

The Attitude and Commitment of the Malaysian Government towards Islam in the Foreign Policy (1957-2003): An Assessment

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Abstract

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. Being part of the Ummah, Malaysia endeavors her utmost to manifest her concern and commitment to the Islamic principles of brotherhood and justice. Islam plays an important part in the national life, as it is closely linked to the ethnic identity of the politically dominant Malays. Consequently, the foreign policy of Malaysia may be said to be affected by Islam to a considerable degree. The primary concern of this paper is to examine Malaysia's commitment to Islam and Islamic cause, as reflected in its foreign policy. It is also, in a way, an attempt to identify the prime mover of Malaysian foreign policy. This paper, argues that Islam has never been an overriding factor in Malaysia's support for Islamic issues. Malaysian's role in this respect was largely motivated by pragmatic considerations resulting from an interplay between various factors; political, economic, religious and humanitarian.

INTRODUCTION

Malaya gained its independence on August 31, 1957. According the new Merdeka Constitution, Islam was made for the first time the official religion (Sheridan & Groves, 1967) for the entire Federation, including Penang and Malacca as well as the Malay states. Article 3(2) provides

that the Malay states' rulers will be in charge of Islam in their states. But in the states of Penang and Malacca, where there is no dynastic rule, governors of these states are not entrusted with religious responsibility. Instead, this duty is assumed by the Yang DiPertuan Agong who acts as the ruling Monarch for the federation as a whole.

From a historical study of Malay politics, one may notice that Islam has increasingly become a vital political force because of its significance to communal and political identity of the Malay-Muslims (Nair, Shanti 1997). According to the Constitution of Malaysia, Malay means "a person who professes the Muslim religion, speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs".¹ This definition clearly signifies a strong correlation between religion and ethnicity in Malaysian polity, thus paving the way for the emergence of Islam as a potent political force in Malaysia domestically and internationally.

Significantly, Islam represents a symbol of legitimacy for the ruling Malay party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Since its formation under the leadership of Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, UMNO has been successful in providing guidelines for Malaysian Islamic diplomacy. Islam, with the passage of time, gained greater role in the politics of Malaysia as a result of serious and deepening intra-Malay rivalry, particularly between UMNO and PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia). Therefore, UMNO under the leadership of successive Prime Ministers has continued its commitment to use Islam as an important policy tool to help, protect, promote and secure Malaysia's national interests within the international world of Islam.

Indeed, Islam, as a bastion of Malay identity, has considerably influenced the domestic policies of the Malaysian government. The exact degree to which Islam influences Malaysian foreign policy has yet to be investigated, but it is reasonable to assume that such an important component in the national life and character of the Malays do have some influences. Since

Islam plays a remarkable role in the national life, it should inevitably exert considerable influence in its external attitudes and politics.

ISLAM IN MALAYSIAN FOREIGN POLICY: AN OVERVIEW

The foreign policy of Malaysia has been since the first days of independence directly and consistently engaged in the promotion of friendly and cooperative relations among nations in order to achieve a just and safe international order, and to promote the struggle against imperialism, racism and human misery (Shafie, Ghazali 1982).

Malaysia believes that every state must be allowed to choose for itself its own form of political, economic and social organizations, free from any manner of external interference. Malaysia's commitment to the principle of international peace and justice may be best illustrated by its constructive support for the nationalist struggle for freedom and justice, e.g. the cases of the black South Africans, Bosnians and Palestinians.

In a democratic country like Malaysia, foreign policy must reflect the aspirations of the people for peace, security and development. As discussed earlier, Islam plays an important part in the national life, as it is closely linked to the ethnic identity of the politically dominant Malays. Therefore, Islam is an important factor in contemporary Malaysian politics, especially in mobilizing the Malays for political action, and in the formulation of foreign policy.

Islam, being the official religion of the country, is thus protected and subsidized. Significantly, Islam has for long been a component of Malay political culture, and thus represented a symbol of legitimacy for the ruling Malay party, UMNO, from its formation. Commenting on the importance of Islam in Malay culture and Malay politics, it is by no means an exaggeration to suggest that religion and religious consideration are of great importance in the foreign policy making of Malaysia.

Islam is certainly a unifying force in the Malay community as well as among the Islamic world community. This feeling of kinship in Islam is, therefore an attitude of mind, which if not exercising undue influence on Malaysian foreign policy formulation, will at least be taken into account when evaluating foreign policy alternatives in order to achieve the realization of a particular national aim (Widdowson 1976).

Malaysia being a Muslim country with a sizable Muslim population and Islam as its official religion would have to show special concern and support to Muslim affairs and issues throughout the world. The spirit of ummatism, which advocates one single integrated Muslim community unseparated by boundaries of race and worldly ideologies, has made possible the gathering of Muslim countries in a number of organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Malaysia is indeed by no means an exception.

Malaysia's emphasis on the co-religionists' issues could be seen in her firm stands on the Palestinian issue, the Russian aggression on Afghanistan, the Gulf war, the conflict in Bosnia and the struggle of Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia. On the OIC as well as the UN levels, we note Malaysia uncompromising support to all Islamic gatherings and causes.

The basic premises for Malaysian Islamic diplomacy were certainly laid down by the first Prime Minister of Malaysia who was also the first Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Since the era of the first Prime Minister, Malaysia has actively supported the cause of Islamic nations, particularly on the platform of the OIC, and courageously voiced out the Ummatic causes in the UN gatherings. In many occasions, Malaysia has contributed much in terms of providing ideas and suggesting solutions with respect to issues affecting the Ummah, and the world community at large.

The feeling of Islamic brotherhood triggered the Malaysian government to involve itself in important Islamic issues such as the Palestinian issue, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Bosnian conflict, the Iran-Iraq war and the problem of Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia. The Islamic-Ummatic orientation of Malaysia has become the basic motivation for Malaysia to support the Islamic cause. This could be best exemplified by the Palestinian cause, which is perhaps the oldest and the most pronounced Islamic issue to the Malaysian government. All the Malaysian Premiers have contributed significantly to the Palestinian struggle, morally, materially and through other means.

Malaysia's preoccupation with the Palestinian issue is perhaps the earliest among other Islamic issues. Malaysia's stand towards the Palestinian struggle and the Zionist regime could be noticed ever since the early days of independence under the premiership of the first Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Another Islamic-humanitarian issue that gained much attention from the Malaysian government was the plight of the Afghan Muslims who were victims of the Soviet aggression.² The armed Soviet intervention in Afghanistan on December 27, 1979 was formally condemned by a vast majority of the UN member states, including Malaysia, as an act violating the principle of international conduct as enshrined in the UN Charter. The concept of Islamic fraternity was another factor that motivated the Malaysian government to support the Afghan cause.

One important event that paved the way for a growing attention to Islam in Malaysian government policies in the late sixties under the administration of Tunku Abdul Rahman, was the occurrence of the riots of May 13, 1969 (Camber 1983). They led to a growing Malay-Islamic re-assertiveness and hence, as far as foreign policy is concerned, were instrumental in a slight change in favor of Islam and the Muslim nations. The May riots, later described by Tunku as the 'darkest period in our

national history', were, doubtless, a serious blow to the government's image, and especially to UMNO. They were, therefore, encouraged to enhance their participation and strengthen their association with the International Islamic community in order to boost their image and regain the confidence of the Malay-Muslim population in particular.

It is Important to highlight that the outbreak of the Arab-Israel war of 1967, resulted in the major change in the policy of Malaysian government toward Israel. Since then, the Palestinian issue became one of the favorite topics in the Malaysian dailies³ and in Parliament⁴. The withdrawal of the proposal to recognize Israel in 1967 was justified by the Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, in the following words, "to change the political status quo of the region through force of military might is an anachronism and militates against a cardinal tenet of the United Nations"⁵. Thus Malaysia's conviction in the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, and its opposition to acts of terrorism was apparently the major reason for its refusal to recognize the Israeli regime. This change of attitude was presumably also partly motivated by the heightened domestic pressure. For instance, several UMNO branch resolutions urged the review of the recognition proposal in order "to keep up the good name of Malaya among Muslim countries in the Middle East"⁶.

Prior to 1969, the Islamic consideration had apparently had an impact on the formulation of the Malaysian foreign policy. The Malaysian government believed that the issue was essentially a political one. It is important to highlight that early Malaysia's support for the Palestinian cause was more of a political nature, but partly as well a gesture of support for the co-religionists.

Another major landmark, perhaps that most important factor for the subsequent drastic change in the Malaysian government attitude and role towards the Islamic issue, was the arson of Al-Aqsa mosque on

August 21, 1969. Since then, Malaysia's support for the Palestinian cause was very much supportive and vigorous. In one of its statement on the problem, the Malaysian government pledged Malaysia's support for the Arab cause "until justice has been done for the Arabs"⁷. Noticeably, the arson led to the reenergizing of Islam in the International arena through the holding of the first Islamic Summit Conference in Rabat. Simultaneously Islam has increasingly influenced the foreign policies of the Malaysian government who, since 1969, acted in concert with fellow Muslim countries within the OIC over the Palestinian issue.

Tunku Abdul Rahman himself attended the Islamic Summit. His speech on the occasion suggested that Islam had already become an important pillar of Malaysian foreign policy. In his address, Tunku stressed that the Palestinian issue was actually an Islamic issue. He stated:

"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".⁸

Malaysia regional Islamic profile has been maintained through her active participation at the non-governmental level, and in regional gatherings, to promote solidarity and cooperation among regional Muslim states. In 1981 for instance, Tunku Abdul Rahman was appointed the President of the RISEAP (Regional Islamic Dakwah Council for Southeast Asia and the Pacific)⁹. The headquarter of this organization and a training center were subsequently established in Kuala Lumpur to promote greater non-government cooperation in Islamic matters among the various regional Islamic organizations, and in June 1982, Kuala Lumpur was the venue of the first General Assembly of RISEAP. At this conference, Dr. Mahathir reiterated Malaysia's firm commitment to the cause of Islamic da'wah,

locally and internationally, and vowed to vigorously support the cause of Islamic nations.¹⁰

It is undeniable that Islam is a major force in Southeast Asia since it is the official religion of Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, the faith of some 90 percent of the Indonesian population and a large minority in the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore. In addition, Islam in Southeast Asia has been increasingly politicized as a result of development within the Islamic world. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to expect that Malaysia's foreign policy would also be geared towards an active and serious commitment to the regional Islamic causes. Yet this commendable stand in the conduct of foreign policy is arguably adopted for more than religious reasons. Politically, it is primarily motivated by the desire to ensure the maintenance of peace and stability in the region, and to promote cooperation among the regional state. As such, ASEAN has always been regarded as the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy.¹¹

Indeed, Malaysia's active involvement in the affairs of the Islamic world is not confined to the political arena. At the economic front, Malaysia believes that the economic growth and development of member countries has currently become more difficult, especially by the manipulative policies of the developed nations, and the problem of indebtedness. Malaysia, under its first Premier, contributed significantly to the establishment of Islamic Development Bank (IDB) which aimed at accumulating wealth from the rich members to help the poor and less developed, and, at the time, to ensure that Muslim economy could compete with other developed and developing economies.¹² Closer ties with the Muslim world, both Arab and non-Arab, holds the attractive potential for greater commercial, trade and investment linkages with these states. Dr. Mahathir echoed this point clearly when he remarked that Malaysia should take advantage of the presence of 900 million Muslims in the world.¹³ Pakistan and Iraq, for instance, are among the biggest buyers of Malaysia's palm oil.¹⁴

In terms of investment, closer ties with the Gulf States, and institutions like that of IDB, Saudi Fund and the Kuwaiti Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED), has injected funds for Malaysia's various development plans. Bilateral loans from these institutions had, for example, totaled by the end of 1984 M\$390.3 million (Saudi Fund: M\$25.5 million and Kuwait Fund: M\$137.8 million) (Ahmad, M. Yusof, 1990: 308). Indeed, closer political and religious ties with these countries led to medium and long-term economic benefits for Malaysia. For instance, through cultivating closer relations with the Arab world, the administration of the second Premier, Tun Abdul Razak, got a M\$300 million loan to finance various developmental projects in the country, and was indeed instrumental in the success of its New Economic Policy (NEP).¹⁵

Tun Razak's era was very much known for its domestic economic restructuring (NEP) to address the economic imbalance among the Malaysian communities that was one of the prime reasons for the communal crisis in 1969. Consequently, Tun Razak continued to enhance its active and closer participation with the Muslim world especially 'the oil-powers', that could benefit Malaysia economically. Indeed, the policies he formulated locally and globally were depicted in terms of national objectives.

Malaysia's closest cooperation and active support to the Arab world during Tun Razak administration had clearly been of great benefit to the country both politically and economically. In the economic field, Malaysia gained many trade opportunities offered by the Gulf States like Qatar, Oman, UEA and Bahrain, mainly through importing its rubber, wood, and food, including canned one.¹⁶

In a speech in the House of Representatives in March 1975, Tun Razak maintained that his tour to the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia was very successful. He proudly said that a capital of \$300 million from the Arab

countries would be utilized for the Medical Faculty of the National University of Malaysia (UKM), the National Technological Institute, the construction of a port in Kuantan and the funding of an electrical power project in Terengganu River. Another \$100 million from the UAE would also be used to finance projects of mutual interest. With regard to the political aspect, Tun Razak stressed that Malaysia managed to strengthen unity with the Arab countries through its firm stand against Israeli occupation of Arab lands.¹⁷

Malaysia 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 rights of the Palestinian people were prerequisites for a lasting peace in the Middle East. They also reaffirmed their recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.¹⁸ Indeed, the government active association with the Islamic world, like the successful hosting of the Fifth Islamic Conference in Kuala Lumpur, had really enhanced its image abroad, but particularly at home among the Malay-Muslims. This is indeed a crucial part of the government's drive of image rebuilding especially in the post 1969 riot.

Malaysia involvement with the Islamic nations is not only confined to the political and economic spheres. Association with the Muslim world enabled Malaysia to promote greater cooperation in the fields of culture, education, science and technology. For instance, Tun Abdul Razak signed in 1975 a treaty with the Gulf States to exchange scientists, professors, students, journalists and sport elite. In the same year, he also concluded an agreement on economic, technical and cultural cooperation with Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹⁹ The next administration under the leadership of Tun Hussein Onn continued this policy by signing in 1977 an economic, scientific and technical agreement with Libya and the Arab Republic of Egypt.²⁰

Beside the principles of non-alignment and regionalism, the third Premier of Malaysia, Tun Hussein also adopted the concept of Islamic solidarity. Thus he upgraded relations with the Muslim countries, particularly the Arab states, and enhanced participation in the International Islamic Organizations, especially in the OIC. At the inaugural meeting of the Regional Islamic Organization of Southeast Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP) on November 10, 1980, Tun Hussein stressed his government's commitment towards Islam and the Islamic world. In his words;

*“Although the Malaysian society is multi-religious, Islam has been made the official religion of the country. The Federal and State Constitution guarantee the freedom of worship. Our national ideology, the Rukun Negara, provides for the belief in God. Malaysia has always supported the cause of Islam. It takes an active part in the Islamic Conference and the Islamic Development Bank. It is also active in the propagation of Islamic faith. We believe that material development alone cannot ensure the [health of a] nation; we also attach great importance to spiritual development”.*²¹

Admitting that material benefits were one of the priceless rewards of brotherly ties with the Islamic world, Tun Hussein continued Tun Razak's pragmatic strategy of using Islam as a binding force, which was instrumental for Malaysian development (Nair, Shanti 1997). Identified as a growing source of loans and investment capital for Malaysia, relations with the 'oil powers' were upgraded to underscore the Prime Minister's belief that Islam was indeed capable of bringing about prosperity and progress. Such ties were actively sought, and provided substantial resources for the Third Malaysian Plan, with wide publicity for loans and agreements signed with countries like Libya, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.²²

Tun Hussein's first visit outside ASEAN, was to Saudi Arabia. In 1977, Malaysia obtained M\$193 million from the Saudi Fund for Development, and concluded several important trade, technology and scientific

agreements with Iraq. By 1978, total Arab loans to Malaysia stood at M\$329 million. Under the Third Malaysian Plan, Libya provided M\$25 million towards development projects while Saudi Arabia gave a M\$200 million loan pact (Nair, Shanti 1997).

Malaysia, under Tun Hussein, had been commended for the propagation of Islam, and the development of Islamic world. PERKIM, still under the patronage of the ex-Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was the most successful beneficiary of this form of International funding with a gift of M\$12 million from Libya. In 1978, Kuwait pledged M\$15 million to the Perak State Religious Department, and Saudi Arabia pledged M\$3.5 million for a proposed religious school.²³

Reviewing Malaysia's political scenario under Tun Hussein's administration, one would realize that his government's commitment to the cause of Islam, locally and internationally, was inevitable and urgent. The growth of global Islamic resurgence in the second half of the 1970's, whose impact was vividly noticed in Malaysia, posed a serious challenge to Tun Hussein's government.²⁴ The rise of transnational da'wah activity, as a sequence of the global Islamic resurgence, spearheaded by three most important da'wah organizations: ABIM, Jama'at Tabligh and Dar al-Arqam, had further challenged the power of the government (Means, Gordon P., 1970: 71-74).

The strength and growth of such non-government organizations continued to challenge the domestic and external policies of the Malaysian government throughout the 1970's. Despite a renewed initiative to give attention to Malaysia's relation with Islamic nations in the Middle East and Africa, it was clear that the government had yet to work out an appropriate response to the impact of International Islamic revivalism on Malay-Muslim society (Nair, Shanti, 1997: 72). Curtailment of this movement was at any rate expected to be injurious to the image of the government. Thus it felt that closer active commitment to the Islamic

cause, like the Palestinian problem, would be somewhat imperative and urgent to secure legitimacy amidst the challenge of the world-wide revival of Islam in the 1970's.

The Malaysian government under Tun Hussein 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 states 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.

As already mentioned, Tun Hussein's policies were somewhat a continuation of Tun Razak's pragmatic initiatives, especially his pro-Arab policy. Realizing that foreign trade and investment were of greater importance for Malaysia, Tun Hussein consolidated and intensified relations with Muslim countries in West Asia. He visited Saudi Arabia in 1976, Egypt and Libya in January 1977, and Turkey and Iraq in February 1977.²⁵ Various agreements had been concluded between the parties concerned during these visits, thus developed a great momentum and impetus in the cooperation between Malaysia and those countries in the fields of trade, economy, technology, culture and science.²⁶ From the official communiqué issued at the close of every visit, one could clearly see, beside mutual cooperation, the urgency of the Middle East issue, particularly the cause of the Arab-Palestinians and their plight.

The resurgence of Islam had motivated, if not forced, UMNO, the leading Malay party, to be on its guard because the revival has in fact being translated into political benefit by its rival, PAS. Consequently, the government had to upgrade its commitment to Islam, and to treat Islamic issues more effectively in order not to offend Malay-Muslim sensibilities. Islamization was then taken by the government as a means to attract

Malay voters in the election amidst PAS challenge. Tun Hussein once commented;

*“You may wonder why we spend so much money on Islam. You may think it is a waste of money. If we don’t we face two major problems. First, Party Islam (PAS) will get at us. The party will and does claim that we’re not religious and the people will lose faith. The second, we have to strengthen the faith of the people which is another way to fight communism”.*²⁷

Reviewing the address of His Majesty at the opening of the Fifth Parliamentary Meeting in March 16, 1981, one could also note the considerable Islamic dimension of the Malaysian foreign policy. In his address the King emphasized:

*“My government is also concerned with International developments, such as the continuing conflict between Islamic states in West Asia and the Palestinian issue. The external aggression against Afghanistan is fraught with dark implications. In the light of these developments, my government is currently involved in several International organizations with a view to settling these disputes. I am also pleased that my government has been accorded high standing amongst Islamic nations. My government will also continue with efforts to consolidate cooperation and ties amongst Islamic nations.”*²⁸

Dr. Mahathir the fourth Premier later shifted Malaysia’s foreign policy from being essentially pro-Western and ASEAN-based to one with an increasing International profile and identification with the Third World problems.²⁹ Dr. Mahathir succeeded in bringing Malaysia to the fore, especially among the Third World countries, by voicing forcefully their aspiration and aims. Altaf Gauhar, Secretary General of the Third World Foundation, acknowledged Malaysia as a champion of the less developed Third World countries (Ahmad, Aziz Zariza, 1997: 137).

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. Dr. Mahathir's placement of the OIC and "pan-Islamism" at the second rung of Malaysia's foreign policy priority list in 1981 clearly testifies to this fact (Ahmad, M. Yusof, 1990: 170). Throughout the 1980's, Malaysia increasingly sought to identify itself with International Islamic issues, and as an activist member of the global Islamic community. Both government and UMNO rhetoric increasingly referred to Malaysia as an Islamic nation.

Undoubtedly Mahathir, like his predecessors, continued to deal with Islam as an important policy tool to protect, promote and secure Malaysia's national interests within the International world of Islam,³⁰ but no radical departure occurred from the one already laid down by the previous administration. Perhaps it is in the Palestinian issue that a strong sense of continuity could be noted. Though there was no radical departure with regard to the government's attitude towards this issue, some new assertiveness could be noticed during Mahathir administration.

The Pro-Islamic orientation of Mahathir is also evident in foreign policy. It is apparent that Mahathir's leaning towards the Muslim world is even more pronounced than his predecessors. Dr. Mahathir's declaration, in 1983, that Non-Aligned Movement and the Commonwealth were no longer as important to Malaysia as the Muslim Bloc overtly verifies the above fact (Mutalib, Hussin, 1995: 32).

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 UMNO in the eyes of the Malay-Muslim populace (Mutalib, Hussin, 1995: 30). Dr. Mahathir's commitment to the Islamic cause, particularly the Palestinian issue, had become even more pronounced and assertive with his co-option

of Anwar Ibrahim, the former President of ABIM, into the government in 1982.

Another factor for this commitment to the usage of Islam as a policy tools, is to maintain socio-political and religious stability amidst the challenge of da'wah movements resulting from the global Islamic resurgence since the late 1970's. The Iranian revolution, which took place at the close of 1979, posed a serious challenge to many 'secular-oriented' Muslim movements including Malaysia. Being fully aware of the power and pride of this movement, the government decided not to leave it to the manipulation or exploitation of the opposition Islamic parties. Since curtailment was expected at any rate to be injurious to the government reputation, it was thus persuaded, if not compelled, to respond to Islamic demands, especially to review its domestic Islamic policies, and its image within the Islamic world.

Under the leadership of 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, Dr. Mahathir's era witnessed increasing awareness among various civil society groups³¹ of Islamic issues, thus motivated his government to be more assertive towards them. Hence, in analyzing the role of the 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.

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 the Southeast Asia region, and the second country in the world, to do so.³² 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 Palestinians by saying, "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".³³ 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 office and the representative of the PLO in Kuala Lumpur, as accorded to other resident diplomatic missions here."*³⁴

The increasing role of the Malaysian government on 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 (Nair, Shanti 1997: 207). Humanitarian aid came in other forms like medical assistance, scholarships for Palestinian students at Malaysian Universities and occupational training centers.³⁵

Another most recent disturbing challenge to the Ummah was the costly and long war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988) that may be regarded as one of the most tragic events in Islamic history. It resulted in heavy casualties in terms of human live and financial costs, and to a certain degree, threatened both the Middle East and world stability. The Malaysian government strongly believed in a political solution to the Iran-Iraq conflict, and the issue to her was purely political.³⁶

Deputy Premier, Datuk Musa, assured that Malaysia, being a non-Arab country which is not located in the area or conflict, and as a member

of the OIC, would offer to undertake serious and long term efforts to find peace in the area of conflict. He commented on the stand of his government on the conflict as follows: "Considering that Malaysia maintains close relations with both Iran and Iraq, we would like to offer ourselves to find a solution to the conflict without appearing to take sides with either side".³⁷

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.

In November 1986, the over sensitivity to the PLO cause was again repeated. Following an official visit to Singapore by President Chaim Herzog of Israel, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei submitted an official protest to the Singapore government that chastised this visit for its lack of sensitivity towards the feeling of its Muslim neighbors. Anti Singapore rallies were held in Johor, and effigies of Premier Lee Kuan Yew were burned by protestors.³⁸ The rally organizer submitted a memorandum to the government calling for stronger actions ranging from a break in diplomatic ties³⁹ to a review of the water supply agreement with Singapore.⁴⁰ In response to these widespread demonstrations organized by various civil society groups, the government temporarily withdrew its High Commissioner from Singapore, and the relations between the two countries were strained for a while.

Another bold and commendable step taken by the Malaysian government was its decision of 12 January 1989; to elevate the office of the PLO in Malaysia to a full fledged Embassy of the state of Palestine.⁴¹ This movement clearly confirms the government aggressive posture in supporting the *Intifadha*, and was in line with its previous recognition of the state of Palestine.⁴² The elevation was, in fact, yet another reflection

of Malaysia's strong and unequivocal support to the just demands of the Palestinian for the self-determination and independence.

At the 18th Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on March 13, 1989, the Minister of Foreign Affairs explained in details the position of the Malaysian government in this respect. In his words;

“Malaysia is proud to be amongst the first countries to recognize the State of Palestine. As a manifestation of our support, Malaysia has upgraded the PLO office in Kuala Lumpur to full Embassy status. Malaysia earnestly calls the UN secretary General and the members of the UN Security Council to continue taking the necessary efforts for the early convening of an international peace conference in the Middle East. Israel must be brought to its senses that they are going against the tide for peace. Their continued ‘iron fist’ policy would not serve their objective but instead leads to further suffering.”⁴³

Another important development during Dr. Mahathir's administration was the signing of peace agreement between the PLO and Israel which had significant impact not only for the Palestinians and Israelis but the Arab States in the Middle East.⁴⁴ Commenting on the signing of the peace pact, Dr. Mahathir hoped that it would become an important milestone towards the absolute peace in the Middle East. Malaysian Foreign Minister, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi also commended the Palestinian leadership for its realistic and courageous act in leading the Palestinian people towards a new and promising future.⁴⁵

Support for the Accords, of the concessions made, and the process were not free from criticism. The repeated public posturing of all sides has discredited the process, not to mention putting into question the possibility of achieving peace, at least in the short-term.

Dr. Mahathir also repeatedly voiced out his doubt and criticism on Israel's sincerity with regard to the peace agreement.⁴⁶ On December 13, 1994, when delivering his speech at the 8th Islamic Summit Conference in Casablanca, Morocco, he expressed his disappointment by saying;

*“Most of us, I believe, are unhappy with the progress of the peace process in Palestine. The Israelis have been dilatory and insincere. But wrecking the peace process will not get us anywhere. Indeed if the sabotage succeeds it will force us to begin all over again. And how can we believe that the strategy which got us nowhere after decades of costly struggle will achieve success if we begin again? I appeal to all Palestinian patriot of all shades and political leanings to unite and strengthen their resolve so that the small gains that they have made can be consolidated and enhanced. In time, you will achieve your objective”.*⁴⁷

Before his retirement, Dr. Mahathir made another immense contribution to the Islamic *ummah* with the successful hosting of the 10th OIC Summit Conference in Putrajaya, Malaysia. Reviewing his opening address, one could note the extensive Islamic dimension of the Malaysian foreign policy notably the Palestinian issue. In his words;

*“To begin with, the government of all the Muslim countries can close ranks and have a common stand if not on all issues, at least on some major ones, such as on Palestine. We are all Muslims. We are all oppressed. We are all being humiliated. But we who have been raised by Allah above our fellow Muslims to rule our countries have never really tried to act in concert in order to exhibit at our level the brotherhood and unity that Islam enjoins upon us”.*⁴⁸

Throughout the opening remark, he championed the theme of Islamic unity vigorously and assertively. He also declared courageously that the

Jews and their proxy are the main causes for the current Palestinian plight. In one of his statements he said;

*“We are actually very strong. 1.3 billion people cannot be simply wiped out. The Europeans killed 6 million Jews out of 12 million. But today the Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them”.*⁴⁹

Remarkably, the Islamic issue, particularly the Palestinian Issue, during the Mahathir administration, had been receiving an overwhelming attention from the government and public. It is apparent that Mahathir's commitment to the Islamic issue was even more pronounced and assertive than that of his predecessors. Inevitably, the co-option of Anwar Ibrahim, ABIM's president, in the government before the 1982 General Election, had intensified the collaboration between government and the civil society groups, particularly ABIM and PERKIM, in the Ummatic issue. The government's vigorous efforts to enhance its Islamic image internally and internationally, was no doubt, partly motivated by its desire to preempt and defuse the consistent charge of PAS, and other political and non-political Islamic-based groups, that it had not doing enough to support the cause of Islam at home and abroad.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's commitment and support to the Islamic cause has, however, been perceived differently by various groups. Many contest that the role of Islam in Malaysian foreign policy should not be viewed as a major shift towards the ideologization of religion in International relations. Many suggest that Malaysia's support for the Islamic cause is largely due to its cautious pragmatism and humanitarian concern rather than to its religious commitment. For the government it is indeed undeniable that co-religionism has provided domestic political mileage for the ruling Malay party, and UMNO leaders have also given the Palestinian plight an international dimension, not just an Islamic focus, because it involves universal human rights.

The pluralist nature of the Malaysian society has, however, posed a dilemma for UMNO. While on the one hand, the party has to accommodate the multi racial aspirations of the National Coalition (BN), it consistently needs, on the other hand, to demonstrate its commitment to Islam in order to maintain the support of the Malay-Muslims. Therefore, being pragmatic, the government has to support the Islamic cause in order not to offend the Malay religious sensibilities, and local UMNO politicians and leaders have consequently tended to emphasize their loyalty to the Malay and Islamic expectations. This dilemma has triggered PAS, with its forthright commitment to Islam, to charge UMNO with little and reluctant support for Islam, and to denounce its presumed “excessive leniency” in yielding to the demands of its non-Malay and non-Muslim parties in the National Coalition.

Doubtless, Islam has constituted a powerful weapon in the struggle for political supremacy in Malaysia. To face intra-Malay rivalry, Islam has been used by successive Malaysian Prime Ministers as a continuing source of political legitimacy, and a shield against external interference in Malay politics. In their literature and activities since independence, the themes of Malayism and Islamism are, therefore, tightly fused together. As such, Malaysia since Tunku has pursued a pro-Muslim stand in its foreign policy. Curtailment of Islam may at any rate injure UMNO’s image among the Malay-Muslim voters, thus the support of the Palestinian cause becomes inevitable and of utmost political necessity. Due to the intra-Malay political rivalry, especially from PAS, the government has also been fully aware of the power of Islamic resurgence at home and abroad, thus has given its full support to the Palestinian struggle.

In analyzing Malaysian attitude and role to the Islamic cause, I venture to argue that Malaysia was more politically and symbolically committed to the Palestinian issue. Significantly, Malaysia’s stance on the issue was consistently in line with that of other OIC member-states, and on the same track with the international community, especially as represented

in the United Nations. For instance in case of Palestinian issue it does not seem to be comparable with that of the Arab nations. For the Arab nations, the Palestinian issue has definitely become part and parcel of their daily lives, and was perhaps their most important concern. Hence their role in it is doubtless more remarkable and significant than that of Malaysia whose acquaintance and commitment is, rather recent, and of more political nature, though the religious factor played a role in igniting the sympathy of the Malay-Muslims with the Palestinian tragedy.

The study also suggests that the role of the Malaysian government concerning the Palestinian issue was largely motivated by pragmatic considerations resulting from an interplay between various factors: political, economic, religious and humanitarian. They have been, first and foremost, instrumental in mobilizing support among the Malay population. Secondly, they help to preempt and diffuse Malay-Muslim opposition especially that of PAS, and, thirdly, they enhance the image of Malaysia within the Islamic world, through its membership of the OIC. Closer ties with the Muslim world, especially with the Arab nations, have, moreover, provided greater commercial, trade and investment opportunities for the country's various development plans. Within the 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. The Malaysian government was, therefore, bound by these pragmatic considerations to maintain a pro-Muslim and a pro-Palestinian attitude in its foreign policy.

Though many claim that Islam has never been an overriding factor in Malaysia's support of the Islamic cause, 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. It is only with the full realization of the direct relevance of Islam that the Islamic issues could be resolved comprehensively. The ideals of Islamic brotherhood and solidarity, if understood properly, would motivate Muslims in Malaysia and elsewhere to assist their brothers all over the Islamic world.

It may be presumed that Malaysia in the foreseeable future place a greater emphasis on Islam in its International relations. This will certainly be so when the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) assumes greater importance and the concept of universal Islamic brotherhood is fully comprehended by all Muslims. Malaysia, where Islam plays active role in the national life, could accelerate its commitment to the Ummatic cause through sending volunteers to the battle ground, and by joining UN-peace keeping troops that may be sent to the area to help in resolving the problem. In addition, Malaysia, with its pioneering role in the Third World, is expected to continue to persuade the UN to ensure the implementation of resolutions on the crisis, and to urge all member-states of the OIC to forge a united front to help solve the Islamic issues.

Remarkably, the OIC ranks high on the list of Malaysia's foreign policy undertakings. Being a Muslim country, Malaysia is obliged to support the Islamic cause. To ignore this obligation will not only erode her Islamic credentials within the community of Islamic nations, but also domestically among the Malay-Muslim sector of the populace. The latter could affect significantly the legitimacy of UMNO as the protector of Islam and Malay-Muslims in the country. As such, the Malaysian government had, and will continue to play an active role concerning the Islamic issues to ensure the well being of the *Ummah* at large, and its own survival at the national level.

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Endnotes

¹ *Federal Constitution Malaysia*, Article 160 (2)

² *Islamic Herald*, vol.12, no.4, 1988, p.29

³ Since then events related to the Palestinian issue were reported in detail by the Malaysian dailies for example the Arab League Summit of 1967. See; *Utusan Malaysia*, 1 September 1967 and *The Straits Times*, 29 November 1967

⁴ *Parliamentary Debates, House of Representative, June 1967*, pp. 860-867 and January 1968, pp. 3494 –3495.

⁵ *Suara Malaysia*, 26 October 1967.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *The Straits Times*, 8 June 1970

⁸ Speech by Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj at the first Islamic Summit Conference in Rabat, Morocco, September 22-24, 1969. See, *The Malay Mail*, 26 September 1969.

⁹ *New Straits Times*, 11 November 1981.

¹⁰ *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, 15, no.2 (June 1982), p.149

¹¹ *ISIS Focus*, June 1990, p.22

¹² *Berita Harian*, 17 April 1974

¹³ *New Straits Times*, 2 April, 1984.

¹⁴ *Economic Report 1985* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 1985), p.42

¹⁵ *Utusan Malaysia*, 1 April 1975

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See, *The Straits Times*, 23 January 1975, *New Straits Times*, 27 January 1975 and *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, March 1975, pp.7-22

¹⁹ *Utusan Malaysia*, 23 January 1975 and 25 January 1975.

²⁰ *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, March 1977, pp.6-13

²¹ _____, *Koleksi Ucapan Tun Hussein Onn 1980* (Kuala Lumpur: National Archive of Malaysia and Prime Minister's Department) p. 199

²² *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, March 1977

²³ *New Straits Times* 17 October 1978 and 16 November 1978. Also see, *Islamic Herald* vol.4, no.5 & 6, 1979

²⁴ For details on Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia see; Mohamad Abu Bakar, "Islamic Revivalism and the Political Process in Malaysia", *Asian Survey*, vo;.XXI, no.10, October 1981, pp.1040-1059; Judith Nagata, "Religious Ideology and Social Change: The Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia", *Pacific Affairs*, vol.53, no.3

²⁵ See *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, March 1977, p.10

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 9, 1979,p.15

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ At the Islamic Development Bank Meeting in Istanbul in May 1982, Malaysia for instance, urged, in the words of its Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the rich Muslim countries to adopt appropriate policies and measures to counteract adverse international economic development affecting Third World nations. See, *Islamic Herald*, vol. 6, no. 3 & 4, 1982, p. 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

³¹ In totalitarian context, civil society naturally defines itself in opposition to the state. It takes its meaning from being not of the state. In Malaysia, each ethnic group is not monolithic. There are internal divisions that are expressed in institutional form, i.e., through political parties. For instance, PAS, the main rival for the ruling Malay party UMNO, claims to be more Islamic than the latter. Other opposition parties like PRM and Semangat 46 also posed great challenge to UMNO in winning over the Malay-Muslim voters. Beside the oppositional Malay-Muslim political parties, *da'wah* movement or Malay-Muslim Non-Governmental Organization (NGO's) and Government-Oriented NGO's (GONGO's) mainly ABIM and PERKIM has also become a great challenge to UMNO's Islamic credentials. For details on the concept of civil society in Malaysia, see, NorAzizan 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 International Association of Historians of Asia, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, 27-31 July 2000.

³² See, *Islamic Herald*, vol. 5, no. 7&8, 1981, p. 41 and Chin Kin Wah, "New Assertiveness in Malaysia Foreign Policy", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1982, p.28.

³³ *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, vol. 14, September 1981, p.271.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See, *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, vol. 17, no. 3 (September 1984), pp. 24-25. During Yassir Arafat's visit to Malaysia in 1984, a joint-communiqué was issued which mentioned Malaysia's offer of training and scholarship.

³⁶ *Islamic Herald*, vol.6, no.9&10, 1982,p.42

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Utusan Malaysia*, 22 November 1986.

³⁹ Submitted to Acting Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithauddin from the UMNO Youth, see *New Straits Times*, 22/11/1986.

⁴⁰ *Utusan Malaysia*, 21 November 1986. On the day of the visit, the People's Action Committee headed by a well known Malaysian poet and writer Dr. Usman Awang comprised of the UMNO Youth, PAS, the Chinese based Party, DAP, PSRM and various civil society and including PERKIM, ABIM, PKPIM, trade Unions launched protest demonstration in front of Singapore High Commission in Kuala Lumpur and handed a memorandum of protest which condemned the visit.

⁴¹ *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, March 1989, vol 22, no. 1, p.5.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, vol.22, no.1, March 1989, p.36

⁴⁴ *Berita Harian*, 11 September 1993

⁴⁵ *New Straits Times*, 13 September 1993

⁴⁶ *Berita Harian*, 14 August 1994

⁴⁷ A speech delivered at the 8th Summit of the OIC in Tehran, Iran on December 9, 1997. See also Makaruddin, Hashim, 2000.

⁴⁸ An opening speech delivered at the 10th Session of the Islamic Summit Conference at Putrajaya, Malaysia on October 16, 2003

⁴⁹ *Ibid*