

## Determinant of Mahathir's Foreign Policy towards Palestine Conflict

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**Abstract:** Malaysia during the tenure of Tun Mahathir Mohammed as the premier always has put Palestine in the special place. It was during Mahathir's era that sees the high commitment of the government towards the Palestine – Israel crisis. This paper will attempt to analyze the reasons that influence Mahathir decisions or also known as determinants of Mahathir's foreign policy towards the Palestine conflict. In analyzing the foreign policy of a country, it is not normal to attribute the name of a president or a prime minister to it. However, in the case of Mahathir and Malaysia this is quite normal and the reasons are many. Some of them were because he was the longest ever serving prime minister of Malaysia. His tenure of almost twenty two years had synonymized him with Malaysia and vice versa. Upon appointed as the fourth premier replacing Tun Hussein Onn, he took a very close attention on the matter of foreign policy and international affairs. Even though at that time Malaysia had a foreign minister but the de-facto foreign minister is none other than him. Therefore, this paper is termed in such a way because of his influence in the issue of Palestine.

**Key words:** Co-religionist • Determinant • Foreign Policy • Mahathir • Malaysia • Palestine

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### INTRODUCTION

The conflict between Palestine and Israel had started in 1948 and has continually worsened from time to time and to this moment, there seem to be no solutions to this conflict. Indeed, this conflict has opened the eyes of majority of the countries and some of them had responded by aiding Palestine and one of them is Malaysia. The help rendered by Malaysia towards Palestine and the Palestinians started since the time of the first prime minister of Malaysia that is Tunku Abdul Rahman. The help and aids are still given and channeled to the Palestinians up until today. The successors of Tunku, namely Tun Abdul Razak, Tun Hussein Onn, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the incumbent sixth Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak basically continue and follow this policy set up by the Tunku's administration.

However, during the time of the fourth Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, the level of commitment shown by Malaysia towards the issue of Palestine heightened. Tun Dr. Mahathir during his years as the Premier of Malaysia took this issue close to his heart and the commitment shown by Malaysia and himself is significantly greater than any other prime minister of

Malaysia. Therefore, one might ask why is it that Malaysia during Mahathir's administration showed significant interest in the cause of helping the Palestine.

The Mahathir's administration went to the extent of committing some of their resources in order to help the Palestinians. Donations, scholarship, sponsorship and other means have been given in order to decrease the degree of miseries and sufferings of the Palestinians. In addition, Malaysia was also vocal in voicing their critics towards the Israelis as well as the major powers who seem not to care about the fate of the Palestinians. Malaysia was indeed very critical in questioning the commitment of the major powers who have promised to bring about peace and security especially after the establishment of United Nations (UN) after the end of World War II. Not only that, Mahathir in one of the conferences that he attended critically criticized the world for not doing anything despite seeing the mass killing in their televisions.

Assessing the behaviour shown by the Mahathir's administration, critics may well conclude that the determination of Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine is because of the shared faith that the Malaysians and Palestinians which is Islam. However, this is too simplistic of a conclusion.

Malaysia, since its independence in 1957 has shown itself as a diplomatic nation and would avoid any conflicts that could affect its people. Therefore, as a country, that detests aggression and injustice, Malaysia has shown its support towards the cause of the Palestinians. The supports shown by Malaysian is also based on the humanitarian ground because this issue is beyond the issue of faith and it is actually concern with all the people in this world.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The researcher looks at the historical roots of the Palestine, which tell the story of the origins of the conflicts between the Palestinians and the Israelis. By looking at the historical records, the researcher also managed to highlight the awareness of the Malaysian towards this conflict as well as the foreign policy of the premier before Mahathir.

In completing the research, the study is likely to depend on primary and secondary data. Primary data and information is collected from various government institutions as well as the speeches of the Malaysian ministers. As for the secondary data, the selection of relevant books, journals, magazines, reports and papers presented at seminar and conferences, local and foreign newspapers as well as all kinds of material from the internet are very important. These literatures are written by different authors and will be used for analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The installation of Dr. Mahathir Mohammad as the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia after Tun Hussein Onn saw the change in Malaysia's foreign policy. Upon taking office, he outlined the priority of Malaysia's foreign policy towards, first ASEAN, second Islamic Countries, third the Non-Aligned Movement and fourth the Commonwealth [1]. This move has indicated that he has come up with a revolutionary move of positioning the West as the last priority in Malaysia's foreign policy strategy. This was unlike Tunku Abdul Rahman, who, during the early days of independence, viewed the relations with the West and the Commonwealth particularly as very important. In hindsight perhaps the very survival of Malaysia depended on these relations.

The influence of Mahathir's foreign policy of minimizing the relations with the West, can be seen when he introduced the policy of "Buy British Last". He also brought Malaysia's attention by introducing the "Look

East Policy", which aimed at emulating Japan and Korea in their productivity. These are just some example of how, upon given the responsibility as the Prime Minister, he changed the direction of Malaysia's foreign policy. However, when it comes to the issues pertaining to Muslims for example in the Palestine issue, Afghanistan and et cetera, he is continuing his predecessor's policy but perhaps with a deeper involvement and commitment. Mahathir had manifested his support and stand of helping the Palestinian when his administration granted full diplomatic status to the office and representative of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Kuala Lumpur on 21st August 1981 [2]. This action indeed has demonstrated his serious stand and commitment of helping the Palestinians.

One would guess why is it that Mahathir bring this issue of Palestinian conflict very dear to his heart. What was the reason behind his high level of commitment towards the sufferings of the Palestinians? What motivated him to help the Palestinians? There are a lot of contributing factors that motivate him to be deeply involved in this issue and one of the factors is because of Islam or to be more precise because of co-religionist factor. Because of this by 1980s, Malaysia under his administration had aligned with Islam and had championed the international Muslim issues. With the active participation in OIC and UN in fighting and condemning the aggressions towards the Muslim, Malaysia has become an activist of Muslim community. There were few important events that happened during his tenure as Prime Minister that affect the member states of OIC. One of it was the struggle of Afghan Mujahiddeen. In this matter, Malaysia rendered the support and helps towards the Afghan Mujahiddeen, which officially started in 1979, when the Russian invaded Afghanistan. The support showed by Malaysia included the monetary fund donated to the Afghan Mujahiddeen. Some RM400, 000 had been donated by people in Malaysia by 1982 of which the sum of RM150, 000 coming from the government. Another initiative in commemorating the Afghan Mujahiddeen struggle towards liberating Afghanistan was by declaring March 21 as the "Afghanistan Day" and being celebrated since 1982 [3]. Apart from that, the government also allowed the Afghan to set up an office in Malaysia in supporting their struggle. The Mahathir's administration goes extra mile in supporting the Mujahiddeen of Afghanistan by bringing their children to study in university in Malaysia through scholarship. This was another example of co-religionist support shown by Mahathir's foreign policy.

Another example that needs to be highlighted in order to show Malaysia's commitment towards co-religionism as well as the principle of self-determination and territorial integrity and humanitarian ground was the crisis faced by the former Yugoslavia i.e. Bosnia Herzegovina. Immediately after the massacre of the Bosnian Muslim begun, Malaysia tries to help the helpless Bosnian Muslim. Apart from the voicing out and condemning this brutal act of the Serbs, Malaysia also sent out their peacekeeping forces under the banner of UN. Seeing that this effort was not enough, Mahathir's administration follow one of the effort that they have used in helping the Afghan, where they bring the Bosnian Muslim to Malaysia and give them scholarship to study in Malaysia's university. His efforts in trying to stop the war in former Yugoslavia included writing the letters to the superpower countries to urge them to do something to stop this massacre. In his letter to the Prime Minister of France, Mr. Edouard Balladur dated November 24 1993, he urges [4];

"It is my sincere hope that France which plays a leading and influential role in the international community, particularly at the UNSC and the European Community, would not allow the senseless killing and suffering in Bosnia-Herzegovina to continue. Malaysia looks forward to working with France not only on the in the humanitarian relief efforts, but also in the just and peaceful settlement of that shocking conflict."

In another letter that he wrote to the Prime Minister of France, he again asked France to use its influence over the EU as well as the UNSC and to play its critical role in order to do something to stop the inhumane killing and the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian and Croats by the Serbs. When NATO started moving its forces towards the conflicted sites and put an effort to settle this conflict once and for all, Mahathir wrote a congratulatory letter to Bill Clinton, the President of USA. In his letter dated December 29 1995, he writes [5];

"For my part, I would like to register my humble appreciation of your role in stopping the slaughter of Muslims and Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I had always believed that without a show of strength the Serbs cannot be brought to the negotiating table. Your decision to use air power to punish the Serbs was the right decision and I congratulate you."

This letter clearly shows how grateful Malaysia is towards the ending of the brutal massacre faced by the Muslim in Bosnia. This has shown how Malaysia highly regarded its relationship with the Muslim and how Malaysia would strive for the issues pertaining to Muslims.

Since then Malaysia had made several effort at persuading the superpower country from taking atrocious actions towards the Muslim countries. This was profound especially after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. Malaysia condemned US President Bush's decision to attack Afghanistan and Iraq consecutively for the alleged conspiracy of attacking USA and the possession of Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD).

Malaysia's close attention towards the issue of Palestine was the hallmark of the Malaysia's foreign policy where the King always address the Parliament on the need for Malaysia to continuously fight towards this issue. It had been the stand of Malaysia that the reason for their continuous support for Palestine and denouncement of the Israel is due to the Palestinian right to self-determination and territorial integrity.

Another factor which led to the active role played by Mahathir's administration in the issue of Palestinians is because of the issue of humanity. He condemned the major powers for not trying to help the diabolical conflict faced by the Palestinians. Thus Mahathir took charge of this issue by critically condemning the Israel as well as the major powers. The Palestinian issue is not an isolated case because other crises also occurred in other parts of the world especially in the third world country. Therefore, Mahathir looked at the issue of Palestine as serving his agenda in also championing the issue that happened in the third world country on the ground of humanitarian.

As can be seen, one of the features of Malaysia's foreign policy during the time of Mahathir was his efforts in bridging the gap among the Third World Country. He always has been critical when criticizing the unfair treatment of the West towards the Third World Countries. He explains in his words [6];

"As a Third World Country, we should maintain a low profile, but the atrocities and the unfairness of the powerful has forced us to be openly critical of them and to try to influence their leaders."

Therefore, it can be demonstrated that Malaysia apart from being an activist of the global Muslim community was also becoming the activist of the Third World Countries. To some Mahathir was one of the prominent leaders of the Third World Countries.

Another factor that comes into play when analyzing Mahathir's policies towards Palestinians is the idiosyncratic factor. Idiosyncrasy is defined as "peculiarity of the mental constitution or temperament of a person [7]. It is referring to how one's state of mind is influencing or shaping one's behavior due several reasons. It can be the experiences, educational background, memories, social background attributes,

values, perception and beliefs [8]. Looking at Mahathir's policies towards the Palestinians it may have the influence of idiosyncratic factor. As it has been defined earlier, idiosyncrasy is formed through one's prior experiences and other factors like social and educational background. It is very interesting to look at some of the events that Mahathir has experienced and how this experienced had shaped his behavior in dictating the nation foreign policy and especially towards the Palestinians.

Mahathir is different from his predecessors in terms of his educational background. As all his predecessor received their tertiary education in United Kingdom, Mahathir studied in Singapore. Perhaps that is why he did not look at the UK as how his predecessors look at it and that is why when he was installed as the prime minister he came up with "Buy British Last policy.

However, looking at his policies towards Palestinians, it may due to his prior experience that influences his decisions on this issue. He lived through the time when Malaysia was colonized by British, Japan and again British. He had experienced the rough time of living under the colonial masters and therefore understands what the Palestinians feel when their land and home were taken by the Israelis.

Perhaps the last factor that motivates his policies towards Palestinians is the most important one. It should be noted that Mahathir's administration had always met with a challenge from the opposition party especially PAS and especially in the matter concerning Islam. His administration had been called 'un-Islamic' by this people. It was a serious challenge for him because the opposition party together with a few NGOs can pose a threat especially in the election [9]. The opposition will use this issue in order to get support especially from the Malay Muslim. In order to survive in politics, several initiatives need to be taken by him and one of them is through the Palestinian issue.

The challenge was not coming from PAS only but also from NGOs and one of them is Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or ABIM. At its inception, ABIM was led by Anwar Ibrahim and was considered to be successful in appealing to the educated Malay elites [10]. In order to maintain his administration and for his own political survival, Mahathir responded to this challenge. During his time he introduced a lot of Islamic related institutions for example the International Islamic University and Islamic Development Foundation in 1983, an Islamic Bank in 1984 and Islamic Insurance company in 1985 [11].

At the international level, Mahathir critically voiced his concern over the Islamic issues especially things that happened in Palestine, Afghanistan, Bosnia Herzegovina

and Iraq. All his twenty speeches that he delivered at the UN revolved around Palestine [12]. For this Mahathir received the acknowledgement as the Islamic statesman and therefore manage to undercut the threat pose by PAS at the domestic level.

## CONCLUSION

As was mentioned earlier, Malaysia's foreign policy during his tenure especially when it comes to Palestine was the continuity of his predecessors but he has brought a new level of commitment into this issue. The influence of Islam in foreign policy on the other hand was deemed important because it is one of the strategies in trying to garner domestic support of his government as well as the ruling political party. As that is one of the motives and reasons of his policies towards Palestinians, there are other factors at play as well. His policies towards Palestinians were the result of his co-religionist sentiment, his idiosyncrasy, humanity and the most important factor was due to his own political survival. Indeed, from the analysis it is this factor that compels him to champion this issue because as a result of this he was regarded as an Islamic statesman. It is noticeable that through his policies towards Palestine that he managed to undercut the challenge from PAS as well as the NGOs who accused his agenda and administration as "un-Islamic".

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