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## **Malaysia's Support for Palestine: A Complex Interplay of Principles and Geopolitics**

**Ngoun Sovannmakara**

### **Introduction**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most complex and enduring issues in the world, involving decades of violence, displacement, and suffering. The conflict centers on the disputed land of Palestine, which is claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians as their ancestral homeland. Israel, backed by the U.S. and other Western powers, has occupied and annexed most of the Palestinian territories, including the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, and has imposed harsh restrictions and policies on the Palestinian population. The Palestinians, supported by some Arab and Muslim countries, have resisted the Israeli occupation and oppression, and have fought for their right to self-determination and statehood. Various attempts to negotiate a peaceful solution have failed, and the situation remains unstable and unsolved.

During this conflict, one Southeast Asian nation has taken a distinctive and unwavering position. Malaysia, known for its cultural diversity and thriving economy, has emerged as a vocal advocate for the Palestinian cause, standing firmly to seek justice and statehood. With nearly two-thirds of its population practicing Islam, Malaysia's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian issue is deeply rooted

in its society and political affairs.<sup>1</sup> This essay will argue that Malaysia's support for Palestine is not merely a political statement, but a reflection of its values and principles, as well as its challenges and aspirations.

## Malaysia's Actions

Malaysia's commitment to supporting Palestine is not merely a political statement, but action has been taken as well. An exemplary event, the "Malaysia with Palestine Assembly" held on October 15, 2023, at the Axiata Arena Stadium in Bukit Jalil drew over 15,000 participants from diverse political and religious backgrounds. They came together to express their unwavering solidarity with Palestine through speeches, songs, poems, and prayers. Even Former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin encapsulated the moment, emphasizing the importance of taking a firm stance against the "slaughters of the Zionist regime" in Palestine.<sup>2</sup>

On October 19, 2023, at the ASEAN and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit, Prime Minister Anwar affirmed Malaysia's full support for Saudi Arabia and the GCC in their efforts to bring an end to the crisis and prevent further escalation in the Gaza Strip. Anwar passionately appealed to the international community to ensure peace. He underscored the need for collective efforts to halt the ongoing violence, particularly in the Gaza Strip, where thousands of innocent lives have been lost due to Israel's actions, and even lives in hospitals and public spaces are at risk.<sup>3</sup>

The Malaysian government has consistently condemned Israel's military actions which are rooted in principles of justice, human rights, and international law. Malaysia has called upon Israel to respect international law and advocated for a peaceful resolution to the conflict through diplomatic means. The Malaysia's stance highlights the importance of a two-state solution, allowing Israel

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<sup>1</sup> Bedi, Rashvinjeet S. "Analysis: Malaysia's pro-Palestinian Stance and Ties with Hamas — under the Spotlight but Not under Pressure." *CNA*, October 19, 2023. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-palestine-hamas-israel-anwar-3855796>.

<sup>2</sup> Strangio, Sebastian. "Protesters in Malaysia, Indonesia Come Out in Support of Palestine." *The Diplomat*, October 16, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/protesters-in-malaysia-indonesia-come-out-in-support-of-palestine/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Palestine: World Must Wake up against Hypocrisy, Says PM Anwar." *Malay Mail*, October 22, 2023. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/10/22/palestine-world-must-wake-up-against-hypocrisy-says-pm-anwar/97795>.

and Palestine to coexist in peace, and aligning with the broader international consensus seeking a just and lasting resolution.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, the dedication of Prime Minister Anwar extends beyond words. He has actively called for an immediate suspension of bombardment and the development of a humanitarian corridor in Rafah in response to the terrible situation in Gaza. He also promised RM100 million (about US\$21 million) in humanitarian relief for Gaza. Anwar's appeal for Israel to renounce its dispossession practices and sincerely negotiate a cease-fire with Hamas underlines Malaysia's commitment to resolving the conflict and fostering peace.

## Malaysia's Potential Implications

Malaysia's stance on the Palestine issue has not been without controversy. While most Western countries and some Arab nations have condemned Hamas for its role in the conflict, Malaysia has refrained from doing so. This has put a spotlight on Malaysia's relationship with Hamas, which is designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the EU, among others. Anwar clarified this policy in the Malaysian parliament, asserting that Malaysia maintains a relationship with Hamas, emphasizing that they do not agree with the stance of Western countries.<sup>5</sup> The fact that Hamas won elections and was chosen by the people of Gaza to lead underscores Malaysia's stance.

However, Malaysia's relationship with Hamas may have economic and political consequences. The United States has urged Malaysia to change its stance of refusing to recognize Hamas as such. Malaysia, however, maintains that it strongly rejects all forms of terrorism and condemns actions that result in the loss of innocent lives, emphasizing its support for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.<sup>6</sup> The disagreement highlights differing perspectives on Hamas, with the

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<sup>4</sup> "Malaysia and Saudi Renew Determination in Maintaining International Peace, Stability and Security." *Malay Mail*, October 23, 2023. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/10/23/malaysia-and-saudi-renew-determination-in-maintaining-international-peace-stability-and-security/97835>.

<sup>5</sup> "Malaysia Regrets Stance of Several Western Nations on Humanitarian Issues in Gaza, Says PM Anwar." *The Star*, October 23, 2023. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/10/23/malaysia-regrets-stance-of-several-western-nations-on-humanitarian-issues-in-gaza-says-pm-anwar>.

<sup>6</sup> "Malaysia Received 3 Diplomatic Notes from US over Palestine, Says Premier," *AA*, accessed February 8, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/malaysia-received-3-diplomatic-notes-from-us-over-palestine-says-premier/3039474>.

U.S. emphasizing security concerns and Malaysia emphasizing its commitment to a diplomatic resolution that respects the rights and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Moreover, the U.S. proposed the Hamas International Financing Prevention Act, aiming to impose sanctions on foreign entities supporting Palestinian militant groups. Although, Malaysia firmly rejects unilateral sanctions and emphasizes the potential economic impact, as the U.S. is Malaysia's third-largest trade partner. The proposed U.S. law has raised concerns about its implications for Malaysia.<sup>7</sup> The potential imposition of sanctions on Malaysia as outlined in the proposed law by the U.S. could have multifaceted impacts on the nation.

Economically, Malaysia, with the U.S. as its third-largest trade partner, may experience adverse consequences such as trade restrictions, affecting bilateral commerce that totaled about US\$78 billion in 2022 according to United States Trade Representative. The strained relations could potentially lead to a decrease in investment opportunities for U.S. companies in Malaysia, impacting the nation's economic landscape.

Diplomatically, Malaysia may face isolation or backlash not only from the U.S. but also from other countries that align with the U.S. perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This could result in a decline in Malaysia's credibility and influence, particularly in international forums, potentially affecting its role as a mediator and leader in the Muslim world.

Some observers have also criticized Malaysia for its stance on the conflict, accusing it of being anti-Semitic and anti-Israel.<sup>8</sup> Israel claims that it has the right to defend itself from the rockets and attacks launched by Hamas and other militant groups and that it is acting in self-defense and in accordance with international law. Israel also argues that it has a legitimate claim to the land of Palestine, based on its historical and religious ties, and that it recognizes the right of the

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<sup>7</sup> "Israel-Gaza War: Malaysia Rejects US Sanctions Bill against Supporters of Hamas, Palestinian Militants," *South China Morning Post*, November 7, 2023. [https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3240592/israel-gaza-war-malaysia-rejects-us-sanctions-bill-against-supporters-hamas-palestinian-militants?campaign=3240592&module=perpetual\\_scroll\\_0&pgtype=article](https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3240592/israel-gaza-war-malaysia-rejects-us-sanctions-bill-against-supporters-hamas-palestinian-militants?campaign=3240592&module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article).

<sup>8</sup> Hutt, David. "Anwar Ibrahim, Anti-Semite?" *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/anwar-ibrahim-anti-semite/>.

Palestinians to have their own state, but only if they recognize Israel's right to exist and renounce violence. Israel rejects the idea of a two-state solution based on the pre-1967 borders, as it considers them to be indefensible and incompatible with its security needs which is also why Israel refuse to ceasefire.<sup>9</sup>

## Malaysia's Internal Challenges

Malaysia's stance not only puts the country in potential diplomatic conflict with powerful states but also causes internal conflict. On October 13, 2023, over 1,000 people gathered in Kuala Lumpur to demand that the U.S. accept responsibility for enabling Israel's aggression and occupation of Palestine. Protesters wearing the distinctive Palestinian scarf keffiyeh and waving the Palestinian flag marched towards the US embassy and briefly clashed with police. "What we are protesting here today is the colonization of Palestine, backed by America and Western powers," activist Hishamuddin Rais said, adding that the Gaza crisis was not a conflict between Muslims and Jews or between Israel and Hamas.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, Malaysia's strong support for the Palestinian cause was allegedly the trigger for a bomb scare on October 15 at the Mid Valley Southkey Mall in Johor Bahru. According to the authority, the mall's management received a call from a person claiming to be from abroad who planned to plant a bomb in the area because Malaysia supports Palestine. The mall was evacuated and later declared safe, but Malaysia's deputy prime minister, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, stated that despite the danger, the country will continue to support the Palestinian cause.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sherwood, Harriet. "Israel-Palestine: Is the Two-State Solution the Answer to the Crisis?" *the Guardian*, November 4, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/04/israel-palestine-is-the-two-state-solution-the-answer-to-the-crisis>.

<sup>10</sup> Azmi, Hadi, and Hadi Azmi. "Israel-Gaza War: Malaysia's pro-Palestinian Protesters Call for US to Take Responsibility for Enabling Israel." *South China Morning Post*, October 20, 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3238654/israel-gaza-war-malysias-pro-palestinian-protesters-call-us-take-responsibility-enabling-israel>.

<sup>11</sup> Leong, Adeline. "Mid Valley Southkey Given All-Clear After Fake Bomb Threat, Business Resumes Today." *TRP*, October 15, 2023. <https://www.therakyatpost.com/news/2023/10/15/mid-valley-southkey-given-all-clear-after-fake-bomb-threat-business-resumes-today/>.

These incidents show that Malaysia's stance on the Palestine issue is not without risks and challenges. Malaysia has to balance its domestic and international interests, as well as its moral and pragmatic considerations. Malaysia has to deal with the possibility of violence and extremism, as well as the pressure and criticism from other countries. Malaysia has to navigate the complex and sensitive dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the diverse and conflicting opinions of its people.

## Conclusion

Malaysia's persistent support for Palestine not only contradicts dominant narratives but also presents complicated issues. Malaysia walks a fine line between values, cultural ties, economic interests, and global positions. The nation's willingness to jeopardize powerful relationships for moral ideals compels us to consider our opinions and preconceptions. Malaysia's stance calls for a thorough rethink of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, as well as a sophisticated examination of options for peace and justice. As we interact with Malaysia's courageous viewpoint, the conclusion challenges us to examine our perspectives and adopt a greater understanding of the complex factors at work in this long-running dispute.

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**Ngoun Sovannmakara** is a research intern at CSEAS. He is currently a junior student of International Relations at IISPP. His research interests include diplomacy and foreign affairs in the context of Southeast Asia.

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