently supported the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and opposed Israeli occupation. This commitment intensified after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the 1969 Al-Aqsa Mosque arson, leading to Malaysia's embracing of Palestinian resistance movements (Robani, 2010; Ahmad Alfarra, personal communication, March 4, 2019). Under the Prime Ministers Abdul Razak and Hussein Onn, Malaysia established ties with the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Opening an office for Fatah in the early 1970s and recognising the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, Malaysia became one of Asia's strongest allies of the Palestinians. Relations with Fatah and the PLO soared under the fourth prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who developed strong personal ties with PLO chairman Yaser Arafat (Mahathir Mohamad, personal communication, October 4, 2017; Ahmad Alfarra, personal communication, March 4, 2019). Hamas, which emerged in the late 1980s, tried to reach out to the Malaysian government under Mahathir but did not achieve success. Malaysia during Mahathir's first premiership remained committed to working solely with the PLO (Ghusheh, 2013). Hamas, however, still sent envoys to Malaysia in the 1990s to meet mostly with the Islamist opposition, PAS, but also with some government officials (Osama Hamdan, personal communication, August 20, 2018). It was only after the Palestinian Islamist movement won the 2006 parliamentary election during the premiership of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that Malaysia received an official delegation from Hamas and considered formalising ties with the Palestinian movement (Syed Hamid Albar, personal communication, October 24, 2017).

MAHATHIR AND HAMAS

Hamas did not exist in the early years of Mahathir's first premiership. The Islamic Resistance Movement went public under its current name, 'Hamas', only in December 1987. During the 1980s, Mahathir's Malaysia maintained warm ties with the PLO. Shortly after Mahathir assumed leadership, his Foreign Minister, Ghazali Shafie, announced in August 1981 that Malaysia would grant full diplomatic status to the PLO Office in Kuala Lumpur, becoming the first country in Southeast Asia to do so (Ahmad Alfarra, personal communication, March 4, 2019). By October of the same year, the PLO Office in Kuala Lumpur was accorded full diplomatic status, and by July 1982, a new Palestinian ambassador, Ahmad Alfarra, was commissioned to Kuala Lumpur (Alfarra, 2007). By July 1984, Mahathir welcomed PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat on his first visit to Kuala Lumpur. Arafat met the Prime Minister and other officials and was also hosted at a special state banquet by the King of Malaysia. Realising the importance of diplomatic support, Malaysia was quick to recognise Arafat's 'Declaration of Independence of the State of Palestine' in November 1988, becoming the second country in the world to do so. Soon after, in January 1989, the Malaysian government upgraded the PLO office's status to that of an official embassy of the State of Palestine. A few months later, in 1990, Arafat returned to Kuala Lumpur to celebrate the diplomatic boost his embassy received from the Malaysian

government. Throughout the 1990s, Arafat and Mahathir communicated regularly through their respective diplomatic envoys. In August 2001, Arafat paid his final visit to Malaysia before his demise in 2004 (Ahmad Alfarra, personal communication, March 4, 2019).

Throughout Mahathir's first premiership, the country remained committed to supporting the PLO politically by recognising it as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians and, at times, providing financial support (Mahathir Mohamad, personal communication, October 4, 2017; Ahmad Alfarra, personal communication, March 4, 2019). Although Malaysia remained consistent in recognising the PLO, some communications with Hamas took place in the mid-1990s. Hamas's spokesperson, Ibrahim Ghushah, wrote to Prime Minister Mahathir, who responded, advising Hamas to change its strategy and work with the PLO (Ghushah, 2013). A meeting between the two sides also took place in 1997, when Hamas Chief Khaled Meshal met Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia (Osama Hamdan, personal communication, August 20, 2018). The bilateral relations with Hamas, however, did not go beyond these few encounters and remained limited until Hamas's January 2006 electoral victory and its consequent visit to Putrajaya in the following months (Syed Hamid Albar, personal communication, October 24, 2017).

BADAWI AND HAMAS

Abdullah Badawi's years witnessed significant developments in the Palestinian political landscape. In November 2004, longtime PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat passed away. The departure of Arafat, who in addition to being PLO chairman was also the President of Fatah and the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), left a substantial vacuum in Palestinian political life—a vacuum his successor, senior Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas, could not fill. By 2006, Hamas rose to power after securing a landslide victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections and forming the PA government (BBC, 2020). These swift political developments deeply polarised the Palestinian political landscape. Facing internal and external pressure, Hamas and Fatah agreed to form a unity government in March 2007, an arrangement that quickly collapsed in June of the same year. Eventually, this political division led to security clashes in Gaza and a resulting constitutional crisis: the Palestinian Authority split into two de facto governments, one in Gaza led by Hamas and the other in the West Bank led by Fatah. As chairman of the OIC and NAM, Malaysia closely monitored these developments and, at times, sought to play a role in resolving these disputes. In response, Abdullah's tenure saw a growing Malaysian involvement in the Palestinian issue and the formation of official ties with Hamas.

One week after taking over from Mahathir, Prime Minister Abdullah reemphasised in November 2003 the need to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Malaysiakini, 2020). Abdullah took every opportunity, as the chair of the OIC and the NAM, to advocate for the Palestinian cause. This included hosting senior-level ministerial meetings and summits for Palestine in Putrajaya in April and May 2004 (The Guardian, 2004). Malaysia under Badawi maintained warm relations with Yasser Arafat until his death in November 2004

(Syed Hamid Albar, personal communication, October 24, 2017). When Arafat passed away on November 11, 2004, Malaysia immediately issued a statement of condolence and sent a senior delegation led by Prime Minister Abdullah to attend his funeral in Cairo (Albar, 2017). In January 2005, Malaysia welcomed the results of the Palestinian presidential elections and congratulated President Mahmoud Abbas on his election (Malaysiakini, 2005). In January 2006, Prime Minister Abdullah welcomed the results of the second Palestinian parliamentary elections and congratulated Hamas on its victory (Utusan Malaysia, 2006). Malaysia accepted the results of the Palestinian elections and called on President Abbas to engage Hamas. However, the US and its Western allies rejected the new Hamas-led Palestinian government and worked with Israel to undermine it (Osama Hamdan, personal communication, August 20, 2018). The shift in Palestinian leadership from a Fatah-dominated system to a dual rivalry between Fatah and Hamas was closely monitored by Putrajaya (Albar, 2017).

One challenging experience in Malaysia's relations with the Palestinians occurred during the May 2006 NAM Foreign Ministers Summit, which was held in Putrajaya (Albar, 2017). Although in his opening speech, Abdullah called on the US and other Western powers to resume their aid to the Palestinian Authority and engage the newly elected Hamas government rather than boycott it, his government was unclear about who was leading the Palestinian delegation at the Summit. One day before the opening of the Summit, the Palestinian government of Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh sent its Foreign Minister, Dr Mahmoud al-Zahar, to represent Palestine at the Summit. Meanwhile, the new Palestinian ambassador to Malaysia, Abdul Aziz Abu Ghoush, arranged for the PLO's Head of the Political Department, Farouk Kadoumi, to attend the Summit as well. The two Palestinian delegates failed to reach an agreement on who should lead the delegation, leading Alzahar to abruptly end his visit without attending the Summit. While Alzahar blamed both the Malaysian government and the new Palestinian ambassador to Malaysia for the fiasco, the incident temporarily complicated Malaysia's approach to the Palestinian political leadership.

Malaysia's relations with Hamas took a new turn in March 2007, when Prime Minister Abdullah hosted the movement's leadership, headed by its Chief, Khaled Meshal, in Putrajaya (Albar, 2017; Hamdan, 2018). This was the first time the Malaysian government officially hosted Hamas. During the visit, Hamas leaders discussed their vision for the Palestinian issue and their hopes for good bilateral relations with Prime Minister Abdullah and other Malaysian leaders. This visit, however, did not undermine Malaysia's recognition of Fatah, the PLO, or the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas. When the clashes between Hamas and Fatah forces took place in Gaza in June 2007, Prime Minister Abdullah called for a ceasefire between the disputing parties (Utusan Malaysia, 2007). A few days later, Abdullah called on President Abbas to hold talks with the Hamas leadership in order to unite the Palestinians (KUNA, 2007). A few months later, President Abbas arrived in Malaysia for his first official visit. During his two-day visit, Abbas met with Prime Minister Abdullah and other Malaysian leaders to discuss the developments of the Palestinian issue and bilateral relations. This visit cast a long shadow on Malaysia's relations with Abbas's rivals, Hamas, for the remaining years of Abdullah's premiership. The country's communication with Hamas remained limited, while its relations with the

PLO and Fatah remained intact. This scenario was set to change after the December 2008 Israeli war on Gaza and the April 2009 change in the Malaysian leadership.

As tensions continued to rise in Gaza in 2008, the Israeli government broke a short-lived ceasefire on December 22, 2008, when its air force waged massive military strikes on Palestinian territory. By the end of the three-week military operation, thousands of Palestinians were killed, and many more were injured. The infrastructure of Gaza was devastated like never before. Although the US backed Israel in this attack, many countries, including Malaysia, condemned the Israeli aggression and called for an immediate end to the clashes. In order to rally Malaysian public support for Gaza, Prime Minister Abdullah called on Malaysian Muslims to convene Solat Hajat special prayers for the Palestinians in Gaza on January 9, 2009, and tabled a parliamentary motion condemning the Israeli attacks (Utusan Malaysia, 2009). On February 19, Abdullah launched a nationwide fundraising campaign to aid the Palestinians in Gaza. The campaign received widespread participation and intensive media coverage over the following weeks. This Malaysian official's solidarity with Gaza was encouraged and influenced by a growing Malaysian civil society involvement in the international humanitarian efforts in Gaza.

NAJIB AND HAMAS

The early years of Najib Abdul Razak's premiership saw efforts to advance cordial bilateral relations with the Palestinian Authority, especially after President Mahmoud Abbas's visit to Malaysia in May 2010 (KUNA, 2010; Bernama, 2010). Although the visit seemed to cement bilateral relations between Malaysia and the Ramallah government, the wide international media coverage of the Israeli attack on the Mavi Marmara humanitarian ship quickly shifted Malaysia's attention to the unfolding situation in Gaza. While maintaining its relations with the Abbas-led PA, Najib's government soon moved to develop stronger ties with Hamas and its Gaza government (Hamdan, 2018; Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, personal communication, September 16, 2018).

The May 2010 Mavi Marmara attacks opened the eyes of the Malaysian government to the reality in Gaza: Hamas was the de facto government of the Strip, and any serious humanitarian effort there required a direct line of communication with Hamas (Ku Jafar Ku Shaari, personal communication, October 2, 2017). By July 2010, the Malaysian government hosted a senior Hamas delegation led by senior political bureau member Mohamad Naser (Hamdan, 2018; Khalid Qadomi, personal communication, December 13, 2017). During the meetings, the two sides agreed to develop bilateral relations and hold future meetings. The growing interest of Malaysian civil society in the humanitarian situation in Gaza further pushed the Malaysian government to improve its communications with Hamas, bypassing traditional diplomatic channels (Hafizah Abu Bakar, personal communication, June 25, 2020). Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs), such as the Global Coalition for Jerusalem and Palestine, Quds International Institution (QII), and the Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM), played active roles in encouraging the Malaysian government to expand relations with the Gaza government (Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, personal communication, September 16, 2018; Moneer Saeed,

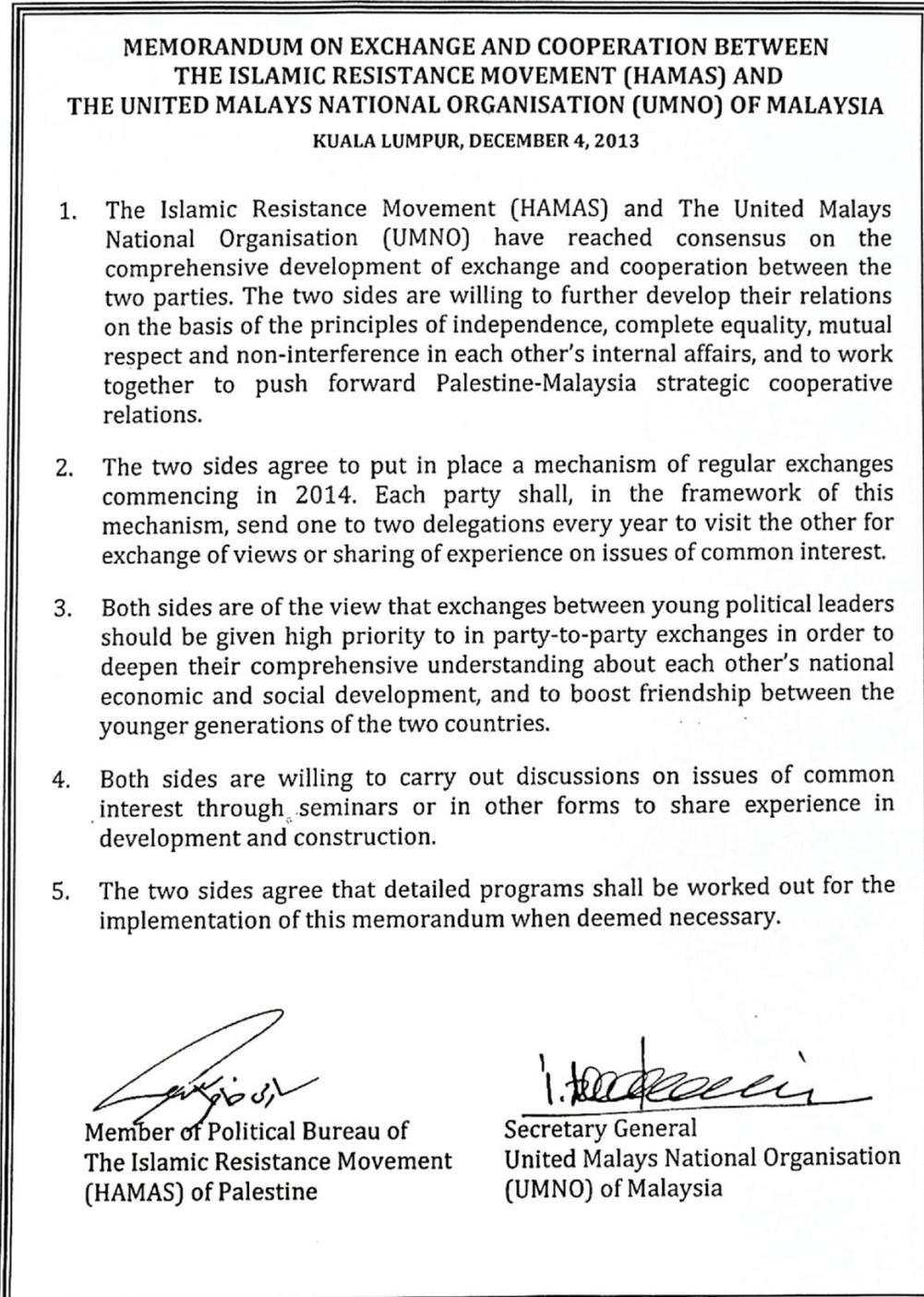
personal communication, March 15, 2019; Nasharuddin Mat Isa, personal communication, September 26, 2017). These advocacy NGOs, along with Palestine-oriented humanitarian NGOs such as Aman Palestin, played major roles in bringing Hamas leaders and envoys to visit Malaysia and in sending Malaysian envoys to Gaza (Abdullah Zaik, personal communication, January 14, 2022).

Throughout the early years of Najib's premiership, several senior Hamas delegates visited the country to cement bilateral relations. By 2011, high-level Hamas delegates included Deputy Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) Dr Ahmad Bahar, Gaza's Civil Defence Force Chief Yusuf Alzahar, Hamas spokesman Osama Hamdan, and Hamas Parliamentary Chief Dr Khalil Alhayyah (Nasharuddin Mat Isa, personal communication, September 26, 2017; Mohamad Faiz Mohamad Nawawi, personal communication, January 26, 2018). During these visits, Hamas leaders met with senior Malaysian officials, including the Prime Minister, his deputy, and other political leaders from both the government and the opposition. The following year, UMNO hosted several leaders from both Hamas and Fatah at its annual party assembly. While this was not the first time Hamas leaders visited Malaysia, the extensive media coverage of Hamas delegate Osama Hamdan indicated progress in Hamas's relations with UMNO and the Malaysian government (Bernama, 2012). Hamdan, who by then had become instrumental in advancing Hamas's ties with Malaysia, discussed collaboration with UMNO and, together with UMNO Secretary General Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansur, initiated a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for collaboration in education, youth and women empowerment, and capacity building between the two parties (Jismi Johari, personal communication, May 24, 2018; Hafizah Abu Bakar, personal communication, June 25, 2020). The MOU was signed a year later in December 2013. Hamdan's frequent visits during this period included regular meetings with Prime Minister Najib, Defence Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, and other senior government officials (Hamdan, 2018). In one of his meetings with Najib in November 2012, he invited the Prime Minister to visit Gaza and meet Prime Minister Ismail Haniyyeh (Bernama, 2012; Hamdan, 2018).

By December 2012, senior UMNO leader Azeez Raheem met in Gaza with Prime Minister Ismail Haniyyeh, who told the media that 'Prime Minister Najib had expressed his wish to visit Gaza next year' (Bernama, 2012). Meanwhile, other Malaysian leaders visited Gaza to foster ties with its Hamas administration. One notable example was the visit of Malaysian Deputy International Trade and Industry (MITI) Minister Mukhriz Mahathir, who met senior Palestinian officials in Gaza, including its Health Minister, Dr Mufid El-Mukhalalati, to discuss cooperation (Bernama, 2012). While Hamas continued to focus on building ties with the UMNO-led government, its delegates did not miss any opportunity to maintain warm ties with the opposition (Hamdan, 2018). In October 2012, the Gaza government Health Minister, Dr Basem Naim, was hosted by the Selangor state government, where he met then PKR advisor Anwar Ibrahim and other Pakatan Rakyat (PR) leaders (Basem Naim, personal communication, April 30, 2024). A month later, another Hamas delegation arrived in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, to attend the annual PAS Muktamar (Mohamad Nawawi, 2018). While it was clear that PAS did not like the increasing warmth in Hamas-UMNO relations, the Islamic party continued the tradition of hosting Hamas leaders at its party assembly (Khalid Qadomi, personal communication, December 13, 2017).

The frequent exchanges between Hamas and Malaysia culminated in the unprecedented visit of Najib to Gaza on January 22, 2013. Najib, who his wife and several senior officials accompanied, became the first Malaysian premier to visit Palestine and was officially received by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyyeh. Describing his visit as a “humanitarian visit,” Najib declared from Gaza that setting foot in the besieged enclave was the best way to show Malaysia’s support for the Palestinian people (Bernama, 2013). By the end of the visit, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) detailing Malaysia’s pledge to help rebuild Gaza was signed by the foreign ministers of both sides (Mat Isa, 2017). Najib’s visit to Gaza accelerated bilateral relations with Hamas, and by December 2013, Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal led a senior delegation to attend UMNO’s 67th Annual General Assembly. While Fatah delegates were also present, Meshaal took centre stage and met with Najib and other senior officials. During their meeting, Najib assured Meshaal of his support and stressed that, despite the West’s claim that Hamas was a terrorist organisation, he and his government believed ‘Hamas was an elected government whose leaders were freedom fighters’ (Hamdan, 2018). During the same visit, Meshaal joined UMNO Vice President and Defence Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi at a press conference where Zahid announced that UMNO and Hamas had become partners and allies (UMNO Online, 2013). Zahid also stated that his party was willing to serve as a mediator in reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah (Bernama, 2013; Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, personal communication, September 16, 2018). By the end of this visit, Hamas and UMNO signed the MOU shown in Figure 1 below, setting the stage for future expansion of their bilateral relations (Hamdan, 2018; Abu Bakar, 2020).

Figure 1: Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Hamas and UMNO signed on December 4, 2013. (Source: Archives of UMNO Headquarters)



To implement the MOU, additional visits by senior Hamas leaders, especially Osama Hamdan, took place in the following months (Hamdan, 2018). During his visits in 2014, Hamdan, in addition to his regular meetings with government officials, met with leaders of several Malaysian NGOs and senior PAS leaders to acknowledge their roles in

promoting Hamas's struggle in Malaysia. During a meeting with PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang, Hamdan was informed of the party's decision to form a special secretariat focused on the Palestinian issue (Mohamad Nawi, 2018). In another meeting, Prime Minister Najib reiterated Malaysia's support for Hamas in its struggle, especially after its survival of the Israeli military offensive of July to August 2014 (Hamdan, 2018). By November 2014, another senior Hamas leader, Mohamad Naser, attended the annual UMNO assembly and met with Najib and other officials (Abu Bakar, 2020). UMNO-Hamas meetings continued in 2015. By October 2015, Hamas delegates attended the "Women in Politics Conference" organised by UMNO's Women's Wing, and by December, Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal returned to Malaysia and met with Prime Minister Najib and other senior officials (Abu Bakar, 2020; Jismi Johari, personal communication, May 24, 2018). Meshaal, who received widespread media coverage, hailed Malaysia for its important role in supporting the Palestinian cause and thanked the country for its humanitarian assistance (Bernama, 2015).

While Hamas-UMNO relations were growing warmer, the Palestinian movement maintained frequent interaction with Malaysia's main Islamist party, PAS. In May 2016, Hamas leaders attended PAS's 62nd Muktamar in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, and returned a year later in May 2017 for another event hosted by the PAS state government (Hamdan, 2018). Meanwhile, Hamas continued to attend UMNO assemblies, but the Malaysian environment was changing as Najib became more embroiled in the 1MDB crisis (Qadomi, 2017).

The frequent Hamas visits to Malaysia did not sit well with the Israeli government. From 2014 onwards, Israeli media reported several allegations about Malaysia becoming a hub for Hamas activities (The Jerusalem Post, 2014). These allegations gained more media attention when it was reported that senior Hamas leader Saleh Aruri was relocating to Malaysia in 2017. However, both Malaysian and Hamas officials denied the claim and reiterated that their relations were focused on political and cultural cooperation, not military activities (New Straits Times, 2017; The Sun, 2017; Hamdan, 2018). The other Palestinian party was also uneasy about the growing warmth between Malaysia and Hamas. By November 2017, Palestinian Presidential Advisor for Religion and Islamic Relations, Dr Mahmoud Alhabbash, was in Malaysia to attend an event in Sarawak (Wafa, 2017). Alhabbash met with Prime Minister Najib and invited him to visit Ramallah and Jerusalem. However, Najib did not commit to visiting the West Bank due to the possible public backlash if he had to go through Israeli authorities (Mat Isa, 2017).

Hamas and Fatah returned to Kuala Lumpur again in December 2017 for what became UMNO's last general assembly as the dominant ruling party. Both Palestinian delegations met separately with Prime Minister Najib and other senior leaders and listened to Malaysian leaders express their displeasure with President Trump's plan to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. Towards the end of Hamas's visit, UMNO Youth Chief and Minister Khairy Jamaluddin, who met Hamas leaders, led a demonstration against Trump's plan near the US embassy. By 2018, Osama Hamdan returned to Malaysia in March and April to highlight Palestinian concerns about Trump's plan and to follow up on the investigations into the assassination of Palestinian scientist Dr Fadi Albatsh in Kuala

Lumpur (Hamdan, 2018). By May 2018, a new government took over in Putrajaya, paving the way for a new phase in Hamas-Malaysia relations.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Mahathir Mohamad and Hamas

While Mahathir's first premiership coincided with Hamas's early years, the movement's limited international reach and its subordinate position to Fatah in the Palestinian struggle made it difficult for Mahathir's government to establish open diplomatic ties with Hamas (Hamdan, 2018). It was only with Hamas's meteoric rise during the Second Intifada (2000–2005), the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, and its stunning parliamentary victory in 2006, all external factors to Malaysia, that the group caught the country's attention (Johari, 2018). Despite this, Mahathir maintained some informal communication with Hamas in the mid-1990s, encouraging the group to cooperate with his longtime ally, PLO leader Yasser Arafat (Ghusheh, 2013; Mohamad, 2017). Mahathir's close personal relationship with Arafat, alongside UMNO's cautious approach to political Islam, likely hindered any deeper engagement with Hamas at that time.

However, a significant shift occurred during Mahathir's second premiership (2018–2020). His deeply personal and idiosyncratic passion for the Palestinian cause, combined with the evolving political landscape in Palestine, facilitated what could be seen as the “golden age” of Malaysia's cooperation with Hamas. Mahathir's foreign policy decisions were often coloured by his distinctive worldview, in which his moral convictions about global justice and his anti-Western stance shaped his approach to the Palestinian issue. At the same time, the changing dynamics in Palestine—especially the weakening of Fatah and the increasing prominence of Hamas—created a more favourable environment for Mahathir to strengthen Malaysia's ties with the Gaza-based government (Basem Naim, personal communication, April 30, 2024).

Abdullah Badawi and Hamas

Just as his predecessors' foreign policy was shaped by several dynamics, including idiosyncratic factors, domestic politics, and the international environment, Abdullah's was as well. However, emerging domestic factors began to play a more significant role in shaping Malaysia's foreign policy during his tenure, including the growing influence of humanitarian NGOs, the evolving Islamic identity of the Malaysian state, and the increasing sway of Malaysian public opinion. Abdullah, born into a family deeply rooted in Islamic traditions, had a grandfather, a revered Islamic scholar known for his piety and wisdom. Abdullah himself studied at the University of Malaya's Islamic Studies program, and this Islamic background influenced his worldview. It was reflected in his Islam Hadhari policy, which sought to modernise Islam in Malaysia. As Malaysia became more aligned with Islamic ideals, policymakers, including Abdullah, became more invested in the Palestinian issue. While Abdullah's foreign policy maintained the same stance on Palestine as Mahathir's, the Islamic dimension of this issue gained greater prominence under his leadership.

On the domestic front, Abdullah faced a shifting sociopolitical and socioeconomic environment. Though initially enjoying broad public support, his administration eventually faced strong opposition, culminating in the 2008 elections. The opposition, led by Anwar Ibrahim, achieved unprecedented electoral success, denying the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition its traditional two-thirds parliamentary majority. One issue the opposition seized upon was Abdullah's ambiguous stance on the Hamas government. While Abdullah congratulated Hamas in 2006 and hosted its leaders in Putrajaya in 2007, his government later backtracked, freezing relations with Hamas (Hamdan, 2018). The opposition, particularly PAS, criticised this shift, calling for Malaysia to fully recognise and support Hamas's elected government, a position they argued aligned with the views of the Malay Muslim majority (Abdul Hadi Awang, personal communication, October 16, 2017; Mat Isa, 2017).

Another significant factor during Abdullah's tenure was the growing influence of emerging Malaysian humanitarian NGOs, such as Perdana Global Peace, as well as Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) like Aman Palestin and Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM). These NGOs played a crucial role in pressuring the government to take a more active stance on the Palestinian issue or in collaborating with officials to implement Malaysia's initiatives regarding Palestine (Zulaiha Ismail, personal communication, September 27, 2017; Zaik, 2022). These organisations not only raised awareness about Palestine but also became influential actors in Malaysia's foreign policy decisions, advocating for closer ties with Hamas and its Gaza government.

At the same time, media and public opinion were becoming increasingly influential. Abdullah's government embraced a more open public space, allowing for greater media freedom and the expression of diverse views (Liew Chin Tong, personal communication, November 3, 2020). This shift, alongside the rise of alternative media outlets, sparked a more open and critical discussion of government policies, including foreign policy. In this environment, Abdullah's government was under increasing pressure from civil society, opposition groups, and the media to demonstrate that it was actively supporting the Palestinian cause, including the need for direct ties with Hamas (Mat Isa, 2017). As a result, Abdullah found himself balancing domestic expectations with the need to maintain a consistent foreign policy.

In addition to domestic factors, Malaysia's assessment of the international environment shaped its foreign policy towards Palestine during Abdullah's time. Despite the challenges posed by the U.S.-led "war on terror," Malaysia found itself in a position to play a leading role in the Muslim world on the Palestinian issue. Under Abdullah, Malaysia chaired two important international organisations —the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) —which enabled it to position itself as a relatively influential actor in global discussions on Palestine. Malaysia's rising stature as a middle power was particularly evident during the Israeli attacks on Lebanon in 2006, the internal Palestinian political strife, and the devastating Israeli war on Gaza in 2008-09. Malaysia became more involved in international diplomatic efforts to end the Israeli military actions and attempted, though unsuccessfully, to encourage reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas (Albar, 2017).

Najib Abdul Razak and Hamas

Malaysia's relations with the Palestinians during the reign of Najib Abdul Razak witnessed a major shift from the decades-long policy of exclusive interaction with Fatah and the PLO to a more open approach that embraced Hamas as a rising and instrumental Palestinian political force (Ku Shaari, 2017; Mohsen Saleh, personal communication, February 4, 2018). This shift was further deepened by UMNO's engagement with Hamas, as evidenced by frequent top-level exchanges culminating in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that formalised the relationship (Abu Bakar, 2020). While relations with Hamas and the Gaza administration were strengthening, Fatah's—and by extension, the PLO's—ties with Malaysia began to wane. This transformation was driven by key developments during Najib's tenure: the Israeli attack on the Mavi Marmara, Najib's 2013 visit to Gaza, Meshaal's 2013 and 2015 visits to Malaysia, and the Hamas-UMNO MOU.

Analysing the factors that shaped Najib's foreign policy across idiosyncratic, domestic, and international levels reveals that Abbas's visit to Malaysia did little to improve relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA). In contrast, Najib's government increasingly prioritised engagements with Hamas. While Wisma Putra occasionally expressed interest in facilitating meetings between Abbas and Najib, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) exercised caution, concerned about preserving the Prime Minister's image (Johari, 2018). Within Najib's inner circles, Abbas was viewed as too conciliatory towards Israel (Mat Isa, 2017; Johari, 2018). Many Malaysian Muslims perceived him as a secular leader whose stance lacked firmness, especially when compared to the more defiant images of Hamas leaders Khaled Meshaal and Ismail Haniyyeh, who commanded wider respect in Malaysia and the broader Muslim world. Najib's interactions with them contributed to his image as an Islamic leader aligned with the Palestinian struggle (Ahmad Atawneh, personal communication, October 17, 2017). Supporters of Najib's pro-Hamas stance claimed that the Gaza visit helped portray him as “a leader of the Islamic Ummah” who stood with “defiant Islamic leaders” rather than the “toothless PA leader” (Johari, 2018). The Malaysian government extensively utilised mass media to highlight Najib's visit to Gaza and his relationship with Hamas as evidence of his Islamic credentials and personal courage. A visit to Ramallah or hosting Abbas again would not have served this narrative (Atawneh, 2017; Johari, 2018). As such, Najib's advisors ultimately rejected the idea of another Abbas visit to Malaysia or Najib accepting Abbas's invitation to Ramallah (Mat Isa, 2017). Over the remainder of Najib's tenure, Malaysian NGOs and UMNO leaders—driven by concerns over dwindling public support post-1MDB—continued to push for stronger engagement with Hamas and Gaza over the PLO.

The Mavi Marmara incident served as a turning point, making clear to Najib's government that Hamas was the de facto authority in Gaza. The Ramallah-based PA and its Kuala Lumpur embassy had no operational control or meaningful access to the Strip. The Malaysian government, needing a reliable communication channel with Gaza to support its NGOs and humanitarian missions, began rethinking its approach (Zaik, 2022; Saleh, 2018). Activists returning from Gaza briefed both Wisma Putra and the PMO with field insights that supported engagement with Hamas (Hafidzi Mohd Nor, personal communication, June 6, 2018; Azmi Abdul Hamid, personal communication, March 27, 2018; Zaik, 2022).

In the ensuing years, multiple Hamas delegations visited Malaysia, laying the groundwork for the 2013 MOU between UMNO and Hamas and facilitating deeper cooperation (Abu Bakar, 2020). Najib publicly endorsed this growing relationship, asserting that Hamas was not a terrorist organisation but a group of “freedom fighters” (Hamdan, 2018). The intensifying relationship was influenced by the strong advocacy of Malaysian NGOs and a public increasingly supportive of political Islam (Atawneh, 2017; Mat Isa, 2017; Johari, 2018). Najib and UMNO leaders viewed this connection as both a strategic move to support Palestine and a means to boost their domestic popularity among Malay Muslims (Mat Isa, 2017; Johari, 2018).

Domestic political considerations played a crucial role in advancing Hamas-UMNO ties (Ishtiaq Hossein, personal communication, September 29, 2017). Facing a tough electoral contest in 2013, Najib sought to consolidate Malay Muslim support. A strong pro-Palestine foreign policy was one such strategy (Mat Isa, 2017; Atawneh, 2017). Hamas’s embrace of Najib during his Gaza visit and the broader symbolic alignment between the two were seen by UMNO as an electoral asset (Johari, 2018; Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, 2018). The warming of ties between the two parties led to the formalisation of the relationship via the 2013 MOU. UMNO began competing not just with PAS but also with pro-Palestine NGOs by sending its own humanitarian convoys to Gaza. NGOs, in turn, exerted pressure on state institutions to deepen engagement with Gaza (Atawneh, 2017), contributing to increased NGO influence in shaping Malaysia’s policy on Palestine.

Domestic political calculations heavily shaped Najib’s 2013 visit to Gaza. The timing—on the eve of general elections—was critical. Though Najib’s earlier reforms attracted some non-Malay support, he needed to galvanise Malay voters. A high-profile foreign policy move was necessary, and the Gaza visit served that purpose. Still, this domestic calculus was complemented by NGO lobbying and international considerations. NGOs played a prominent role in Najib’s Palestine policy. His key informal foreign policy advisor, Nasharudin Mat Isa—former PAS deputy president, Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM) Director, and Palestinian Cultural Organisation (PCOM) Trustee—served as a conduit between Najib and Middle Eastern Islamist movements (Mat Isa, 2017). Nasharudin facilitated Najib’s Gaza visit and consistently encouraged strong relations with Hamas. Despite internal opposition—especially from Wisma Putra and some in the PMO—Najib prioritised domestic political advantages and public opinion, ultimately greenlighting the visit (Mat Isa, 2017). Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority objected, but their protests were ignored (Abu Bakar, 2020). Najib characterised the trip as a “humanitarian visit,” rebutting accusations of favouritism towards Hamas and stating his support for all Palestinians. He clarified that visiting the West Bank was impossible without Israeli approval, which Malaysia did not have due to its lack of diplomatic ties with Israel (Bernama, 2013). For UMNO, the visit was a public relations triumph. Senior UMNO leader, Ahmad Maslan, lauded Najib as a bold, globally respected Muslim leader. NGOs echoed this sentiment, praising the visit as an act of solidarity (Bernama, 2013). The trip also came at a time when the Malaysian opposition was trying to leverage the many episodes of regime change unfolding in the Middle East due to the Arab Spring. Najib appeared to be a friend of one of the main Islamic political groups, Hamas, at a time when other Islamic political movements were sweeping elections in the Arab World.

Internationally, the visit raised Najib's stature in the Muslim world (Qadomi, 2017; Atawneh, 2017; Saleh, 2018). Notably, prominent Islamic scholar, Dr Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, praised Najib in a letter in March 2013 (Bernama, 2013). Malaysia's emergence as a middle power and its geostrategic importance gave Najib the flexibility to engage Hamas without provoking major backlash from Western powers (Saleh, 2018). While U.S. and Western pressure remained a concern, Malaysia's strategic hedging and nuanced diplomacy allowed it to balance its traditional ties with the PLO while pursuing a "humanitarian" relationship with Hamas (Ku Shaari, 2017). Western powers, recognising the domestic pressures the Malaysian government faced, appeared to tolerate this posture.

Meshaal's visits to Malaysia in 2013 and 2015 marked the height of Malaysia-Hamas relations during the Barisan Nasional era. The 2013 visit resulted in the signing of an MOU between Hamas and UMNO, enabling broader cooperation, including in youth and women's development (Abu Bakar, 2020). This strengthened Hamas's ties across Asia and enhanced UMNO's Islamic legitimacy (Johari, 2018). Meshaal's 2013 visit also served domestic political purposes. After Barisan Nasional lost the popular vote, Najib, concerned about legitimacy, invited Meshaal to meet with opposition leaders, including Anwar Ibrahim, to ease political tensions. Although the mediation efforts failed, they reflected the growing trust between Hamas and Malaysian political factions (Hamdan, 2018; Johari, 2018). While Meshaal's 2015 visit was not the last by a top Hamas leader to Malaysia, the frequency of such high-level visits declined thereafter—except for a brief resurgence during Mahathir's second premiership (2018–2020).

Malaysia-Hamas Relations after Barisan Nasional

In the post-Barisan Nasional era, Malaysia's relations with Hamas have continued to be shaped by a combination of domestic political dynamics, international constraints, and humanitarian considerations. The transition to a new political landscape under the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government initially saw a more cautious approach as the new administration of Mahathir Mohamad focused on the domestic front; however, not long after, Mahathir reinvigorated Malaysia's outreach to Hamas and hosted several senior Hamas leaders in Kuala Lumpur, including during the 2019 prestigious KL Summit. Meanwhile, Malaysia's support for Gaza and its humanitarian outreach persisted, demonstrating continuity in its pro-Palestinian stance. Mahathir's Pakatan Harapan government also maintained Malaysia's regular criticism of Israeli policies on all possible international platforms. The following two Perikatan Nasional-Barisan Nasional governments of Muhyiddin Yassin and Ismail Sabri were more embroiled in the struggle to address the COVID-19 crisis than in foreign policy endeavours. However, intermittent shows of solidarity with Hamas and the Palestinians took place from time to time. Moreover, Anwar Ibrahim's unity government maintained the same tone on Hamas and Palestine. While the situation in Palestine after the October 7 Al-Aqsa Flood military operation and the ensuing Israeli genocide in Gaza developed beyond anything seen in the past, Malaysia maintained a consistent approach in favour of the Palestinian side. While he did not host the movement chief in Malaysia like some of his predecessors, Anwar visited Hamas leader Ismail Haniyyeh in Doha in May 2024 and continued to defend the movement against Western accusations of terrorism. This evolving relationship between Malaysia and Hamas reflects Malaysia's balancing act between its Islamic solidarity, public

opinion, and the complexities of international diplomacy in addressing the Palestinian struggle.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Malaysia's engagement with Hamas reflects a dynamic foreign policy shaped by the views and idiosyncrasies of its leaders, the domestic pressures they faced, and the international contexts in which Malaysia operated. Malaysia's relations with Hamas grew steadily during the Barisan Nasional era and evolved further thereafter. Under Mahathir Mohamad, the relationship with Hamas was minimal, as his focus remained primarily on the PLO and Yasser Arafat. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi introduced an Islamic emphasis to Malaysia's foreign policy, and early outreach to Hamas under his leadership showed potential, though it was later curtailed due to domestic and international considerations. It was under Najib Abdul Razak that Malaysia openly embraced Hamas as a central actor in the Palestinian struggle. Marked by Najib's 2013 visit to Gaza and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between UMNO and Hamas, this period signalled a notable shift in Malaysia's approach. This empirical study contributes to understanding this pivotal period by documenting key developments, including the political use of Hamas ties, the influence of public opinion, and the critical role of NGOs, especially PONGOs, in driving Malaysia's pro-Hamas orientation. Framed as humanitarian solidarity, these efforts allowed Najib's government to respond to grassroots pressure while also projecting Malaysia's Islamic credentials on the international stage. Although the post-BN era saw changes in domestic politics, Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine—and Hamas in particular—continued to develop. Across administrations, the trajectory of Malaysia–Hamas relations have been shaped by a blend of public support, NGO advocacy, and broader geopolitical considerations. By tracing these developments, this study offers an original empirical account of Malaysia's evolving position, underscoring how domestic and transnational factors intersect to shape the country's foreign policy toward Palestine.

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