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**MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT TOWARDS THE
PALESTINIAN ISSUE
1957-1989**

BY
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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

This study aims at analyzing the Malaysian government's attitude and commitment to the Ummatic cause as reflected in its foreign policy, with particular reference to the Palestinian issue. Emphasis is given to the eras of the four Prime Ministers since independence in 1957 and up to 1989. It is also, in a way, an attempt to figure out whether there had been any radical change in the Premiers' attitude and commitment to the Palestinian cause.

The outcome of the study suggests that successive Malaysian administrations, from Tunku Abdul Rahman down to Dr. Mahathir, had consistently upheld an oppositional stance against the Israeli regime, and were supportive of the Arab-Palestinians cause. No significant difference could be detected with regard to the attitude and role of the various Premiers, only during the tenure of Dr. Mahathir some degree of assertiveness may be noted. The study also suggests that Malaysia, though an integral part of the Islamic *Ummah*, was largely motivated in its commitment to the Palestinian issue by political and pragmatic considerations. Finally, the study proposes ways and means to enhance the commitment of the Malaysian government and people towards the Palestinian struggle.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised/read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Science in History and Civilization.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references and a bibliography is appended.

Name: ANIDAH BINTI ROBANI

Signature.....

Date.....

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1957-1989

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This work is dedicated for the cause of Islam and may Allah bless it with His Mercy and Acceptance.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia
ALIRAN	Persatuan Aliran Kesedaran Negara
AMDA	Anglo-Malayan Defense Agreement
ASA	Association of Southeast Asia
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asia Nations
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
HAMAS	Islamic Resistance Movement (<i>Harakat al-Muqawamah Al-Islamiyyah</i>)
IDB	Islamic Development Bank
IINA	International Islamic News Agency
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NEP	New Economic Policy
NOC	National Operations Council
OIC	Organization of Islamic Conference
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia)
PERKIM	Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Welfare And Missionary Association of Malaysia)
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
RISEAP	Regional Islamic Dakwah Council for Southeast Asia and the Pacific

UAE	United Arab Emirates
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
UN	United Nations
YADIM	Yayasan Dakwah Islamiyah Malaysia
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

1.1. Background

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 misery¹.

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 in its constructive support for the nationalist struggle for freedom and justice, e.g. the causes of the black South Africans, Bosnians and Palestinians. However, for practical reasons this thesis does not aspire to comprehensively study the Malaysian foreign policy, but it rather attempts to explore its corner stone. Its emphasis is upon finding its underlying principles, in particular, is it driven by international humanitarian mode or Islamic orientation at large? In other words the study attempts to analyze the Islamic dimension in the formulation of Malaysian foreign policy.

Before indulging on the study one should first and foremost establish the importance of imbibing Islamic values in foreign policy. According to Geddes, Islam's capability as an international order is due to the faith itself, which draws together in common

¹ M. Ghazali Shafie, *Malaysia: International Relations* (Kuala Lumpur: Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd., 1992), p.3

brotherhood all who believe in God and His message. Islam, with its dynamic and universal principles of brotherhood and justice, is a cohesive force, which have tremendous moral and material effect upon international affairs².

Malaysia can be classified as a Muslim state. 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. The foreign policy of Malaysia may be said to be affected by Islam to a considerable degree. The pro-Arab attitude adopted over the problem of Israel and Arab refugees shows this clearly. Malaysia can be seen to strongly value cultural links with other Muslim states, and has at times demonstrated natural sympathy for them.

Malaysia's emphasis on its co-religionists' issues could be seen in her firm stands on the Palestinian issue, the Russian aggression in Afghanistan, the Gulf war, conflict in Bosnia, as well as the struggle of Muslim minorities in Southern Thailand and Philippines. Malaysia's commitment to the *Ummah's* issues is not only humanitarian but Islamic as well. As was the case of the Moro struggle for their self-government, the ethnic and Islamic ties had triggered Malaysia directly and indirectly into the role of supporting and sheltering the Filipino refugees, which resulted in a measure of disquiet in Malaysian-Philippine relations. Malaysia commitment to the Islamic issues can, however, be best illustrated particularly in the case of Palestinian struggle for self-determination.

² C.L.Geddes, "The Muslim World in International Affairs", *Horizon*, Vol.XIX, no.2, 1966,p.143

The Palestinian issue constitutes one of the most explosive and unresolved issues of modern times, which threatens not only the stability of the region but also the peace of the world. The history of Palestine has been marked by many dramatic events, left a lasting impact on the region, and the world at large. Closely linked with the three world religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, with Zionist-Jewish nationalism as well as the strategic interests of the superpowers, this issue has been the direct cause of several wars in the Middle East. To understand its roots, one must have a general understanding of the history of Palestine.

Briefly, in 1516 the Ottoman Turks conquered Palestine and occupied it till 1917, hence for about four centuries Palestine was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire. In 1917, the British forces launched a campaign against the Turks for the seizure of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. Jerusalem surrendered on 9 December 1917, and thus the Ottoman rule in Palestine came to an end. The year 1917 marks a turning point in the history of Palestine not only because of the end of Ottoman rule, but also because of the British Balfour Declaration of November 1917 that constituted the root cause of the Palestinian question. The state of Israel was proclaimed by the Jews on 14 May, 1948 on the eve of the termination of the British mandate over Palestine. Consequently, the war of 1948 broke out between the Jews and the neighboring Arab states, which led to catastrophic consequence to the latter. Jews, on the other hand, managed to occupy 78% of Palestine, and drove out about 2/3 of the Palestinians from their homeland. Another disastrous war occurred in 1967 when the rest of Palestine was occupied i.e. the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The period from 1967 onwards was largely characterized by the Jewish occupation of Palestine and the Palestinian military struggle for their right and self-determination.

However, the Palestinian issue still remains an explosive and unresolved problem. Its solution is a necessity as well as an international concern, particularly to the Muslims who treat it not merely as a regional or an Arab issue, but also a religious one.

The Muslim leaders and masses alike have never compromised on the issue of Al-Quds. This sentiment is indeed shared by Malaysia. The main concern of this thesis will therefore be an analysis of the Malaysian government's commitment to the cause of the *Ummah* as reflected in Malaysian foreign policy, with particular reference to the Palestinian issue. 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.

Significantly, Malaysian internal politics play a dominant role in the formulation of Malaysian foreign policy. From a historical study of Malay politics, one may conclude that Islam has increasingly become a vital political force because of its significance to communal and political identity of the Malay-Muslims³. According to the constitution of Malaysia, Malay means "a person who professes the Muslim religion, speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs"⁴. 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.

³ Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy* (London:Routledge, 1997), pp.1-11

⁴ See, Federal Constitution Malaysia, Article 160(2)

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 responded to the pressure by taking up a number of steps to promote the role of Islam in Malaysia as well as in Malaysian foreign policy.

The growing influence of PAS, accentuated by the Malay economic frustration and political insecurity due to the communist threat, had persuaded Tunku to enhance his commitment to Islam and Islamic nations⁵. Tunku's approach was motivated by pragmatic consideration to secure and promote the identity and integrity of the newly-founded Malaysia as well as to maintain the legitimacy of UMNO, the regime's base. Malaysia, now under the leadership of Dr. Mahathir, continues 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. In terms of policy goals and strategy, Dr. Mahathir's Islamic diplomacy is indeed a continuation of those already set in place by his predecessor.

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 OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference). Through a thorough study of the role of Islam

⁵ Abdullah Ahmad, *Tengku Abdul Rahman and Malaysia's Foreign Policy 1963-1970* (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn. Bhd., 1985), pp.109-118

in Malaysian politics, one may conclude that Islam in Malaysia since independence has been increasingly politicized, domestically and internationally.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Malaysia, which has a Muslim majority and Islam is its official religion, takes considerable pride for being part of the Islamic *Ummah*. As such, the cause of Islam can rightly be said to constitute one of the important pillars of Malaysian foreign policy. Being an integral part of the Muslim world, especially as a member of OIC, Malaysia has to endeavor her utmost to manifest its concern and commitment to Islamic principles of universal brotherhood. This is particularly so by supporting the causes of the Muslim nations, of which the Palestinian issue is perhaps the most important.

The primary concern of this study is to analyze Malaysia's commitment to the *Ummah*, particularly the Palestinian issue, as reflected in Malaysia's foreign policy. It is in a way an attempt to examine Malaysian government's stand and role towards the issue. Emphasis would be laid on the important period 1957 – 1989. This period will be divided into four main stages, each representing the administrations of one of the four Prime Ministers of Malaysia, as follows:

◆ 1957 – 1970

Significantly, the study will study the attitude and role of the Malaysian government towards the Palestinian issue during the office of Tunku Abdul Rahman. The period will cover some of the important events occurred at this stage like the Malaysian attitude towards the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the arson of Al-Aqsa mosque in 1969.

◆ 1971 – 1976

The second period scrutinizes the attitude of the Malaysian government during the office of the second Premier of Malaysia, Tun Abdul Razak, and the role played by his government in the Palestinian issue, especially in the Arab-Israeli war of 1973.

◆ 1976 – 1981

The third period analyzes the attitude of the Malaysian government towards the Palestinian issue during the tenure of Tun Hussein Onn, the third Premier of Malaysia. The study will also highlight some of the contributions made by his government in solving the problem.

◆ 1981 – 1989

The last period concerns with the office of the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. The study scrutinizes the stand and role of his government towards the Palestinian issue. Among the important events concerning the Palestinian issue during Dr. Mahathir period was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the successful hosting in Kuala Lumpur of the UN-sponsored Conference on the Question of Palestine in 1983, the visit of the Chairman of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), Yasser Arafat, in 1984 to the elevation of the PLO diplomatic status in Malaysia in 1989.

It is hoped that with this periodization one gets a better insight of the reflection of the Palestinian problem on the Islamic *Ummah*, particularly Malaysia.

Specifically, the study will try to answer the following questions;

- How deeply affected and committed is the Malaysian government towards the Islamic principle of Ummatism, particularly the Palestinian issue?
- What is the attitude of the Malaysian government towards the Palestinian problem?
- What are the factors and forces that motivated, and hindered, the Malaysian government's commitment to the Islamic cause?
- To what extent has Malaysian policies attained their stated goals and objectives?

Malaysian commitment and support to the Islamic cause have been perceived differently by various groups. The general perception tends to challenge the 'genuineness' of Malaysian's commitment to Islamic principles as expressed in its foreign policy. Many contest that the role of Islam in Malaysia's foreign policy cannot be viewed as a major shift towards the ideologization of religion in international relations, but rather based on humanitarian basis. Therefore, this study also aspires to identify the prime mover of Malaysian foreign policy. In particular, is it based on the principle of international humanism or the Islamic orientation at large?

1.3. Significance of the study

- The absence of exhaustive scientific study and documentation on the Malaysian views and attitude towards the Palestinian issues has propelled me to fill this academic gap. It is in a way an attempt to widen one's intellectual horizon by analyzing this world issue from a Malaysian vantagepoint.

- The study may contribute towards the understanding of the historical roots of the Palestinian problem, and how it affects the rest of the Muslim world, particularly Malay Muslims.
- It may also become a reference work for preliminary documentation of Malaysian's views and attitude, as well as the government's role and policies, towards the Palestinian issue. It is in a way an investigation on the degree to which Islam influences the foreign policy of Malaysia.
- The study may also pave the way for evaluating the contribution and achievement of Malaysia regarding the Palestinian cause.
- This study is in a way an attempt to find further constructive strategies for Malaysia to increasingly and effectively contribute towards international peace and order.
- It is also hoped that this study will kindle and enlighten the minds of the Muslims, wherever they might be, especially the youths, on the issue of Human Rights, especially with regard to the Palestinian struggle.

1.4. Review of the literature

The volume of direct and comprehensive literature on the topic is very limited and perhaps almost absent. However, the research attempts to organize the available literature into three categories. The first deals generally with literature on the Palestinian issue written by Malaysian authors; the second broadly with Islam in Malaysian

politics, and the third specifically with the Islamic dimension of Malaysian foreign policy.

Most of the literature on the Palestinian issue written by Malaysian authors deals generally with its historical roots, and the danger of Zionism⁶. All the literature in this category attempt to instill the awareness among Malaysians, especially the Malay-Muslims, on the importance of the Palestinian issue not merely as an Arab or regional issue, but rather as a religious issue as well. The writers of this group staunchly condemn the Zionist regime, and vigorously attempt to exhibit the vicious agenda of the Zionists towards the Islamic *Ummah* at large.

Another category of the literature, which could provide some useful insights to the present study, is concerned generally with Islam in Malaysian politics. Reviewing this kind of literatures is deemed necessary to provide a general understanding on the role of Islam in Malaysian polity, domestically and internationally. Most of the scholars in this category highlight the importance of the role of ethnicity within the Malaysian society where the proportion of the Malays to the non-Malays is almost even, Islam is linked closely to the ethnic identity of the politically-dominant Malays. From their historical study of Malay politics, they conclude that Islam has increasingly become a

⁶ See, Ismail Zayid, *Palestin: Warisan Kita* (Kuala Lumpur: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, 1977), Mustafa Suhaimi, *Palestin: 40 tahun dalam Neraka Zionis* (Selangor: Najdi Publication, 1988), Ismail Mohd. Arifin, *Intifadha: Kebangkitan Islam Palestin* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Hizbi, 1989), Yusri Yusof, *Usaha Iktiraf Palestin: Siapa Khianati Palestin* (Selangor: Penerbitan Pemuda, 1994), Kamarulzaman Hj. Zainal, *Protokol Komplot Zionis Ancam Dunia* (Selangor: Progressive Products Supply, 1990), and Amaludin Darus, *Impian Yahudi Menjelang Ajalnya* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Abad, 1981).

vital political force because of its significance to the communal and political identity of the Malay-Muslims.⁷ Significantly, they also assert that the contemporary independent Malaysia has been affected by the global Islamic resurgence, particularly in the late seventies and the early eighties that has found expression in its International relations. This expression has reflected the political priorities of its domestic constituency – the Malays. Indeed, in analyzing Islam in Malaysian polity, they unanimously agree that the domestic and external realities are significantly interrelated, thus provided for the emergence of Islam as a force in Malaysian foreign policy.

The third category of literature, which also has significant relevance to the study, deals broadly with Malaysian foreign policy.⁸ Most of the writings in this category deal with general ideas on the formulation and development of Malaysian foreign policy since independence, sources of Malaysian foreign policy, principles that govern Malaysian external behavior and personalities involved in foreign policy making. Indeed, few studies have been conducted on the Islamic dimension of Malaysian foreign policy. More importantly, none of these studies has examined Malaysia and Palestinian issue exclusively and comprehensively. With regard to the Islamic dimension of Malaysian foreign policy, this study may find some relevance in the

⁷ See, Hussin Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics* (New York:Oxford University Press, 1990), Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur:Penerbit Jaya Bakti, 1987), Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam: Modern Religious Radicals and their Roots* (Vancouver: University of British, 1984) and K.J.Ratnam, *Communalism and Political Process in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Uni. of Malaya Press, 1965) and Judith Nagata, “Religious Ideology and Social Change: The Islamic Revival in Malaysia”, *Pacific Affairs*, 53,no.3 (Fall 1984),pp.405-440

⁸ See, Dato’ Abdullah Ahmad, *Tengku Abdul Rahman and Malaysia’s Foreign Policy 1963-1970* (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn Bhd., 1985), Mohammed Azhari Karim, Llewellyn D.Howell and Grace Okuda (eds.), *Malaysian Foreign Policy: Issues and Perspectives* (Kuala Lumpur:INTAN, 1990), Marvin C.Otto, “Foreign Policy Formulation in Malaysia”, *Asian Survey*, 12 (1973),pp.225-239, and M.Pathmanathan and David Lazarus, *Winds of Change:The Mahathir Impact on Malaysia Foreign Policy* (Petaling Jaya:Pelandok Publications,1984)

works of Shanti Nair, Mohamad Abu Bakar, H.J.Widdowson and Mohd. Yusof Ahmad.

Shanti Nair⁹, in his work entitled *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, contributes significantly to the understanding of the intense relationship between domestic and foreign contexts, which has allowed for the emergence of Islam as a force in Malaysian foreign policy. He also highlights specific connections between the direction and intent of the country's foreign policy towards other Muslim countries, with regard to global and regional Islamic issues, and the politics of Islam within the domestic scene. In tackling Islamic issues, particularly the Palestinian issue in Malaysian foreign policy, Shanti's discussion is very brief. More significantly, his study on the Palestinian issue gives more emphasis on the tenure of Dr.Mahathir, particularly since the 1980's. It is in the light of this limitation that my study attempts to fill the gap by analyzing deeply and comprehensively the Palestinian issue during the suggested period 1957-1989.

Penghayatan Sebuah Ideal: Satu Tafsiran tentang Islam Semasa, is a well-written work of Muhamad Abu Bakar¹⁰, which is overtly related to the theme of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia, and covertly to this study. This work is basically a compendium of articles, which the author wrote over the past decade or so and presented in a variety of forums. There is a good deal of information in it on the various aspects of contemporary Islam, particularly in Malaysia. In this work, Muhamad's concept of Islam as an ideal is not something unrealizable but something uncompromisable. If weaknesses are identified, then they are those of practitioners,

⁹ Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, (London: Routledge, 1997)

¹⁰ Mohamad Abu Bakar, *Penghayatan Sebuah Ideal: Satu Tafsiran Tentang Islam Semasa* (Kuala Lumpur:DBP,1987)

and not of the faith. In this work, Muhamad contributed significantly in analyzing the role of Islam in International relations, the present challenges facing Islam and its future scenario. The work ventures to argue that the government's commitment to Islam has somehow been accentuated by the intra-Malay rivalry, particularly UMNO and PAS. In order to maintain its legitimacy in the eyes of Malay-Muslim population, UMNO, in Abu Bakar's view, enhanced their commitment to Islam in domestic as well as international policies. Unfortunately, the author does not deeply examine in this work Malaysian attitude towards the Ummatic issues, particularly the Palestinian issue.

In his article *Islam in Malaysia's Foreign Policy*¹¹, Muhamad Abu Bakar discusses in general the development of Malaysia's foreign policy, and the factors that motivated Malaysian's government commitment to Islam and Islamic nations i.e. Indonesian confrontation (1963-1966), communist threat in Southeast Asia, and intra-Malay political rivalry. Muhamad contests that the role of Islam in Malaysia's foreign policy cannot be viewed as a major shift towards the ideologization of religion in international relations, but rather it was more for moral and humanitarian reasons. But his discussion of the Islamic dimension of Malaysia's foreign policy does not go into details on the co-religionists' issues, particularly the Palestinian issue. The emphasis is, however, on the general Ummatic issues that concerned Malaysia since Tunku Abdul Rahman. In view of this limitation, this study attempts to cover this gap by examining Malaysia's role in the Islamic issues, specifically the Palestinian issue from 1957-1989.

¹¹ See, Mohamad Abu Bakar, "Islam in Malaysia's Foreign Policy", in Mohammed Azhari Karim, Llewellyn D.Howell and Grace Okuda (eds.), *Malaysian Foreign Policy: Issues and Perspectives* (Kuala Lumpur: INTAN, 1990)