



# THE RESTRUCTURING OF MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICIES TOWARDS PALESTINE: THE ROLE OF NGOS IN BILATERAL RELATIONS AND SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT

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**Abstract-** *Malaysia's commitment to expressing objections against the conquest and tyranny inflicted by Israel on the Palestinian people has never faded. Various representatives of social movements, whether individually or collectively, have stepped forward to drive various initiatives to help the Palestinians, particularly NGOs. Indirectly, the involvement of NGOs in the Palestine issue has been able to contribute to enhancing the bilateral relations between Malaysia and Palestine. There are two objectives of this study, firstly to examine the essence of Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine. Secondly, how can the contributions of NGOs strengthen the interaction of bilateral relations and socio-economics between Malaysia and Palestine? The study design uses a qualitative approach involving focus group interviews and document analysis. The findings reveal that the medium of communication involving the process of interaction, negotiation, and soft diplomacy between Malaysia and Palestine simultaneously proves that the bilateral relations of the country are in good condition. The researcher also found that the interaction and cooperation between NGOs and the Malaysian Government is one of the contributing factors to the good relations between Malaysia and Palestine and the harmony of the country's foreign policy. However, the researcher perceives that the Malaysian Government's view on the role of NGOs in helping Palestine is somewhat restrained. The comments provided by the Malaysian Government are only based on the scope of how the genuine efforts of NGOs in assisting socio-economics through aid missions increase awareness of the Palestine issue among Malaysians and become a platform for delivering humanitarian aid to Palestine.*

**Keywords:** *Malaysia-Palestine, foreign policy, bilateral relations, socio-economics impact, NGO*

## 1 . INTRODUCTION

Globalization can be achieved through cooperation among nations to protect mutual interests, including specific ones such as national sovereignty. This situation increases the necessity to maintain good relations among countries so that when problems such as natural disasters or wars occur in a particular country, other countries will offer humanitarian assistance. This assistance is one of the socio-economic support for countries facing disasters or any humanitarian crises (Gupta et al. 2023; Monich et al. 2023). Malaysia, the country is seen as having political stability and strength in economic development, and harmonious socio-cultural aspects. One factor contributing to Malaysia's stability is its foreign policy mechanism. Typically, a country's foreign policy reflects the achievements and successes of the administration, influenced by the form and orientation of the current leaders' foreign policy (Omar, Abdullah, & Mukhtaruddin, 2005; Mohamad Ikhrum et al. 2022; Mohd Ikbal et al. 2021). Thus, it is clear that a country's foreign policy depends on the governance pattern of the current leaders. For example, if leaders in a country embrace peace-loving attitudes and high moral values, the foreign policy of that country will show unity and high awareness in helping disaster-stricken countries.



This study specifically focuses on the discussion regarding Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine. Malaysia's commitment to protesting against the conquest and oppression carried out by Israel on the Palestinian people has never faded. Even during the outbreak of war in June 2021 when the world was facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and Muslims were celebrating Ramadan, the people and leaders of Malaysia did not fall behind in denouncing Israel's ruthless actions (United Nations, 2023). Various initiatives were mobilized to help the Palestinians face the war, such as attacking Israel's social media, central and state governments offering socio-economic contributions amounting to hundreds of thousands of ringgits, and numerous virtual discussions on the Palestinian issue to spread awareness among Malaysians. Meanwhile, social movements, especially Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) alongside celebrities and national humanitarian icons, formed a coalition under My Aqsa Defenders to jointly expedite assistance to Palestine.

Malaysia is committed to providing socio-economic contributions in helping the Palestinian people continue their lives. According to Ruhanas (2009), the roles and contributions made by NGOs in championing the Palestinian issue align with Malaysia's foreign policy objectives towards Palestine, which are based on the principles of self-determination, justice, and humanitarian values (Shahrulnizam et al. 2019). The initiatives of NGOs in helping Palestine have received strong support from the Malaysian Government. This is because the Palestinian issue is one of the humanitarian agendas frequently discussed at the international level. In addition, the good diplomatic relations between NGOs and other international organizations will influence the effectiveness of NGOs in contributing influence to the formulation of Malaysia's foreign policy. Thus, the roles and contributions of NGOs are seen as representing Malaysia's voice in continuing to fight for the liberation of Palestine. This study has two objectives: first, to examine the essence of Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine. Second, to investigate how NGO contributions in socio-economics can strengthen bilateral relations between Malaysia and Palestine.

NGOs can be understood as non-profit, non-governmental agencies, and volunteer groups that support issues involving public welfare at local, national, or international levels (Shiraaaj et al. 2019; Azlan et al. 2019; Huayairi et al. 2011). Oriented around responsibility and consisting of individuals with common interests, NGOs bring community concerns to the government, monitor policy, implement programs, and encourage the participation of stakeholders in the community. Various types of NGOs revolve around certain issues such as human rights, the environment, health, and education. NGOs participate in global politics in several ways: raising public awareness of environmental issues, lobbying decision-making states to influence the establishment of domestic and foreign policies, coordinating boycotts in efforts to change harmful corporate practices, participating in international negotiations, and helping to monitor and implement international agreements (Betsill & Corell, 2001; Salleh, Samsudin & Mansor, 2019; Nazri & Sulaiman, 2020; Ishkanian & Shutes, 2021). According to Agbor (2009), most NGOs have gained popularity because many negotiations they have initiated have been successful. NGOs also participate in discussions of new laws that could lead to solutions to transnational problems. In this case, NGOs participate in discussions and formally influence decisions made by governments. Therefore, NGOs have become crucial in policies related to international trade, international aid, human rights, and others.

NGOs have significantly influenced the behavior of foreign policies. For example, in 1995 three U.S.-based NGOs, The Development GAP, Oxfam America, and Friends of the Earth proposed a detailed proposal for the renovation and restructuring of U.S. foreign aid. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the largest non-governmental organizations based in the United States, urged the U.S. government to provide more foreign aid to stimulate economic growth in the poorest countries in the world, even though the United States was facing an economic crisis. In addition, Amnesty International has worked as a symbolic protector of human rights and has changed the shared perception of human rights in many countries. As an NGO working in the field of



international development, the activities and community opinions within NGOs about regional conditions can impact the foreign policy decisions of a country (Kim, 2011).

In international relations, NGOs have a crucial role in identifying and investigating human rights violations. NGOs influence in pressuring governments and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to fulfill international obligations to promote and protect human rights. Moreover, NGOs play a central role in protecting the recognition of human rights at an international level. At one point, NGOs succeeded in creating political pressure on countries to respect human rights and get more people actively involved in implementing all types of human rights, including economic, social, and cultural rights (Pease, 2008). Given the scope of the importance of the role and contribution of NGOs at the international level, it is clear that NGOs have a responsibility to fight for human rights through contributions in the form of finance, medicine, food and drink, and socio-economic projects in Palestine. Therefore, this study looks from a different angle at the Malaysia-Palestine relationship through the roles and contributions of NGOs, especially in socio-economic aspects.

## 2. CONCEPT OF MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Policies are usually planned, formed, and determined by leaders at administrative levels to be implemented by an organization. A policy serves more as a basis or guides to some action plans that have been designed to achieve goals for the benefit of the organization. Hence, a policy can be regarded as an official statement accepted and issued by authoritative bodies such as the government, boards, and legislation. When a policy exists, the public can understand all the purposes, goals, or directions that the organization wants to achieve (Edris, 1997). Karim (1990) defines foreign policy generally; at its core, it encompasses the historical context and determines the contemporary role of Malaysia in world politics. Foreign policy is a guide for interacting with other countries or beyond their borders. All affairs and relationships established with other countries or international issues must follow the standards that have been set. Therefore, all parties in the country must follow the formulated policy to avoid any negative conflicts.

Typically, when discussing the concept of foreign policy, it will indirectly connect with the international relations system (M. Hudson, 2005). Foreign policy is defined as a concept practiced by a sovereign country in the process of establishing diplomatic relations with another country (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006). It also refers to the ideas and actions outlined by policymakers to solve problems or propose a change in the international political system or establish relations and negotiations with other countries (Othman, 2005). In other words, foreign policy serves as a guideline for all actions that will be taken by a country to establish relations with other countries. Malaysia is a unique royal government where parliamentary democracy seems to stand firm with the existence of free elections. Malaysia is a country that practices a free and non-aligned policy, respects other countries, promotes the spirit of solidarity, and is friendly with all countries regardless of ideology, provided that these countries respect other countries and practice peaceful foreign policies. Malaysia's relationship with foreign countries has existed since the pre-independence era in the era of the Malacca Sultanate when Melaka actively practiced foreign policy with countries such as India, Siam, Arab, China, Persia, Japan, and countries around the Malay Archipelago. Since independence, Malaysia has continued this tradition where Malaysia has played an effective role in the international political system (Nordin & Hussiin, 2004). The effectiveness of the role in international politics can be evidenced by Malaysia's involvement in establishing diplomatic relations with foreign countries since the time of the Malay Sultanate through trade relations and until now when Malaysia still maintains good relations with foreign countries.

As a harmonious country, Malaysia plays a vital role in efforts to establish multilateral cooperation through active participation in various fields such as trade, the environment, and social development. Bonds of unity based on regional understanding are very important in building a solid network with other countries (Jali et.al, 2001). Malaysia's foreign policy in regional relations and



international relations has focused on peace and harmony. This is evidenced when Malaysia is actively involved in building relationships and providing good cooperation with organizations at the international level such as The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the United Nations (UN).

According to Rogers (2006), Malaysia has highlighted its concern about international issues since independence. This was evident in May 1960 when Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, the Prime Minister of Malaya, opposed the apartheid policy practiced by South Africa at the Commonwealth Prime Minister's Conference in London. This happened as a result of peaceful demonstrations in March 1960 held by black people. Rogers also stated that even though Eric Louw, the South African Foreign Minister at the time, tried to persuade Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj not to continue his opposition, he stuck to his stance. Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj again protested against apartheid at the Commonwealth Prime Minister's Conference in 1961. The protest received international coverage and even praise from other African leaders. Malaysia is committed to establishing relations with foreign countries at the international level from various aspects. These relationships are based on foreign policy, which has been shaped by each leader of Malaysia when ruling the country. Even though leaders have changed, Malaysia's foreign policy to continue establishing good relations with foreign countries has never faded. On the contrary, Malaysia is always looking for opportunities to highlight its involvement in the international world.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

A case study design was conducted using a qualitative approach to identify the study topic. This was accomplished by carrying out an in-depth analysis based on interviews and document analysis, in line with the recommendations of Zulhazmi et al. (2023). A focused sampling method was executed, involving five informants, including officers directly engaged in managing Malaysia-Palestine affairs and NGOs. The study employed primary and secondary data collection methods, such as archival documents, to answer the research objectives. Primary data was sourced from interviews conducted with officers from the West Asia Secretary Division, the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and two selected NGOs: Aman Palestin and Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM). The chosen NGOs have been actively addressing Palestine's issues by providing various forms of assistance and governmental cooperation. Following is a brief overview of the chosen NGOs:

#### i. Aman Palestine

Aman Palestine, initially known as the "Palestinian Security Initiative," began operations in late 2004. Aman Palestine was established to provide and distribute donations while taking into consideration the welfare rights of the Palestinian people. Thus, Aman Palestin strives to ensure that every donated ringgit not only safely reaches but is also fully utilized in Palestine. On January 3, 2006, the company registration of Aman Palestin was officially approved under the Companies Commission of Malaysia (SSM), being named Aman Palestin Berhad, a non-profit organization.

#### ii. Viva Palestina Malaysia

Following Israel's attack on Gaza on December 27, 2008, a coalition of 50 NGOs from various ethnicities was formed and named COMPLETE, an acronym for "Malaysian NGO Coalition Against the Prosecution of Palestinian People," on January 5, 2009. In October 2009, COMPLETE met George Galloway, a former British Parliament member and founder of Viva Palestina, and consequently decided to rename itself VPM in October 2009. VPM serves as a global public initiative platform striving for peace, justice, and self-determination for the Palestinian people. Table 1.1 provides detailed information about the list of informants, their organizations, the dates, and interview methods:



Table 1: List of Informant

List of Informant	Organisasi
Informant 1	West Asia Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia
Informant 2	Aman Palestin
Informant 3	VPM
Informant 4	VPM
Informant 5	VPM

### Interview Protocol

The interview conducted is of an in-depth nature, aimed at obtaining unique perspectives from informants ready to share their experiences of direct involvement in foreign policy affairs and Palestinian humanitarian issues. The objective of an in-depth interview is to understand the experiences of the informants, rather than predicting or controlling their experiences. In effect, the interview findings help to reinforce the phenomena being studied. The researcher uses a list of questions or specific topics for discussion, often referred to as an interview guide, but informants have considerable flexibility in how they respond. The estimated duration of face-to-face interviews ranges from 30 minutes up to an hour and a half. Questions that are not included in the guide are asked as the interviewer highlights issues brought up by the interviewee. Additionally, emphasis should be placed on how the interviewee frames issues; what the interviewee deems important helps in understanding events, patterns, and behaviors.

### Secondary Data

The secondary document analysis used in this study takes the form of a literature review, used to gather essential data through written or printed materials such as books, journals, scientific papers, reports, and the internet. These documents provide information that helps strengthen the arguments in the study. Additionally, official websites of NGOs and relevant ministries are also used as secondary data sources, as there are aspects that cannot be fulfilled solely through interview data.

### Data Analysis Methods and Reporting Techniques

The method used for data analysis is thematic, where the researcher identifies interview data that can address the study's problems and objectives until a theme emerges. The findings of the interview theme are further reinforced by discussions derived from secondary data, a process known as triangulation. This triangulation process aids in ensuring the study's validity and reliability. The reporting technique for the interviews is done in two ways: at the beginning of the sentence, as in "according to Abdul Samad Othman (2015)," and at the end of the sentence (Abdul Samad Othman, 2015). The real names of informants are used after obtaining their permission to be included in the write-up.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Malaysia's Foreign Policy Towards Palestine

Malaysia is an active supporter in expressing concerns over violations of human rights values. In achieving independence, the issue of Palestine has received much attention from Malaysian policymakers, especially as a national independence issue. Malaysia's support for the liberation of Palestine has been long-standing through the outlined foreign policy as a guide to actions taken. The Malaysian government has been at the forefront with other Muslim nations in showing its sensitivity, such as voicing concerns at international forums. Malaysia had the honor of hosting the International Islamic Conference in 1969, attended by 23 Islamic and non-Islamic countries. The conference was considered the beginning of a resurgence and cooperation among Islamic countries. Following the conference in Kuala Lumpur, the summit of Islamic Government leaders was held in



Rabat, Morocco, in September 1969, and then began the process towards the establishment of the OIC. Israel's invasion of the al-Aqsa mosque in Baitulmaqdis on August 21, 1969, was one of the main discussions where the representatives unanimously urged the Islamic countries to organize a summit of government heads to discuss the issue. On August 25, 1967, the Foreign Ministers of the Arab League decided at their meeting in Cairo, Egypt, to hold a summit of Islamic countries to discuss the issue of the burning of the al-Aqsa mosque. The result of the meeting, which was attended by thirteen countries including the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), decided on two proposals, namely to hold a summit of all Islamic countries and a summit of Arab countries. Ultimately, for the interest and unity of Islamic countries, the summit was held in Rabat. Malaysia was then represented by Tunku Abdul Rahman, who later became the first Secretary-General of the OIC from 1971 to 1973 (Salleh, 2003).

Abdul Samad Othman (2015) explains that Malaysia's policy towards Palestine has not changed since 41 years ago when Malaysia fully supports Palestine. Malaysia recognizes the PLO as the sole legitimate administrator of Palestine, accepted by the international community. He explains that the interaction with Hamas remains informal, and visits by Hamas officials to Malaysia are handled through NGOs with minimal involvement by the Malaysian government. He also states that although Malaysia has no objections to proposed visits by Hamas officials to Malaysia in meetings with government officials, so far meetings with Hamas have been held modestly with minimal publicity to avoid sensitive issues with the PLO. In support of Palestine, he emphasizes that Malaysia has no diplomatic relations with Israel or formal trade involvement with Israel. Permits to import and export goods to Israel fall under the jurisdiction of the Customs Department - (Customs Prohibition on Imports) 2012 and (Customs Prohibition on Exports) 2012. Furthermore, he adds that any Malaysian trade activities are conducted through multinational companies via international supply and distribution chains managed by the respective companies.

The researcher argues that Malaysia's support for Palestine is fixed and will never change, even with a change in leadership. According to Koss (2019), two Malaysian leaders active in expressing support for Palestine are Mahathir Mohamad and Najib Razak. On December 6, 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump announced his decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Following that announcement, several large demonstrations took place in front of the U.S. embassy in Kuala Lumpur. Leading Malaysian politicians, such as Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamad, were among the dominant leaders in these demonstrations. Therefore, this study also discusses in focus the Malaysia-Palestine policy during the leadership era of Mahathir Mohamad and Najib Razak.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was among the dominant actors in these demonstrations. The researcher also saw that Malaysia wisely took a middle-ground approach in establishing relationships between the Hamas and Fatah political parties to avoid problems with any party involved. This is because the researcher found in the study by Araj and Brym (2010) that there is a civil conflict between Hamas and Fatah, the two main factions of political parties in Palestine. The researcher also found that the transparency of Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine can be proven when there is no existence of any form of communication relationship, especially in official trade dealings with Israel at the level of the Malaysian government. Although there are business dealings between multinational companies in Malaysia and Israel, Malaysia is not involved in these dealings.

#### **4.1.1. Mahathir Mohamad's Era**

Mahathir Mohamad is a leader known for his outspoken criticism of Israel, the United States, and the UN's role in the Palestinian issue, more so than other leaders. Since his first speech at the UN, Mahathir Mohamad has consistently raised the Palestinian issue every year, emphasizing the suffering still endured by the Palestinians in West Asia. He argued, "The Palestinians must be given their rights, and Israel must withdraw from the territories that are not theirs." He also added,



"Those who oppose have no valid reason because the land belongs to the Palestinians" (Rajendran, 1993).

Mahathir Mohamad's idiosyncrasy is one of the reasons why he is so outspoken in advocating this issue. His experience during colonialism made him feel the need to represent nations and countries that had been colonized and oppressed, to fight for nations experiencing the same fate. He took a firm stance by criticizing Western powers for not caring and taking action against Israel to comply with resolutions 238 and 242, namely that Israel must leave the occupied territories.

In his speech at the UN General Assembly in 1982, Mahathir Mohamad outspokenly declared Israel as a state that had oppressed Palestine with the blessing of the United States (Chamil Wariya, 1989). He equated Israel's cruelty to Palestine with the atrocities committed by Nazi Hitler against the Israeli nation during World War II (Chamil Wariya, 1989). In 1986, he not only blamed the major powers but the entire UN for failing to resolve the suffering faced by the Palestinian people. He condemned Israel's acts of terrorism as disgusting actions that must be stopped immediately. This is because, without peace and security, justice cannot be achieved in Palestinian lands.

At the Asia Region Seminar and NGO Symposium on the Palestinian Question, organized by the UN in Kuala Lumpur, Foreign Minister Dato 'Hassan Haji Omar reiterated Malaysia's stance that a fair, comprehensive, and lasting solution in the Middle East will not be achieved if the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people are not recognized. Studies have found that since the beginning of Mahathir Mohamad's administration, the struggle over the Palestinian issue has not only involved the sovereignty of a country or religious basis but the scope of the struggle is broader. For example, the basic principle of human rights is because Mahathir Mohamad believes that when the Palestinians use force, it is not an act of terrorism but self-defense. This situation is different for Israelis because Israelis have all the weapons compared to the Palestinians. If Palestine explodes itself and kills Israeli civilians because they do not have helicopters, warships, and rockets to retaliate against Israeli ground and air attacks. Despite this unfair advantage, the media still portrays Israeli attacks as a response to Palestinian attacks on them (Rajendran, 1993). The analysis finds that at every international conference, Mahathir Mohamad wants to assert something must be done because if not handled properly, the problem will never end for the Palestinian people, which indirectly gives a negative impact in the Middle East region especially.

Towards the end of Mahathir Mohamad's era in 2003 until 2004, he urged the world to reassess the Palestinian issue. Mahathir Mohamad told George W. Bush that the issue of international terrorism could be solved by eliminating the cause of the terrorists' anger. The United States and other major powers must solve the problems in Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Libya, and others (Abdullah, 2008). This situation shows that Mahathir Mohamad wants the world, especially the major powers, to understand that the issue of international terrorism is closely linked to the issue in

Palestine. This is because the oppression of Muslims around the world has aroused the anger and resentment of these terrorist groups. Due to this, they have no alternative but to choose actions considered violent. From a different perspective on efforts to solve the issue of international terrorism, problems such as inequality and oppression of Muslims must be addressed first. Mahathir Mohamad also strongly criticized the world for associating terrorism with Muslim society and Islam. He argued:

*"But acts of terrorism or even moderate self-defense by Muslims in Palestine are always portrayed as Muslim terrorism. Terrorists, if they are terrorists and in many situations are not, are labeled as Muslim terrorists. Violence by others, by ethnic Europeans, by intolerant Christians and Jews, and by Buddhists, is never associated with their religion. There are no Christian terrorists, or*



*Jewish terrorists, or Buddhist terrorists, or Orthodox Christian terrorists, who are certainly Serbians" (Mahathir Mohamad, 2003).*

Based on his speech, it is proven that Mahathir Mohamad dislikes any party that associates Islam with international terrorism. Therefore, he wants to correct misunderstandings and interpretations associating terrorism with Muslim society and Islam. Mahathir Mohamad's efforts in advocating the Palestinian issue have been appreciated by Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO. During his visit to Malaysia, Yasser Arafat praised the positive impact of Malaysia's foreign policy on Palestine due to the very good friendship between the people of Malaysia and Palestine. He also stated, "Compared to some Arab countries, Malaysia is even closer to us" (Nair, 1997).

#### **4.1.2 Najib Razak's Era**

Malaysia will only consider establishing relations with Israel when a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian people has been successfully concluded. Najib Razak is one of the Malaysian leaders who has been outspoken in condemning Israel's disrespectful actions towards Palestine. He received a courtesy visit from Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri on January 8, 2009, in Kuala Lumpur. During the meeting, Najib Razak gave a speech about the Palestinian issue, stating that only the world's major powers influence to stop Israel's brutal attacks on Palestine. He explained that although Malaysia is in a small capacity, this will not prevent Malaysia from continuing to support the Palestinian people. Najib Razak also added about the call to boycott Israeli products by the general public in Malaysia that Malaysia does not have any products from Israel due to the lack of diplomatic relations with the country ("Malaysia's Najib says", 2009).

In addition, in 2011, Malaysia continued to support the rights of the Palestinian people by rejecting Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip and expressed support for the PNA in its efforts to gain full membership in the UN. Meanwhile, Malaysia continues to refuse to have diplomatic relations with Israel. The Palestinian issue has received high attention both publicly and officially in Malaysia. Many public organizations and philanthropists have made this issue a wide sector by showing interest, especially after several Malaysians participated in the Freedom Flotilla to breach the Gaza blockade (Saleh, 2013). On June 2, 2011, in Kuala Lumpur, Najib Razak received a courtesy visit from a Palestinian parliamentary delegation led by Ahmad Bahr (Deputy Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council). In the official meeting, Ahmad Bahr stated that Malaysia's support for the Palestinian people is not only political but also moral and material. Najib Razak also explained during the meeting that political parties in Malaysia, despite political differences, share the same view on the need to unify efforts to support Jerusalem and Palestine. Najib Razak took a stance in making statements to support Palestinian issues during his visits to Europe and the United States, where he supported the right to return and opposed the Judaization of Jerusalem (Anon, 2011).

Malaysia's stance on the Palestinian struggle seemed stronger when Najib Razak made a one-day humanitarian visit to Gaza accompanied by Foreign Minister Anifah Aman and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Jamil Khir Baharom. The visit symbolizes Malaysia's strong support for the Palestinian people. Najib Razak expressed hope while in the delegation that more Islamic leaders from around the world will take the same step and that this struggle is not only for the Palestinians but also for the Ummah. The presence of the delegation from Malaysia was the first time a foreign prime minister from a non-Arab country has visited Gaza. In addition, Najib Razak took the opportunity to visit the site of a school project funded by Malaysia through the aid of a Malaysian NGO, Aqsa Syarif (Anon, 2013). Based on the above discussion, the researcher sees that Najib Razak has sought various initiatives to further strengthen the solid support for the struggle of the Palestinian people in various forms, whether political support or humanitarian aid. To highlight Malaysia's peace-loving foreign policy, Najib Razak made official visits to political parties in Palestine intending to strengthen diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Palestine. However,



the researcher feels that the relationship established with the Palestinian Government needs to have continuous continuity and not just stop there.

#### 4.3 Malaysia-Palestine Diplomatic Relations

In 1981, Malaysia announced the decision to grant full diplomatic status to the PLO, and in 1989, the PLO's diplomatic status was further upgraded, equating the Palestinian representation with any other resident diplomatic mission in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia's stance on Palestine is renowned for its initiatives supporting international efforts to see the rights of the Palestinian people restored and respected. Malaysia officially recognized the state status of Palestine on November 15, 1988, and subsequently established diplomatic relations with it. Malaysia assisted in the establishment of a PLO office in Kuala Lumpur in 1974, which was later given the status of an "Embassy" in 1989 (Abdul Samad Othman, 2015).

On November 29, 2012, Malaysia, along with 137 other UN member countries, voted in support of UN General Assembly Resolution 67/19 to upgrade Palestine's UN membership status from Non-Member Entity to Non-Member Observer State, thereby enjoying the same status as the Vatican City or the Holy See, a small city in Italy. A Non-Member Entity means that the state of Palestine does not have rights within the UN, while Non-Member Observer State means that Palestine has a voice within the UN but cannot vote on the resolutions being discussed. Malaysia constantly voices concerns and condemns the ongoing Israeli military invasions and illegal Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. Malaysia believes that to achieve a fair and peaceful resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, both sides need to compromise and give way for the negotiations. As Abdul Samad Othman (2015) argues, Israel's insistence that Palestine should continue negotiations without any preconditions does not reflect Israel's readiness to be fair and compromise with Palestine's future, failing to see that continuing Israel's illegal settlement activities in Palestinian territories will only worsen the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Driven by humanitarian and social consciousness, Abdul Samad Othman (2015) explains that Malaysia consistently provides assistance and donations to Palestine, both in the form of cash or goods, according to its capacity, to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people living under the illegal Israeli occupation. He states that assistance and donations are distributed to Palestine through various organizations such as the UN and OIC, Government to Government (G-2-G), or through Malaysian NGOs such as MERCY Malaysia, Global Peace Foundation, and 1Malaysia Putra Club. This aid includes (but is not limited to) supporting the operations of the Palestinian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, providing and sponsoring various nation-building training courses and programs for Palestinian officials, and scholarships for Palestinian students to pursue higher education in Malaysia. Through the Malaysian government's initiatives to help Palestine, as discussed above, researchers find that the Malaysian government has established humanitarian aid relations for the Palestinian people with various actors, whether at the government, international government, or non-governmental levels, particularly NGOs in Malaysia.

Malaysia also promises to consistently provide financial assistance to the UN and UNRWA. According to Abdul Samad Othman (2015), UNRWA was established to provide social services, education, and humanitarian aid to Palestinian refugees. UNRWA is the largest provider of education services under the UN for Palestinian refugees, providing vocational education as well as basic health care programs and assisting the poor. In addition to UNRWA, Malaysia has also contributed (financially or in kind) to the Palestinian people's struggle through the Islamic Solidarity Fund (ISF) and OIC.

On June 2, 2014, major groups in Palestine, namely Fatah and Hamas, established the Government of the State of Palestine Unity, with both parties taking an approach to establish good relations. The Palestinian cabinet consists of 17 ministers: 12 from the West Bank and the remaining five from the Gaza Strip. Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, resigned his position and dissolved the Gaza



cabinet immediately after the oath-taking ceremony. Abdul Samad Othman (2015) explains that at this time, both parties seem to respect the Unity Pact signed on April 23, 2014, stating that both parties should form a unity state government within five to six weeks under the PLO. An important step for the new Palestinian government is to hold a general election within six months. At this time, the incumbent PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah continues to lead the Palestinian Cabinet while Fatah continues to hold key portfolios such as Minister of Finance and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

#### **4.4 The Role of NGOs and the Malaysian Government in the Palestinian Issue**

NGOs serve as a connection between Malaysia and Palestine, strengthening the diplomatic relationship between the two countries. The role played by NGOs as Palestinian humanitarian organizations reflect Malaysia's foreign policy that upholds universal human rights while also representing the Malaysian government's support for the rights of the Palestinian people.

The Malaysian government has given the green light to Aman Palestine to carry out activities to educate the Malaysian community about the Palestinian issue. Aman Palestin not only has a good relationship with the government, but the Malaysian government is always supportive and cooperative, allowing Aman Palestin to freely bring forward the issue of the Palestinian people in Malaysia. The researcher was informed that among the ministers who always support Aman Palestin's work is Jamil Khir Baharom, Minister of the Prime Minister's Department (Awang Sufian Awang Piut, 2015). Based on the relationship with the ministries in Malaysia, Awang Sufian Awang Piut (2015) stated that Aman Palestine has built relationships with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Women's Development in carnivals and cooperation programs concerning the Palestinian issue. In his opinion, the collaboration, albeit modest, has significantly impacted the target groups. For example, the Ministry of Education has allowed Aman Palestin to hold awareness talks on the Palestinian issue in Malaysian schools, a practice still ongoing. During Ramadan 2014, Aman Palestin also collaborated with the State Islamic Religious Department to bring a Palestinian imam to lead tarawih prayers in selected mosques. Indirectly, Awang Sufian Awang Piut (2015) explained that Aman Palestine is involved in building a network of cooperation with state governments, political parties, and all organizations in Malaysia. This is because Aman Palestine is not a political body and thus needs to have good relations with all parties regardless of political background because it requires the support of all parties.

In 2014 during the elections in Malaysia, several political parties made the Palestinian issue a factor to gain support. According to him, Aman Palestine was invited to give talks together regardless of party, government, or opposition. Although there are political parties with wings that support the struggle of the Palestinian people, for example, PAS with Yayasan Amal and Youth Wing, 1 Malaysia Putera, 1 Malaysia Youth Movement from UMNO, and Abdul Azeez Abdul Rahim representing 1 Malaysia Putera, all have sat at the same table to discuss with Aman Palestine to bring together a group of humanitarian missions to Gaza.

To enter Gaza or areas where Palestinian refugees reside, permission must be obtained from the Malaysian embassy in these places so that the mission runs smoothly and, most importantly, to ensure safety. Therefore, Awang Sufian Awang Piut (2015) explained that Aman Palestine has had close communication with the Malaysian embassy, especially in Egypt, through the Rafah border crossing, the Turkish Embassy, Jordan, and Syria previously.

In addition to this, Awang Sufian Awang Piut (2015) reported that Aman Palestine also established relationships with non-governmental agencies, and trade organizations such as LHDN, and EPF to hold discussions and activities related to the Palestinian issue in the workplace. According to him, all these relationships show that Aman Palestine, even as an NGO, has successfully built good relationships at all levels, whether in government or non-government. Based on the interaction



between Aman Palestine and the Malaysian government, the researcher sees this NGO as working to engage all groups and government bodies in bringing up the Palestinian issue in Malaysia. The researcher found that the humanitarian basis brought by Aman Palestine successfully attracted the attention of all parties regardless of which political party.

Like Aman Palestine, VPM also has a harmonious relationship with the ministries in Malaysia and has participated in meetings together with them. According to Shida Shahnan (2015), the Malaysian government assists VPM in many mechanisms, such as approving the Peaceful Rally program in August 2014 to express support for the Palestinian people during the July 2014 attack. Besides, Musa Mohd Nordin (2015) also stated that VPM has also upgraded 13 schools in Northern Semenanjung Gaza in collaboration with the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the Gaza Ministry of Education. He explained that at a higher level of cooperation, VPM has arranged scholarships for Palestinian students to continue their studies at Malaysian universities. This was achieved through cooperation with the National Treasury and the International Islamic University Malaysia.

According to Azra Banu (2015), VPM has continuous interaction with the Malaysian Government and always invites government representatives to programs carried out by VPM. For example, she mentioned that on September 12, 2015, VPM held a BDS seminar at UM by inviting representatives from the Malaysian Government. Besides, VPM always establishes cooperation with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Wisma Putra. She explained that VPM often interacts with various Malaysian Government agencies, especially when VPM sends humanitarian missions to Gaza, for example, VPM collaborates with Wisma Putra to get approval and permits. In addition, VPM has collaborated with the Ministry of Information, Communication & Culture through the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) to launch the KLPFF from February 4 to 6, 2012 (VPMa, 2013).

VPM Treasurer, Norma Hashim, and VPM guest, Abdul Rahim Shehab, (Director of Islamic Society Jabalia) visited Mahathir Mohamad's office (VPMb, 2013). Findings through the VPM website also show that on December 5, 2014, the Save al-Quds Global Campaign was held in Putrajaya by VPM and several other NGOs. This campaign is an initiative to raise public awareness about the critical situation in Al-Quds and Al-Aqsa mosques and Israel's ongoing pressure. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the patron of the Save al-Quds Global Campaign, said that Malaysia would use its position as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for two years starting in 2015 to step up efforts to defend Palestine against Zionist atrocities. The government also decided that Foreign Minister Anifah Aman would raise issues about Palestine in related meetings (VPMc, 2014).

The researcher found that VPM has a good interaction with the Malaysian Government. However, compared to Aman Palestine, VPM has less connection in its program with the Malaysian Government. Unlike Aman Palestine, which has broad coverage and unlimited relations with the Malaysian Government, especially in organized programs. If you look at the activities carried out by Aman Palestine, many involve agencies under the Malaysian Government. This can be seen more clearly, especially when this NGO frequently establishes awareness programs on the Palestinian issue in ministry offices and schools. However, overall, both NGOs have strived to create good interaction and relationships with the Malaysian Government in elevating the Palestinian issue to a higher level

#### **4.5 The Malaysian Government's View on the Role of Malaysian NGOs in Palestine**

Local NGOs in Malaysia have done a good job of promoting and creating awareness among Malaysians about the suffering of the Palestinian people. It is generally known that Malaysian NGOs support the Palestinian people. Since the Israeli military attacks and blockades of the Gaza Strip occurred, many international NGOs, including those from Malaysia, have been called upon to protest and demand that Israel immediately end them. Malaysian NGOs have stepped forward to



provide assistance and reduce the suffering of the Palestinian people by creating various humanitarian activities to assist socio-economic programs and contributions, whether financial or in-kind, to alleviate the burdens of the Palestinian people. Despite the obstacles from Israel towards these efforts, NGOs have still succeeded (in some cases) in distributing necessities to the residents of Gaza.

Actions to alleviate the burdens of the Palestinian people are a shared responsibility, and the efforts made by Malaysian NGOs to increase public awareness of this issue are commendable. The grassroots movement by NGOs, coupled with the unofficial foreign policy of the Malaysian government, is one of the initiatives to show strong support representing the Malaysian people towards unity for the Palestinian people in achieving their aspirations (Abdul Samad Othman, 2015). Through Malaysian NGOs, the United Malaysian Youth Association (IPBM) and the UMNO Youth NGO Relations Bureau have distributed about 2,000 packages of high-protein dry food to war victims in Gaza, Palestine, during the 51-day war (starting July 7, 2014), which was the longest war of this century. The supply of humanitarian aid was handed over through two NGOs in Malaysia, Aman Palestin and Aqsa Syarif, to be distributed to 11,500 war victims. Packages of dry food such as rice, soybeans, dried vegetables, and a mix of vitamins and minerals were delivered in stages by the two involved NGOs. Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, also the Federal Territories Minister, said that the efforts and involvement of volunteers such as Malaysian NGOs in delivering humanitarian aid to crisis countries like Palestine are the best steps in showing universal humanitarian concerns. He encouraged similar programs to be held in the future involving Malaysian NGOs and for them to set an example for other NGOs (Kamarulbaid, 2014).

Nevertheless, researchers generally see that in terms of the Malaysian government's view on the work of NGOs, the Malaysian government has recognized the efforts of NGOs in dedicating their aid to Palestine. In the researcher's own opinion, NGOs can move independently to continue the struggle for the liberation of Palestine, even if they are in a small group and have limited financial resources, but in the name of humanity, NGOs are willing to sacrifice their own time and energy.

#### **4.6 The Effectiveness of NGO Movements in Malaysia-Palestine Relations**

The efforts of Malaysian NGOs have further demonstrated strong support for the Palestinian people. The Palestinian government recognizes and appreciates the efforts made by the Malaysian people in providing the necessary aid to the affected Palestinian people. Abdul Samad Othman (2015) believes this has enhanced bilateral relations between Malaysia and Palestine, thereby complementing Malaysia's stance on Palestine. The grassroots movement by NGOs, along with the efforts of the Malaysian government in international forums, has further shown Malaysia's solid support for the Palestinian people in their quest to achieve the status of a rightful nation. Abdul Samad Othman (2015) believes the Malaysian government has provided the support requested by NGOs, especially in logistics and coordination. Among the NGOs actively involved in assisting the Palestinian people is the Global Peace Foundation led by former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, and MERCY Malaysia. According to him, one of the main objectives of the Global Peace Foundation is to oppose warfare and advocate for global peace. MERCY Malaysia has sent doctors, donated medical equipment and ambulances, and helped to rebuild the El-Wafa Medical Recovery and Specialized Surgery Hospital.

In 2010, the 1Malaysia Youth Club organized a humanitarian mission to Gaza. This mission, in cooperation with the Malaysian Red Crescent Society and the Foreign Ministry, consisted of 67 volunteers, including 35 doctors. The mission members managed to go to Gaza in the second week of August 2010. The club successfully delivered Ramadan humanitarian aid from the Malaysian people, such as food, clothing, blankets, and medicines, to more than 2,000 families in several settlements in the besieged region. This is one example given by Abdul Samad Othman (2015), where the Malaysian government (state actor) and local NGOs work together to alleviate the



burdens of the Palestinian people. Therefore, he sees these efforts will also foster closer diplomatic relations between the Malaysian and Palestinian governments. He feels the Palestinian people appreciate what the Malaysian NGOs have done to alleviate the suffering of the residents of Gaza.

However, for the Palestinian people's real struggle to achieve an independent state, Abdul Samad Othman (2015) feels the need for ongoing support not only from the Malaysian government and its people but also from the international community. Generally, the discussions in this sub-topic have a limited perspective on the effectiveness of NGO movements in strengthening diplomatic relations between the Malaysian government and Palestine. This is because the researcher did not find strong evidence from the interview with Abdul Samad Othman to say that NGOs play a significant role in enhancing diplomatic relations between these two countries. Nevertheless, personally, the researcher believes the strong evidence showing that the work of NGOs contributed to Malaysia-Palestine diplomatic relations when Najib Razak made an official visit to Gaza as a result of the efforts of Malaysian NGOs that urged him to go there.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The foreign policy of Malaysia, like that of any other country in the world, is formulated in response to the policies of neighboring or distant nations based on the interests of that particular country. In line with the principles and spirit of democracy, Malaysia is a country that speaks out against any infringement of human rights. Malaysia's stance can be observed through its involvement in the UN since becoming a member in 1957, including its consistent support against human rights violations in Palestine. As a peace-loving country, Malaysia condemns the oppression and injustice perpetrated by Israel in Palestinian territory. Upholding a transparent foreign policy, the Malaysian government strives to recognize Palestine as a state, exploring various avenues to express support in defending the rights of the Palestinian people. Support for Palestine continues to this day, even amid leadership changes. Based on the established foreign policy, Malaysia can consistently forge good diplomatic relations with Palestine. These relations are not just about expressing support in the chamber, but also contributing by delivering humanitarian aid, especially financially. In 2013, an official visit by Najib Razak, former Prime Minister of Malaysia to Gaza as a symbol of support for the Palestinian people's struggle to regain their national rights from Israeli colonization is a strong argument for stating good bilateral relations between Malaysia-Palestine. The medium of communication involving the process of interaction, negotiation, and soft diplomacy between Malaysia-Palestine simultaneously proves the bilateral relationship of the country in a good state.

Researchers also found that the process of interaction and cooperation between NGOs and the Malaysian Government is one of the contributing factors to the good relations between Malaysia-Palestine and the harmony of the country's foreign policy. NGOs have carried out their responsibilities well on behalf of the entire population and Malaysian Ministries. This is because, in the researcher's view, the arrival of NGOs in Palestine is not recognized on the ticket of the name of that NGO, but the Palestinian people recognize NGOs more as the Malaysian Government. However, researchers see the Malaysian Government's view of the role of NGOs in assisting Palestine as somewhat limited. The comments provided by the Malaysian Government are only based on the scope of how the sincere efforts of NGOs increase awareness of the Palestinian issue to the Malaysian people and become a platform for delivering humanitarian aid to Palestine. The view should be expanded, especially how the ability of NGOs in a small capacity can represent the voice of the Malaysian people to continue humanitarian aid there. Although the success of NGOs in moving to help Palestine can be seen in general, however, through the view of the Malaysian Government, it receives less attention at the ministerial level in particular.

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