

A Critical Review of Malaysia's Foreign Policy towards Israel in the Barisan Nasional Era (1957-2018)

Muslim Imran

While Malaysia's foreign policy towards Palestine has been always visible and has received some academic attention, very few works have focused on the country's policy towards Israel. For decades, the Malaysian government asserted it will not develop any ties with Israel as long as the Zionist state continues to deny the Palestinians their rights, especially the right to an independent Palestinian state. This, however, did not mean Israel did not attempt to penetrate the southeast Asian country. This chapter examines Malaysia's approach towards Israel under the leadership of the country's longest-ruling party, the National Front (Barisan Nasional)¹.

Malaysia's Foreign Policy towards Israel in the Era of Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957-1970)

Although Malaysia naturally supported the Palestinian struggle for self-determination since independence, the country's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had no objection, in principle, to having relations with Israel. The Tunku was reported once to say in parliament that: 'not because the Arabs are anti-Israel that we have to follow as such. Similarly, not because Malaya is anti-communist that we could force others to follow us.'² One year before independence, on October 14, 1956, the Tunku met Israeli Foreign Minister, Moshe Sharett, in Kuala Lumpur.³ Among the issues the two discussed was Sharett's proposal of appointing an Israeli consul in Kuala

¹ Malaysia was ruled by a three-party coalition called the Alliance (Perikatan Nasional) from independence in 1957 until the formation of a new coalition called the Barisan Nasional in 1974. Barisan Nasional remained in power until 2018. This study covers the two periods as the same core parties continued to lead the two coalitions.

² In December 1960. See: Anidah Robani, *The Palestinian Issue: A Malaysian Perspective (1957-2003)*, (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2009), 51.

³ Moshe Yegar 'Malaysia: Anti-Semitism without Jews,' *Jewish Political Studies Review* 18, 3-4 (2006).

Lumpur, an idea the Tunku welcomed according to Sharett's diaries. A year later on August 26, 1957, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion sent a congratulatory letter to the Tunku for Malaya's upcoming independence. Israel also voted to accept Malaya in the United Nations, and in December of that year a member of the Malayan UN delegation informed Israeli envoys that Malaya recognized Israel but had no intention of establishing diplomatic ties with it.⁴

The Tunku's meetings with Israeli envoys and his attempt to recognize Israel were faced with huge condemnation and rejection from the local community, especially from Malaysia's Islamic party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS).⁵ Israeli diplomat Moshe Yegar wrote that the Tunku met with the Israeli envoy to Australia on November 9, 1959, during his visit to the country. The Israeli envoy, Moshe Yuval, reported that the Tunku told him: 'I remember my conversation with Mr. Sharett. The leadership of Malaya knows the character of Israel very well, but the Muslim masses in our country are opposed to you. Therefore, we cannot establish diplomatic relations with you'. Yegar also reported that the Tunku told him during a visit to Kuala Lumpur in 1960 that 'establishing diplomatic relations with Israel would give the opposition radical-Islamic political party ammunition to weaken the government'.⁶ PAS representatives in Parliament, like Burhanudin Hilmi and Asri Muda, criticized the government's proposal to recognize Israel, pushing the government to finally withdraw it in 1967.⁷ Realizing that the chance of having full diplomatic representation in Malaysia was very unlikely, Israel resorted in 1963 to opening a

⁴ Yegar, 'Malaysia: Anti-Semitism without Jews'.

⁵ Abdul Hadi Awang, interview by author with Dato Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, President of PAS, Kuala Lumpur, October 16, 2017.

⁶ Yegar 'Malaysia: Anti-Semitism without Jews'.

⁷ Robani, *The Palestinian Issue*, 52.

commercial office in Kuala Lumpur under the flag of one of its companies.⁸ The office continued to operate as an unofficial diplomatic channel until it was closed upon Malaysia's request in 1966.⁹

Malaysia's Foreign Policy towards Israel in the Era of Abdul Razak (1970-1976)

While Malaysia's relations with the Palestinians were on the rise, the government's diplomatic interactions with Israel came to an end. Relations with Israel became hard to even think of, especially after the domestic political changes which saw all-time Israel-opponent PAS ascend to federal power through Abdul Razak's new ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional. Although it became a member of the government, PAS continued to be critical of the country's foreign policy, demanding more engagement with the Muslim World and a stronger pro-Palestine and anti-Israel stand.¹⁰ For instance, PAS president, Datuk Asri Muda,¹¹ called for the recruitment of Malaysian fighters to go fight along their Arab brethren against Israel.¹² Although this strong stand was not fully mirrored in the country's foreign policy, Malaysian diplomats by this time started to avoid their Israeli counterparts, and the country became more critical of Israel at the United Nations.¹³

⁸ In 1964, after Singapore became part of Malaysia, the company chief relayed to the Israeli Foreign Ministry that his company did not need the Kuala Lumpur office as their main branch in Singapore was sufficient. This prompted Israel's Foreign Ministry to appoint one of its diplomats, Moshe Yegar, as the person in charge of this office. See: Yegar, 'Malaysia: Anti-Semitism without Jews'.

⁹ The head of this Israeli mission, Moshe Yegar, wrote that he was in Kuala Lumpur from November 1964 to January 1966, as head of an Israeli commercial mission approved by the Malaysian government. During his stay in Kuala Lumpur, Yegar met with the Tunku, the interior minister, the permanent secretary of the Foreign Ministry among other leaders. See: Yegar, 'Malaysia: Anti-Semitism without Jews'.

¹⁰ Abdul Hadi Awang, interview by author with Dato Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, President of PAS, Kuala Lumpur, October 16, 2017.

¹¹ Tan Sri Dato' Haji Mohd Asri bin Haji Muda was a Malaysian politician who served as the president of PAS from 1969 to 1982, and as the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of the Malaysian state of Kelantan from 1964 to 1974 when he became a federal minister. Asri had a fall-out with PAS after losing party leadership in 1982 and moved to form the short-lived Parti Hizbul Muslimin Malaysia (HAMIM) before finally joining UMNO in 1988. He was born in Kota Bharu, Kelantan on October 10, 1923, and died on August 28, 1992.

¹² Robani, *The Palestinian Issue*, 84.

¹³ Yegar, 'Malaysia: Anti-Semitism without Jews'.

Malaysia's Foreign Policy towards Israel in the Era of Hussein Onn (1976-1981)

Although Malaysia remained steadfast in rejecting diplomatic ties with Israel, the government of Hussein was careful in its take on the Egyptian initiative taken by President Anwar Sadat towards Israel.¹⁴ Sadat visited Israel in November 1978 and then signed the Camp David Accords with the Israeli government causing an uproar in the Arab and Muslim Worlds. In consequence of this diplomatic move, Arab countries boycotted Egypt and expelled it from the Arab League. Malaysia, however, refrained from any involvement in this intra-Arab dispute, maintaining good relations with all sides. The Egyptian move, nevertheless, did not change Malaysia's freeze on any official diplomatic ties with the Zionist state.

Malaysia's Foreign Policy towards Israel in the Era of Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003)

Throughout his life, Mahathir has remained critical of Israel. This position won him many opponents in the West, and greatly angered Israeli officials who eventually labeled him as "anti-Semitic".¹⁵ Mahathir and his government have repeatedly lambasted Israel and criticized its policies against the Palestinians and other Arab nations. In December 1981, the Malaysian Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning the Israeli annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights. Later in the following year, Mahathir described Israel as 'the most immoral government in the world'.¹⁶ Again in October 1985, the Malaysian Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning an Israeli

¹⁴ Khatib Hamid, interview by author with Tan Sri Khatib Hamid, retired Malaysian diplomat, Kuala Lumpur, November 10, 2017.

¹⁵ Moshe Yegar 'Malaysia: Anti-Semitism without Jews'.

¹⁶ Robani, 128-129

attack on the PLO in Tunisia, describing it as a blatant act of aggression in complete defiance of international principles and norms, symptomatic of a desperate and irrational regime.

Malaysian envoys and leaders consistently voiced out their condemnation of Israel and its policies at various international forums, but more stern action took place when neighboring country, Singapore, decided to host Israeli President, Chaim Herzog, in 1986. On November 17, 1986, just one day before Herzog's arrival, Mahathir recalled Malaysia's High Commissioner to Singapore, K. Tharmaratnam, for consultations over the planned Israeli visit.¹⁷ Several government leaders voiced their displeasure over Singapore's move to host the Israeli President. This official Malaysian uproar was coupled with intense public protests that took place in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Baru. On November 16, 1986, Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia (PSRM) held a demonstration in Johor Baru, about one mile from the border with Singapore, to protest the planned Israeli visit.¹⁸ The next day, another protest was held in Kuala Lumpur, where over 500 people gathered for a demonstration at the invitation of the Malaysian People's Action Committee. In both demonstrations, protesters burned the Singaporean and Israeli flags. When the Palestinian Intifada broke out in 1987, Mahathir was quick to condemn the Israeli repression of the Palestinian protests in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.¹⁹

Throughout the remaining period of Mahathir's premiership, the Malaysian government remained critical of Israel and its policies, but the most eye-catching criticism

¹⁷ Malaysia presses Singapore to cancel Israeli's visit. *UPI*, November 17, 1986.

¹⁸ Ahmad Alfarra, interview by author with Tan Sri Ahmad Alfarra, Palestine ambassador to Malaysia 1981-2006, Kuala Lumpur, March 4, 2019. Alfarra recounted how one protester, a lawyer, was so angry that he laid down on the railway connecting Malaysia to Singapore refusing to leave until the Israeli visit was canceled.

¹⁹ Ku Jafar Ku Shaari, author interview with Dato Ku Jafar Ku Shaari, former Malaysian diplomat, and ambassador of Malaysia to Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine, Kuala Lumpur, October 2, 2017.

came during the 2003 OIC Summit in Putrajaya. During his opening speech at the 10th OIC Summit held on October 16, 2003, in Malaysia, Mahathir condemned Israel and criticized its policies. He went further to highlight how Muslims have been subject to humiliation by the West in spite of their size and strength, comparing them to Jews who were few but influential. In this context he said: ‘Today the Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them’.²⁰ These remarks received sharp criticism from several Western countries like the US, Britain, and Australia, with Britain summoning the Malaysian High Commissioner in London over the comments. Mahathir, however, remained defiant and insisted that his comments on Israel were historical facts, and that he was entitled to his right to free speech.²¹

The main exceptions to Malaysia’s strong anti-Israel policy during the time of Mahathir came in the form of a sports event in March 1997 and the indirect bilateral trade between the two economies. In March 1997, the Malaysian Cabinet allowed an Israeli cricket team into the country for an international cricket tournament held in Kuala Lumpur between 24 March and 13 April 1997.²² In previous years, Malaysia had declined to host any international event where Israeli participants would come in. This cricket tournament, however, was the only exception. The launching of the peace-process in 1990s, and the start of Arab-Israeli peace talks made the diplomatic environment more tolerable for Mahathir to test waters with Israel. However, the

²⁰ Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad. The Opening of the Tenth Session of the Islamic Summit Conference. Putrajaya Convention Centre, Putrajaya. 16-10-2003. Retrieved from: <https://www.pmo.gov.my/ucapan/?m=p&p=mahathir&id=1533>

²¹ Mahathir Mohamad, interview by author with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Putrajaya, October 4, 2017.

²² The Carlsberg 1997 ICC Trophy was a cricket tournament played in Kuala Lumpur between 24 March and 13 April 1997.

decision to host Israelis did not sit well with the Malaysian public who organized several mass protests in Kuala Lumpur against the Israeli visit.²³

Years later, Mahathir tried to explain his motive behind allowing these Israeli athletes into the country by claiming he only wanted to prove to the world that Malaysia was not against individual Israeli citizens but rather against the Israeli regime and its policies.²⁴ This explanation, however, still did not satisfy Mahathir's opponents who believe he succumbed to external pressure and was considering developing economic relations with Israel.²⁵ Bilateral economic relations with Israel was the other problematic issue in Malaysia's approach towards Israel in the Mahathir era. The booming trade relations with Israel were in stark contradiction with the country's official policy and public rhetoric.

Although a Malaysian government ban on bilateral trade with Israel was issued in 1974, a lot of trade was taking place between the two sides, especially through intermediate countries like Thailand and Singapore. The booming Malaysian electronic manufacturing sector set the stage for such exchanges to take place, especially between multinational corporations operating in the two countries, such as Intel. By the year 2000, the amount of bilateral trade between the two countries was in hundreds of millions of American dollars, with most of it related to Intel's activities.²⁶ Although these trade relations were usually kept discreet in Malaysia, Israel repeatedly publicized it in its official reports.²⁷ Palestinian activists and observers called for an end to these relations,

²³ Zulaiha Ismail, author interview with Dr Zulaiha Ismail, Trustee of Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF), Kuala Lumpur, September 27, 2017, and Azmi Abdul Hamid, interview by author with Azmi Abdul Hamid, President of MAPIM, Kuala Lumpur, March 27, 2018.

²⁴ Mahathir Mohamad, interview by author with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Putrajaya, October 4, 2017.

²⁵ Abdul Hadi Awang, interview by author with Dato Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, President of PAS, Kuala Lumpur, October 16, 2017.

²⁶ Jacob Atkins, Malaysia favors Palestinians but buys from Israel. The Times of Israel. 14 September 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/malaysia-favors-palestinians-but-buys-from-israel/>

²⁷ Mohsen Saleh, interview by author with Dr Mohsen Saleh, Chairman of Alzaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations, Istanbul, Turkey, February 4, 2018.

and Malaysian civil society continues to fight against such economic infiltration into the Malaysian market.²⁸

Malaysia's Foreign Policy towards Israel in the Era of Abdullah Badawi (2003-2009)

Echoing his predecessor, Abdullah remained critical of Israel, albeit with a milder tone. Over the years of his premiership, Abdullah reiterated the need for Israel to end its attacks on the Palestinians and to render their rights so that a lasting peace could be achieved. Although Malaysia maintained a ban on diplomatic relations with Israel, some meetings between leaders and diplomats of the two sides occasionally took place.²⁹ In his interview with the author, former Foreign Minister Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar admitted that he had met with his Israeli counterpart, who asked for Malaysia to recognize Israel and open formal ties with the Zionist state. Albar, however, maintained that Malaysia would not formalize relations with Israel until the latter recognized Palestinian rights and accepted the establishment of a Palestinian state in accordance with UN resolutions.³⁰

Prime Minister Abdullah reiterated on several occasions that Malaysia rejects any plans for a dialogue with Israel, as there were no diplomatic ties between the two countries.³¹ Responding to the Israeli attack on Lebanon in July 2006, Malaysia convened an emergency meeting of Muslim leaders on July 3, 2006. OIC Chairman, Prime Minister Abdullah, called in his speech for the convening of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in an 'emergency special session', under the terms of the "Uniting for Peace" resolution, if the Security Council failed to act

²⁸ Nazari Ismail, interview by author with Prof. Dr Nazari Ismail, Chairman of BDS Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, July 25, 2018.

²⁹ Syed Hamid Albar, interview.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ 'No Diplomatic Ties, Malaysia Rejects Dialogue with Israel- Abdullah,' *Bernama*, August 5, 2006.

immediately on the Lebanese crisis.³² A month later, Foreign Minister, Syed Hamid Albar, visited war-hit Beirut on August 16, 2006 to show solidarity,³³ while Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak, announced that Malaysia was planning to send a UN peacekeeping force to Lebanon despite Israeli reservations.³⁴ The increasing Israeli hostility towards Palestinians, especially in Gaza, in the following years, and the growing role of Malaysian NGOs, especially Palestine-oriented NGOs like the Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS Malaysia), stipulated more restrictions on government officials in any matter relating to Israel.³⁵ Over the following years, official Malaysian communication with Israel become a taboo in the vigilant eyes of the Malaysian public, making it harder than ever to build any diplomatic ties with the Zionist state.

Malaysia's Foreign Policy towards Israel in the Era of Najib Abdul Razak (2009-2018)

Malaysia's public support for the Palestinians and its rejection of Zionism remained strong throughout Najib's years. Although the country had always maintained an official position of "no diplomatic communications with Israel" since the 1960s, limited encounters still took place during Najib's administration. Among the most important incidents were the meeting between Defence Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak in 2009, the handshake between Prime Minister Najib and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the UNGA in 2015, and the arrival of Israeli diplomats in Kuala Lumpur in February 2018 for an international conference. These controversial diplomatic exchanges took place in parallel to other controversial

³² 'OIC Special Meeting on Middle East,' *Bernama*, August 3, 2006.

³³ Syed Hamid Albar, interview.

³⁴ 'Malaysia Planning to Send Troops to Lebanon under UN Flag,' *The Star*, Accessed August 3, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2006/08/17/malaysia-planning-to-send-troops-to-lebanon-under-un-flag>

³⁵ Hafidzi Mohd Nor, and Nazari Ismail, interview by author with Prof. Dr Nazari Ismail, chairman of BDS Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, July 25, 2018.

incidents that captured public attention. Among the other Israel-related fiascos were the debate over the government's relations with APCO, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's 2012 Wall Street Journal interview, opposition claims that Israel had undermined Malaysia's security, and the shocking assassination of Palestinian scientist Dr Fadi Albatsh in Kuala Lumpur in April 2018. These many controversies were compounded by the growing economic relations between the two countries.

While Zahid's and Najib's encounters with Israeli leaders were dismissed as mere coincidences which did not lead to any further exchanges,³⁶ the visit of Israeli diplomats to Kuala Lumpur was unprecedented and alarming. The visit was exposed in February 2018 by the participating Israeli diplomats who disclosed that they had participated in a United Nations conference in Kuala Lumpur.³⁷ The Malaysian authorities tried to keep mum over the incident, but Israeli diplomats spread the news soon after their departure. The visit was condemned by the Malaysian chapter of the Boycott Divest Sanctions (BDS) movement which saw it as a dangerous precedent that might have had links to ongoing normalization efforts in the Middle East.³⁸ For the Malaysian government, news of the visit was devastating, especially before the upcoming tough general elections. Malaysian officials tried to dismiss the visit as the work of the UN denying any meeting with Israeli officials took place.³⁹

The growth of relations between Malaysia and Hamas irked Israel, and its failure to make substantial progress in normalizing diplomatic relations with Malaysia further antagonized the Zionist regime. Throughout Najib's years, several Israeli media reports launched accusations

³⁶ Jismi Johari, interview.

³⁷ Michael Bachner, 'In first, Israeli diplomats attend UN conference in Malaysia,' *The Times of Israel*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-first-israeli-diplomats-attend-un-conference-in-malaysia/>

³⁸ Nazari Ismail, interview.

³⁹ Osama Hamdan, interview.

against Malaysia without being able to change the country's anti-Israel position. On the contrary, incidents like the opposition's claim that Najib hired a PR company linked to Israel (APCO), and the government's criticism of Anwar Ibrahim's Wall Street journal comments (in favor of protecting Israel's security) proved the Malaysia's animosity with Israel was still on the rise.⁴⁰

Israel did not sit idle, proving in 2018 that the opposition's 2010 claim that Israel had infiltrated Malaysia's security had some credence.⁴¹ By April 2018, Israel had allegedly launched an espionage mission against a Hamas scientist in Malaysia. A few weeks before the fourteenth general elections, Palestinian scientist Dr Fadi Albatsh was gunned down in Kuala Lumpur.⁴² On the early morning of April 21, 2018, the Palestinian engineer, who was also a religious *Imam*, was shot dead by two anonymous motor riders while on his way to lead morning prayers in a mosque near his home.⁴³

Soon after his assassination, Hamas issued a press statement describing Dr Fadi as a distinguished Palestinian scientist who was a member of the movement. Hamas and Albatsh's family blamed Israel's spy agency, the Mossad, for the assassination.⁴⁴ The Malaysian police launched an investigation on the murder case but had little success in arresting the suspects or reaching conclusive results on the identities of the perpetrators. Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi alluded that Israel was behind the attack. The assassination received heavy media attention, both locally and internationally. Stories about the deceased, his widowed wife and two orphaned children spread out fast, and several media outlets covered the

⁴⁰ Ahmad Atawneh, interview.

⁴¹ 'Anwar alleges Israelis spies in police info system,' *The Edge*, April 6, 2010, www.theedgemarkets.com/article/anwar-alleges-israelis-spies-police-info-system

⁴² Dr Fadi Albatsh earned his PhD in Electrical Engineering from the University of Malaya and had been teaching at the University of Kuala Lumpur for years when he was assassinated.

⁴³ Mohd Norzaidi Arjunaidi, 'Dr Fadi's Remains to Be Taken to Gaza,' *Bernama*, April 22, 2018.

⁴⁴ Osama Hamdan, interview.

mass congregation that performed *Janazah* prayer at his mosque and updates of police investigations.

In spite of the wide media coverage, Prime Minister Najib remained mum on the issue, focusing all his attention on the upcoming General Elections. This silence grabbed the attention of some observers who questioned the extent of Najib's personal commitment towards the Palestinian struggle.⁴⁵ Others suggested that since Home Minister Ahmad Zahid was handling the issue, it was unnecessary for the Prime Minister to comment on this sensitive issue.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, as more investigation findings were being revealed, the home minister and Police chief implicitly signaled that Israel was behind the attack.

While the government's statements were calculated and its response measured, Malaysian NGOs were outraged and many of them issued statements condemning the attack and demanding perpetrators be brought to justice.⁴⁷ However, the sudden change of government in May 2018 and the ensuing political and administrative changes sidelined the issue and both political as well as civil society groups got busy in new issues. Eventually, police investigations on the case ended without reaching concrete conclusions.

Conclusion

While the Zahid and Najib meeting incidents with Israeli leaders were dismissed as mere coincidence, the two encounters were followed by meetings with Hamas leaders. This appears to be an immediate remedy Malaysian leaders adopted to clear their names in the eyes of public opinion.⁴⁸ The more serious incident, however, was the February 2018 participation of Israeli

⁴⁵ Personal conversation with several NGO leaders and journalists who preferred not to be mentioned.

⁴⁶ Jismi Johari, interview.

⁴⁷ Nazari Ismail, interview, Jismi Johari, interview.

⁴⁸ Mohamad Makram Balawi, interview.

diplomats in a UN conference in Kuala Lumpur which was seen in the context of the ongoing American push for normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel.⁴⁹ This incident could be read in the context of external pressure on Malaysia to normalize ties with Israel, especially from certain Arab countries enjoying strong ties with the Malaysian government.⁵⁰ Certain Gulf countries tried to incentivize other OIC member states, like Malaysia, to have them normalize ties with Israel before these Gulf states follow suit.⁵¹ Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf regimes which were very close to the Trump Administration felt it necessary to have other OIC members states in the fold of normalizing states so as to withstand any possible Islamic uproar or backlash. Malaysia, however, was very careful before the fourteenth general elections and wary of Malaysian public opinion.

Najib's government at this critical stage was more concerned about domestic pressure compared to external pressure. The fourteenth general elections were about to be called and Najib was well-aware of the high stakes. Najib's reputation was already tainted by the 1MDB scandal, and public opinion was heavily affected by other issues like the Goods and Services Tax (GST), and the last thing he wanted was a major foreign policy fiasco. Hence, his government remained cautious and tried very hard to avoid any entanglements with the normalization campaign. In this context, the participation of Israeli diplomats in the February 2018 UN conference seems to either have slipped from the oversight of top government officials,⁵² or had been offered as a test-balloon for public opinion before more concessions to foreign powers follow, in a time marred by regime vulnerability in the post-1MDB scandal environment.⁵³ In both cases, the lack of media coverage

⁴⁹ Osama Hamdan, interview.

⁵⁰ Khaled Qadomi, interview.

⁵¹ Osama Hamdan, interview.

⁵² Jismi Johari, interview.

⁵³ Mohamad Makram Balawi, interview.

on the visit enabled the government to cruise through the general elections without this issue blowing up in its face. NGOs, however, reached out to government officials, especially in Wisma Putra, to demand explanations.⁵⁴

As for the assassination of Dr Fadi Albatsh, the incident brought two issues under focus: Malaysia's growing relations with Hamas and Israel's discreet infiltration of the country's security. The Malaysian government's response was very critical of the perpetrators but stopped short of mentioning Israel by name. However, the many implicit allusions by the police and the home minister made it clear Israel was behind the attack. As for Malaysia's relations with Hamas, the ties were strengthened further as the government liaised throughout the investigation with the Palestinian movement. Less than 48 hours after the incident, a senior Hamas delegation arrived in Malaysia to liaise with the Malaysian government on the issue.⁵⁵ Home Minister Ahmad Zahid, who was instrumental in developing UMNO's relations with Hamas, was very firm in pursuing investigations on the matter.⁵⁶ However, the change of government sidelined the issue as the new Pakatan Harapan government was more focused on securing its position as a new government.

The other issue which attracted the attention of observers was Malaysia's vulnerability to external security threats. Dr Fadi's assassination was the second incident after the assassination of the North Korean leader's estranged brother, Kim Jong Nam, a year earlier in Kuala Lumpur. The assassination of Dr Fadi was an eye opener for Malaysian security agencies to possible Israeli espionage activities in the country. While Prime Minister Najib and his government were too busy fighting for their political survival, the case of Dr Fadi was left to the police to take the necessary

⁵⁴ Azmi Abdul Hamid, interview.

⁵⁵ Osama Hamdan, interview.

⁵⁶ Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, interview.

action. This opened the police's eyes to the need to further secure Malaysia against possible future Israeli infiltrations.

While the domestic political environment in Malaysia has been undergoing major changes and transformations since the unprecedented electoral defeat of the Barisan Nasional government in 2018, the country's foreign policy and international relations remained relatively consistent. Although for the short period of 2018-2020 the country's foreign policy was colored by Mahathir's bold anti-Israel foreign policy, the country remained throughout the post-BN period relatively careful of taking visible confrontational anti-Israel positions. Mahathir publicly denounced normalization and called Israel a criminal state, while some of his ministers took strong anti-Israel initiatives including the banning Israeli athletes from entering Malaysia for sporting events. The following administrations,⁵⁷ however, returned to the less confrontational approach of calling for a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict along the UN-sponsored Two-State-Solution. The toning down of Malaysia's anti-Israel position did not necessarily translate into an end of Israeli security infiltrations or a reduction of external pressure on Malaysia to join the Abraham Accords and the normalization process. However, decision makers in Putrajaya remained alert to the growing anti-Israel public opinion in the country, especially at a time of political instability and looming general elections. This public opinion continues to be fueled by a growing pro-Palestine civil society movement that spreads across Malaysia and commands huge influence over the country's decision-making elite. Hence, even if, for whatever reason, Malaysia's anti-Israel rhetoric is toned down in the near future, the country would remain one of the hardest for Israel to penetrate. Malaysia is proudly Palestine's closest friend in the region and beyond.

⁵⁷ The governments of Muhyiddin Yassin (2020-2021), Ismail Sabri (2021-2022) and Anwar Ibrahim (2022-present).

