

Malaysian NGOs and Palestine-Oriented NGOs (PONGOs) in Malaysia

Advocating the Palestinian Issue

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1.0 Introduction

In recent decades, the Palestinian issue has captured the attention and ignited the passion of individuals and organizations worldwide. Among the countries actively involved in supporting the cause of Palestine, Malaysia stands out as a nation with a strong and vibrant civil society that has taken up the mantle of advocating for the Palestinian cause. This chapter explores the role of Malaysian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in advocating for the Palestinian issue, as well as the Palestine-oriented NGOs operating within Malaysia itself.

Malaysia has long been a staunch supporter of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The country's geographical distance from Palestine does not diminish the deep-rooted empathy and solidarity that Malaysians feel towards the Palestinian people. This empathy has translated into a multitude of NGOs dedicated to raising awareness, providing humanitarian assistance, and advocating for Palestinian rights.

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This chapter delves into the diverse range of Malaysian NGOs that actively champion the Palestinian cause, shedding light on their origins, objectives, strategies, and accomplishments. It examines how these organizations have utilized various avenues, such as grassroots mobilization, public awareness campaigns, and diplomatic initiatives, to raise awareness about the plight of the Palestinians and influence Malaysian government policies in support of Palestine.

Furthermore, the chapter explores the significant presence of Palestine-oriented NGOs within Malaysia itself. These organizations, often established by Malaysian citizens, play a crucial role in fostering understanding and solidarity between Malaysians and Palestinians. They organize cultural events, educational programs, and humanitarian projects that bring Malaysians closer to the Palestinian experience, fostering empathy and a deeper appreciation of the struggles faced by Palestinians.

2.0 NGOs Playing Active Roles in Influencing Malaysia's Foreign Policy Towards Palestine

Through an analysis of Malaysian NGOs advocating the Palestinian issue and the Palestine-oriented NGOs within Malaysia, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the dynamic landscape of Palestinian advocacy in the country. By examining the motivations, strategies, and achievements of these organizations, readers will gain valuable insights into the power of civil society in shaping public opinion and influencing policy in the context of a global struggle for justice and self-determination.

Many of Malaysia’s active NGOs maintained a great interest in the Palestinian issue. While many of these NGOs had a wide range of interests and activities besides the Palestinian issue, they were consistently involved in advocating the Palestinian issue through financial contributions, media statements, and grassroots mobilization. These NGOs can be categorized into five main categories: faith-based organizations, humanitarian NGOs, ‘political’ NGOs, advocacy groups and academic institutions, and Palestine-oriented NGOs. Many of these groups played active roles in influencing Malaysian foreign policy towards Palestine. Table 1 below shows the categories and examples of NGOs that were involved in pro-Palestine activities in the period 2004-2018.

Table 1: NGOs Playing Active Roles in Influencing Malaysia’s Foreign Policy Towards Palestine

	NGO Category	NGO Sub-category	Examples of Active NGOs
1.	Faith-based Organizations	Islamic Mass Originations	IKRAM, ABIM, ISMA, HALUAN
		Non-Muslim Pro-Palestine NGOs	ANCOM
2.	Humanitarian NGOs	Islamic NGOs	Muslim Care, Islamic Relief, Yayasan Amal, Serantau Muslim, MAPIM, Global Peace Mission
		Others	Mercy Malaysia, Malaysian Red Crescent Society
3.	Political NGOs	Welfare	Kelab Putra 1Malaysia
		Human Rights & Humanitarian	Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF), Kuala Lumpur Tribunal, Aman Malaysia
4.	Advocacy NGOs and Academic Institutions		Citizens and International, Just International
5.	Palestine-oriented NGOs	Advocacy NGOs	Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM), Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM), Boycott Divest Sanctions (BDS)

		Humanitarian Relief NGOs	Aman Palestin, Aqsa Syarif (MyCare), Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM), Cakna Palestin, Cinta Gaza Malaysia (CGM), My Aqsa
		Advocacy Networks	MyGMJ, Save Al-Quds Campaign, MyAqsa Defenders

(Source: Compiled by the authors based on interviews and survey of Bernama news reports from 2004-2018)

The following is a brief highlight of the main NGOs involved in influencing Malaysia’s foreign policy towards Palestine:

2.1 Faith-based organizations

Although the Palestinian issue has traditionally been viewed as a Muslim issue in Malaysia, followers of other faiths were also involved in advocating the Palestinian issue. Throughout the period 2004-2018, Islamic organizations as well as some Christian organizations organized and joined several activities for Palestine.

2.1.1 Islamic Mass Organizations

Apart from the country’s largest Islamist party, PAS, and its main offshoots, BERJASA and Amanah, Malaysia’s Islamic movement (political Islam) consists of a wide range of mass organizations.⁴ These groups emerged as influential social movements which draw the membership of thousands of Malaysians. While these groups subscribe to one form of political Islam or another, their basic ideology is reminiscent of the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood ideology practiced by a large network of Islamist parties and NGOs across the world. These groups

⁴ Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2009).

define the Palestinian issue as one of the pillars of their struggle and seek to play direct and indirect roles in mobilizing support for Palestine.⁵ Among the most influential active groups fitting this category in Malaysia are: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia (IKRAM), Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA), and Pertubuhan Himpunan Lulusan Institusi Pendidikan Malaysia (HALUAN). These groups have continuously sought to influence the country's foreign policy towards Palestine and have frequently mobilized their members and leaders in pro-Palestine activities. On many occasions, the leaders and members of these groups contributed to the establishment of Palestine-oriented NGOs like Aman Palestin and Aqsa Syarif.

2.1.2 Non-Muslim Pro-Palestine NGOs

While most of the Palestine-advocacy initiatives in Malaysia tend to come from Muslim individuals and institutions, some Christian groups have manifested a consistent interest in the Palestinian issue. For instance, the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) has regularly organized trips to Palestine, received Palestinian visitors, and engaged Palestinian Christians.⁶ The Federation had also issued statements in solidarity with the Palestinians on several occasions.⁷ Other smaller Christian NGOs like the Association of Nexgen Christians of Malaysia (ANCOM) have also been involved in advocating the Palestinian issue including their participation in major pro-Palestine initiatives like the 2017 'Save Jerusalem' rally in Putrajaya.⁸ Other non-Muslim

⁵ Abdullah Zaik, interview, Hafidzi Mohd Noor, interview, and Azmi Abdul Hamid, interview.

⁶ Hermen Shastri, author's personal communication with Dr Hermen Shastri, Principal Secretary of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) in 2020, and Tan Kong Beng, author's personal communication with Tan Kong Beng, Executive Secretary of CFM, Kuala Lumpur, 2019.

⁷ Hermen Shastri, author's personal communication.

⁸ 'Christian group joins Palestine solidarity rally in Putrajaya,' *New Straits Times*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/12/317336/christian-group-joins-palestine-solidarity-rally-putrajaya>

groups in Malaysia have also expressed solidarity on several occasions including through fundraising activities in solidarity with Gaza and the Palestinians.⁹

2.2 Humanitarian NGOs

Various Malaysian NGOs define themselves as humanitarian groups interested in promoting peace, alleviating poverty, and extending humanitarian aid to underprivileged communities, especially in war zones. This group of NGOs includes both faith-based as well as secular groups which focus their work on raising funds for charity and community building. Many of these NGOs were involved in raising funds for Palestine and implementing humanitarian projects there. Groups like Mercy Malaysia, Global Peace Mission (GPM), Islamic Relief, Yayasan Amal, Malaysian Consultative Council for Islamic Organization (MAPIM), and Muslim Care have regularly conducted humanitarian activities for the Palestinians and sent humanitarian missions to Palestine, especially to the Gaza Strip.

2.3 ‘Political’ NGOs

Over the years, several Malaysian NGOs have been founded and led by politicians from the government as well as the opposition. Among the most active NGOs in this category were Kelab Putra 1Malaysia (KP1M), Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF), and PAS Palestine Secretariat. While these NGOs carried out humanitarian aid activities, competition, and rivalry among them reflected political rivalries between rivaling parties and factions. For instance, a tacit competition between the pro-Najib KP1M led by UMNO leader Abdul Azeez Abdul Raheem, and the Mahathir-led PGPF seemed to have existed, although both groups were instrumental in channeling Malaysian aid to Gaza.¹⁰ While KP1M organized several large humanitarian missions

⁹ Steven Wong, interview, and Zulaiha Ismail, interview.

¹⁰ Ziyad Shehadah, interview.

to Gaza, PGPF raised funds and sent several aid ships to the Gaza Strip, sometimes as a part of the international solidarity movement seeking to break the Gaza blockade.¹¹

2.4 Advocacy NGOs and Academic Institutions

Another instrumental group of NGOs and institutions that shaped the discourse on the Palestinian issue in Malaysia are the advocacy groups, think tanks, and universities which frequently manifested an interest in the Palestinian issue. Pro-peace advocacy NGOs like Just International and Citizens International have repeatedly organized talks and forums on the Palestinian issue.¹² The two groups among others have repeatedly issued statements condemning Israeli policies and calling the Malaysian government to exhibit solidarity with the Palestinians.

These NGOs were joined by several think tanks like the Institute for Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) and Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM) which regularly organized intellectual discussions and seminars on Palestine and issued publications on the Palestinian issue. These efforts greatly shaped public opinion on the Palestinian cause and set the par for Malaysian decision-makers on how to interact with this issue. Malaysian universities, especially public universities, have also been involved in shaping this discourse and increasing awareness about the Palestinian issue, especially through their extracurricular activities. Student unions and clubs were involved in raising funds for the Palestinians, and university agencies set up special scholarship programs for Palestinian students.

2.5 Palestine-Oriented NGOs (PONGOs)

¹¹ Zulaiha Ismail, interview.

¹² Chandra Muzaffar, interview, and personal communication with S. M. Idris, President of Citizens International, Penang, 2018.

The Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) are Malaysian NGOs that state explicitly that their ultimate goal is to advocate Palestinian rights and support the Palestinian struggle. These NGOs seek to achieve their goal either through advocacy work or humanitarian aid or both. There are three types of Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) in Malaysia: advocacy NGOs, humanitarian NGOs, and advocacy networks. Table 4.2 below lists the types, examples, and years of inception of Malaysia’s main Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs).

Table 2: Active Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) in Malaysia (2004-2020)

	Humanitarian Relief PONGOs	Advocacy PONGOs	Palestine Advocacy Networks
1.	Aman Palestin (2004)	PACE (2006)	LifeLine4Gaza (2009)
2.	Aqsa Syarif / MyCare (2009)	QFM (2010)	MyGMJ (2012)
3.	Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM) (2009)	PCOM (2011)	Save Al-Quds (2014)
4.	Cakna Palestin (2009)	BDS (2014)	Women Coalition for Palestine (2018)
5.	Rose2Rose (2013)	MyAqsa (2017)	MyAqsa Defenders (2021)
6.	Cinta Gaza Malaysia (2015)		

(Source: Compiled by the authors based on interviews and survey of Bernama news reports from 2004-2021)

2.5.1 Humanitarian Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs)

Reflecting public solidarity and the feeling that war-trodden Palestine needs more humanitarian aid, the early Malaysian Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) were humanitarian in nature. Many Malaysian NGOs organized fundraising campaigns before the emergence of the first PONGO. But by 2004, a group of pro-Palestine activists formed a new NGO focused wholly on advocating the issue of Palestine, this was Aman Palestin.

2.5.1.1 Aman Palestin Berhad

The group which was set up by a number of Islamist activists in 2004 grew throughout the following years to become one of the largest grassroots movements working for the Palestinian issue in Malaysia. Aman Palestin Berhad was founded by the head of Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA), Abdullah Zaik, along with other like-minded activists in the early years of Abdullah Badawi's reign.¹³ Dedicating itself to helping the Palestinian people, the organization defines its goals along three lines: instilling awareness about the Palestinian issue, providing aid and building projects needed by the Palestinians, and advocating Palestinian rights on all levels.¹⁴ To achieve this, the group has conducted several projects over the years including the construction and maintenance of orphanages, the provision of educational assistance for Palestinian students, poverty alleviation programs, charitable agricultural and social projects, medical aid, and other projects all over Palestine and in Palestinian refugee camps.¹⁵

The main instrument to achieve Aman Palestin's goals has been widespread campaigns of fundraising across Malaysia enabling the group to raise and deliver more than RM 2.7 million by the end of 2008.¹⁶ The expansion of Aman Palestin's work came about after the 2008/2009 Israeli war on Gaza which greatly attracted Malaysian attention. This public attention encouraged Aman

¹³ Abdullah Zaik, interview.

¹⁴ 'About Aman Palestin,' *Website of Aman Palestin Berhad*, <https://www.amanpalestin.net/salam.dll?kategori=profil>

¹⁵ Awang Sufian Awang Piut, written interview with Awang Sufian Awang Piut, CEO of Aman Palestin, November 2021.

¹⁶ Aman Palestin, 'Aman Palestin: Aid for freedom', pamphlet, no date.

Palestin to launch a major fundraising campaign in September 2009 under the auspices of the Malaysian king, the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong.¹⁷ The following years saw growing public support for the group and its work, and by the end of 2018, the number of funds raised and delivered by Aman Palestin jumped from less than three million in 2009 to more than RM 68.3 million by 2018.¹⁸

While financial aid remains Aman Palestin's main contribution, the group played a major role in increasing the drive of Malaysian solidarity missions to Gaza. In less than two decades, Aman Palestin mobilized dozens of humanitarian missions to Gaza, sometimes mobilizing hundreds of activists and volunteers.¹⁹ This played an important role in shaping the country's view of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the public sympathy with Gaza and Palestinian resistance. Aman Palestin was also active in providing aid for Jerusalem and Palestinian refugee camps inside Palestine and in neighboring countries. The group also continues to contribute to a special fund for Palestinian students studying at Malaysian universities.²⁰ While Aman Palestin has not been heavily involved in lobbying the Malaysian government, their massive influence over Malaysian public opinion towards Palestine and their continuous interaction with Wisma Putra and other authorities for their international missions have contributed directly to how the Palestinian issue is perceived by the country's foreign policy decision-makers.

2.5.1.2 Pertubuhan Cakna Palestin

¹⁷ More details on Aman Palestin's website: <https://www.amanpalestin.net/>

¹⁸ Abdullah Zaik, interview.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Abdullah Zaik, interview and Ziyad Shehadah, interview.

The Kelantan-based PONGO was launched in the aftermath of the 2008/2009 Israeli war on Gaza by the PAS-led Kelantan state government to help the Palestinians.²¹ The group defines its mission across two main themes: assisting the Palestinians financially and spreading awareness about their plight. This would be achieved through roadshows, fundraising campaigns, and charity sales and dinners among other activities.²² Over the years, the group played active roles in promoting the Palestinian issue, especially in the state of Kelantan. It also contributed to the well-being of the Palestinians through several programs including a scholarship program for Palestinian students at Malaysian universities.²³ To implement its programs, Cakna Palestin lobbied the Kelantan government and the PAS leadership frequently. The group also maintained some interaction with Wisma Putra to implement some of its programs that dealt with Palestinian students and medical trainees.

2.5.1.3 Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM)

Inspired by a United Kingdom-based international solidarity NGO bearing the same name, Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM) was founded in 2009 by a group of Malaysian activists. The group traces its roots to a public campaign called ‘Coalition of Malaysian NGOs against the Persecution of Palestinians’ that was organized in January 2009 in the aftermath of the 2008/2009 Israeli war on Gaza.²⁴ The group defines its main objectives to be: advocacy for Palestine as well as providing medical and other forms of aid to the Palestinians. From 2009 until 2019, VPM managed to raise

²¹ Mohd Faiz Mohd Nawi, interview.

²² Pertubuhan Cakna Palestin, ‘Visi dan Misi,’ *Website of Cakna Palestin*, <https://caknapalestin.org/visi-dan-misi/>

²³ Ziyad Shehadah, interview.

²⁴ Shida Shahnan, most of the information about VPM activities and operations in this section were obtained in 2020 from Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM) Exco member Shida Shahnan.

and channel more than RM16.8 million of medical, educational, relief, and capacity-building assistance to the Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip.²⁵

Other activities of VPM included the participation of its leaders and members in several humanitarian missions to Gaza from its inception until 2018. VPM was also a co-organizer of one of the biggest rallies in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza on August 2, 2014, during the Israeli war on Gaza.²⁶ One of the main contributions of VPM in the field of advocacy and awareness dissemination has been its annual ‘Kuala Lumpur Palestine Film Festival’ held in the Malaysian capital since the year 2012.²⁷ In the field of education, VPM had engaged the Malaysian Ministry of Education as well as Khazanah Nasional to promote scholarships for the Palestinians. It also played a role in providing medical aid to the Palestinians through its connections with the Malaysian Health Ministry and the Islamic Medical Associations of Malaysia (IMAM).²⁸

2.5.1.4 Aqsa Syarif

Founded by several former Aman Palestin activists and Mavi Marmara survivors linked to IKRAM, this pro-Palestine group emerged as a major player in the Palestine-advocacy work in Malaysia. The PONGO which was launched in January 2010 evolved five years later into the larger humanitarian NGO, Malaysian Humanitarian Care (MyCare), which extends humanitarian aid to several other countries besides Palestine.²⁹ Over the past decade, MyCare channeled tens of millions of ringgits to the Gaza Strip. Most of the group’s contributions were meant for immediate

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ ‘Save The Children Of Gaza Rally In KL,’ *Astro Awani*, August 2, 2014, <https://www.astroawani.com/foto-malaysia/save-children-gaza-rally-kl-1392/stop-the-violence-15269>

²⁷ Shida Shahnan.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hafidzi Mohd Noor, interview.

relief and some development projects. Development projects included a bakery, an agricultural farm, and other microfinancing projects.³⁰ Currently, MyCare includes several advocacy and humanitarian PONGOs under its umbrella, many of which focus on the Palestinian issue. these groups include Rose2Rose, PACE, and Aqsa Syarif.

2.5.1.5 Rose2Rose

Aware of the need to empower Palestinian women in the face of Israeli occupation policies, MyCare launched a special organization focused on assisting Palestinian women and children. The group led by Malaysian doctor and activist Dr Fauziah Mohd Hassan managed to channel some aid to Palestinian women, especially in the Gaza Strip. It also provided aid to Palestinian refugee women and children residing in Malaysia through several initiatives.³¹ The group engaged both the federal government as well as some state governments to spread awareness about the humanitarian situation in Palestine.³² The founder and chairperson, Dr Fauziah Hassan was acknowledged by the Prime Minister of Malaysia who invited her to several of his events and conferred some awards upon her.³³ However, the group started in recent years to expand its scope to cover issues of women in Malaysia and across the region.

2.5.1.6 Persatuan Cinta Gaza Malaysia (CGM)

Persatuan Cinta Gaza Malaysia or ‘Cinta Gaza’ started its operations in 2014 with the explicit goal of channeling financial aid to the Palestinians in the war-torn Gaza Strip.³⁴ The group was founded

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Fauziah Mohd Hassan, interview.

³² Ibid.

³³ Hafidzi Mohd Noor, interview.

³⁴ Nader Nuri, author’s personal communication with Nader Nuri, Chairman of Cinta Gaza Malaysia (CGM), May 2021.

by Malaysian youth activist Nadir Nuri who has been living in Gaza for more than a decade.³⁵ Its fundraising campaigns spread across Malaysia and by 2021 the group announced it has managed to raise and deliver about RM 6 million to Palestine, especially the Gaza Strip.³⁶

2.5.2 Advocacy Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs)

In addition to the humanitarian Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) that flourished since 2004, a new genre of PONGOs emerged in the following years: the advocacy PONGOs. Among the main advocacy PONGOs are:

2.5.2.1 Palestine Center of Excellence (PACE)

The Palestine Center of Excellence (PACE) is one of the PONGOs placed under the umbrella of MyCare. This Palestine-focused think tank which serves now as the Research and Development wing of MyCare was established in 2006 for the advancement of research and knowledge about the Palestinian issue.³⁷ The center focuses on monitoring the developments in Palestine to educate Malaysian activists and decision-makers on the socioeconomic, political, and humanitarian situation in the occupied territories.³⁸ Over the years, the center organized various forums, seminars, and dialogues pertaining to the Palestinian issue. The center at times hosted Palestinian political figures and facilitated their reach to Malaysian activists.

2.5.2.2 Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM)

³⁵ Nadir Al-Nuri, *Anak Melayu Di Palestin: Sedekad Di Penjara Terbesar Dunia*, (Selangor: PALM Publication, 2021).

³⁶ Cinta Gaza Website, <http://www.cintagazamalaysia.com>

³⁷ 'Our Agencies,' *Website of MyCare*, <https://www.mycare.org.my/about-us/our-agencies/>

³⁸ Hafidzi Mohd Noor, interview and Fauziah Mohd Hassan, interview.

Towards the end of 2010, representatives of several Malaysian political groups and NGOs launched the advocacy platform, Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM). Being an offshoot of the Lebanon-based international advocacy group, Al-Quds International Institution (QII), QFM was unique in many ways, most important of all was its success in mobilizing activists from rivaling political groups like UMNO and PAS.³⁹ The head of QFM's Board of Trustees was senior UMNO leader and Deputy Minister, Mukhriz Mahathir, while the head of its Board of Directors was PAS Deputy President, Nasharudin Mat Isa.⁴⁰ The idea behind this composition was to unite the otherwise divided Malaysian political figures and institutions under one Palestine-advocacy umbrella to portray the image of bipartisanship.⁴¹

The organization was officially launched in 2012 by the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Muhyiddin Yassin with the explicit goal of spreading awareness about the situation in the city of Jerusalem.⁴² Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM) emerged as a major advocacy PONGO focused on promoting the issues and concerns of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy city of Jerusalem.⁴³ One of QFM's main programs was the establishment of a major Malaysian advocacy network for Jerusalem, the Save Al-Quds Campaign. QFM played a pioneering role along with ABIM and PCOM in building the Save Al-Quds coalition and successfully mobilized this large coalition of NGOs to lobby the government on the issue of Jerusalem.⁴⁴

³⁹ Mohamad Makram Balawi, interview.

⁴⁰ Nasharudin Mat Isa, interview.

⁴¹ Sharif Amin, interview.

⁴² Mohamad Makram Balawi, interview.

⁴³ Sharif Amin, interview.

⁴⁴ Sharif Amin, interview.

QFM also continues to play the major role of providing expert information about Jerusalem and Palestine to government officials, media outlets, and civil society. This is done through their series of publications, exhibitions, and other programs throughout Malaysia. One of the major projects launched and sustained by QFM is its Aqsapedia website,⁴⁵ which is a multilingual online encyclopedia focused on providing knowledge and news pertaining to Al-Aqsa Mosque and Palestine.⁴⁶

2.5.2.3 The Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM)

The Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM) was a Palestinian-Malaysian initiative that aimed at enhancing bilateral relations between Malaysia and Palestine, especially between the Palestinian government in Gaza and the Malaysian government and society.⁴⁷ On February 14, 2011, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, along with Defence Minister Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and former Foreign Minister Dr Syed Hamid Albar launched PCOM as a new Palestine-oriented advocacy group.⁴⁸ The new PONGO enjoyed unique bipartisan support in Malaysia as several Malaysian legislators from the government and opposition were present in its launching ceremony.⁴⁹ Senior Hamas leader Osama Hamdan was also present at the group's launching ceremony.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ The website of Aqsapedia is: <http://www.aqsapedia.net/about-us>

⁴⁶ “In Presence of Dato’ Mukhriz, QFM Launches its Great Educational Project ‘Aqsapedia’,” *Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia*, 28 March 2020, <http://qfmalaysia.org/Activities/5698?title=In%20Presence%20of%20Dato%20%80%99%20Mukhriz%20C%20QFM%20Launches%20its%20Great%20Educational%20Project%20%E2%80%98Aqsapedia%E2%80%99%20>

⁴⁷ Abdullah Waleed, interview.

⁴⁸ “Launching ceremony of PCOM by his Excellency Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed,” *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZhIifUwXkY>

⁴⁹ Several current and former leaders like Shahidan Kassim and Abdul Latiff Mirasa from the ruling party UMNO, as well as opposition leaders like Nasharudin Mat Isa from PAS and Saifuddin Nasution from PKR were appointed by Tun Dr Mahathir to PCOM's Board of Trustees.

⁵⁰ Osama Hamdan, interview.

During his keynote speech at the launching, Dr Mahathir stressed the need to protect Palestinian identity and culture and to strengthen bilateral relations between the two people.⁵¹ In his speech, Palestinian activist and PCOM president, Mohamad Alzoheiri, highlighted the goals of the new organization, which included advancing people-to-people communication and helping connect the Malaysian government and institutions with the Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip.⁵² Over the following years, PCOM emerged as an instrumental facilitator of Palestinian Malaysian relations as it organized several high-level visits for Palestinian leaders to Malaysia and facilitated several Malaysian humanitarian missions to Gaza, Jerusalem, and Palestinian refugee camps.

2.5.2.4 Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) Malaysia

Answering the Palestinian call issued by dozens of Palestinian civil society groups in July 2005 to boycott Israel, a group of Malaysian activists launched the Malaysian chapter of the Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement in Kuala Lumpur in 2015.⁵³ The new advocacy group organized several campaigns and lobbied the Malaysian government and institutions to boycott Israeli products. Led by a University of Malaya professor and supported by several major NGOs, BDS Malaysia emerged as a vocal anti-Israel group that demanded the Malaysian government to end all forms of trade with Israel. Although it started as an advocacy group focused on public education and creating awareness, the group eventually got involved in lobbying the government

⁵¹ 'Launching ceremony of PCOM by his Excellency Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed,' *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZhIifUwXkY>

⁵² PCOM archive.

⁵³ Nazari Ismail, interview.

and interacting with its various agencies like Wisma Putra and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI).

2.5.2.5 Yayasan MyAqsa

Concerned about the state of affairs in Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque, in 2017, a group of Malaysian activists led by the former LifeLine4Gaza chief launched Yayasan MyAqsa as a social foundation to increase awareness about the situation in the holy city and building a network of NGOs focused on helping the Palestinians.⁵⁴ The group developed a close relationship with the Prime Minister's office during the time of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and organized some major international events.

2.5.3 Advocacy Networks⁵⁵

A third genre of Palestine-oriented NGOs is the Palestine-oriented advocacy networks. While some of these networks are part of larger Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs), others are local advocacy networks formed by local Malaysian NGOs. Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) are 'networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation'.⁵⁶ The same applies to local advocacy networks which are also formed around some central ideas or values. In our case, the main theme of the Palestine advocacy networks is advocating Palestinian rights. The following are the main Palestine-oriented advocacy networks in Malaysia:

⁵⁴ MyAQSA Foundation, 'About', <http://www.myaqsa.my>

⁵⁵ Advocacy networks are 'networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation'. See: Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Transnational advocacy networks in international and regional politics'.

⁵⁶ Keck and Sikkink, 'Transnational advocacy networks in international and regional politics'.

2.5.3.1 LifeLine4Gaza

This advocacy network started in 2009 with the goal of helping break the Israeli siege on Gaza. Chaired by an activist from the Palestine Secretariat of the Islamic mass organization, HALUAN, the group managed to pull a large Malaysian participation in the Freedom Flotilla campaign. By May 2010, more than 20 Malaysian participants were on board the Mavi Marmara ship which was attacked by Israel while on its way to Gaza.⁵⁷ Several other Malaysian participants were also aboard the other ships. Although it scored a huge success in its early days, the campaign diminished afterwards due to the proliferation of other Palestine-advocacy NGOs created by some Freedom Flotilla survivors.

2.5.3.2 Global March to Jerusalem-Malaysia (MyGMJ)

The Malaysian version of the transnational advocacy network (TAN), Global March to Jerusalem, started in 2012 and became an annual event for several years. The campaign which was inspired by the large mobilization of masses during the Arab Spring sought to mobilize similar masses in solidarity with Palestine across the world.⁵⁸ Over a dozen Malaysian NGOs like Aqsa Syarif, PCOM, Yaysan Amal, and PGPF participated in forming the MyGMJ secretariat. The network managed to host several mass rallies in solidarity with the Palestinians and continues to be active on social media.

2.5.3.3 Save al-Quds Campaign

⁵⁷ Ashwad Ismail, interview.

⁵⁸ Hafidzi Mohd Noor, interview.

By October 2014, leaders of several Malaysian NGOs initiated the ‘Save Al-Quds Global Campaign’ as a local advocacy network seeking to enlighten the Malaysian public on the critical state of affairs in Jerusalem.⁵⁹ The ultimate goal of the network was to pressure Israel to stop its ongoing policy of Judaization of the holy city and Al-Aqsa Mosque. The initial meetings were attended by leaders of ABIM, IKRAM, PCOM, and QFM among other groups, and agreed to launch the campaign in Putrajaya in the presence of senior government leaders.⁶⁰ A secretariat chaired by ABIM President, Mohamad Raimi, was formed and an action plan for the campaign was devised. By the end of 2014, the number of participating NGOs exceeded 30 and continued to grow to more than 42 groups by the following year.⁶¹ In December 2014, Home Minister Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi launched the Save al-Quds Campaign at the Putra Mosque in Putrajaya.⁶²

Throughout the following years, the network organized a series of meetings in order to discuss an action plan to support the Palestinians. An inaugural meeting was held in September 2015 for the leaders of over 20 Malaysian NGOs after which, a spokesperson for the campaign announced an upcoming mass rally in support of Jerusalem. Answering the calls of the ‘Save Al-Quds Campaign’ to demonstrate, thousands of Malaysians gathered on October 2, 2015, in front of the US embassy in Kuala Lumpur in a ‘Day of Rage’ which was endorsed and supported by more than 40 Malaysian NGOs and political parties, including some non-Muslim organizations.⁶³ The group continued its advocacy work in later years and reached out to the government on several occasions. Currently, the network issues calls and statements on several developments in Palestine.

⁵⁹ Mohamad Makram Balawi, interview.

⁶⁰ PCOM Archive

⁶¹ Abdullah Waleed, interview.

⁶² Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, interview.

⁶³ ‘‘Over 40 NGOs to hold 'Day of Rage' protest at US Embassy,’ *Bernama*, October 1, 2015.

2.5.3.4 Malaysian Women's Coalition for al-Quds and Palestine (MWCQP)

After joining an international humanitarian mission consisting of a boat of activists heading to Gaza by sea in October 2016, MyCare and Rose2Rose leader Dr Fauziah Mohd Hassan joined other female activists in launching the Malaysian Women's Coalition for al-Quds and Palestine (MWCQP).⁶⁴ The new network seeks to mobilize Malaysian women in order to move the Palestine solidarity work in the country forward. Eventually, the women's network was able to interact with various senior female leaders including some ministers who attended its international conferences and events.⁶⁵

2.5.3.5 MyAqsa Defenders (MyAD)

This coalition appeared in May 2021, when MyAqsa Defenders (MyAD) emerged as a collaboration of Malaysian NGOs consisting of 18 organizations working to support and provide relief to the Palestinian people in the war that was waged against them in 2021. Whereas, the head of the MyAqsa Defenders Organization (MyAD), Muhammad Nader Al-Nouri Qamar Al-Zaman, indicated that we are receiving a lot of additional requests to enter MyAD, but he clarified that there are some conditions. The most important of them is that the organizations that want to join the machine of this coalition must focus their work on Palestine. In order to ensure that MyAD works as planned, five NGOs have also been appointed as members of the Supreme Council. MyAD has been able to coordinate and agree with many NGOs from outside Malaysia. MyAD brings together the strength of NGOs operating in Turkey, Indonesia, and many others. And the

⁶⁴ Fauziah Mohd Hassan, interview.

⁶⁵ Zuraida Kamaruddin(@zuraida_my). 2022. 'Admin | I was given the honour to deliver a speech at the 7th Conference of the Women Pioneers of Baitul Maqdis, Istanbul today.' Twitter, May 27; Accessed June 5, 2022. (https://twitter.com/zuraida_my/status/1530167920424144896)

most prominent work of this coalition is to help the largest possible number of Palestinians and provide them with relief in the first stage, and then move on to other relief programs such as the reconstruction of destroyed homes and other programs.

It is worth noting that the MyAqsa Defenders (MAD) succeeded in the 2012 war in collecting RM17.8 million in donations, which will be directed as humanitarian aid to the Palestinians.⁶⁶ MAD, which was founded as a coalition of young people from various NGOs, celebrities, and humanitarian icons, confirmed in a statement that the funds will be directed in stages to the Malaysia Clinic Al-Aqsa project, legal services in Sheikh Jarrah, a poor family. Sponsorship in Jerusalem and the emergency relief project in Gaza. The Coalition is committed to the agenda of good governance, transparency, and accountability in the implementation of humanitarian programs and projects in Palestine.

3.0 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have delved into the significant role played by Malaysian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) in advocating for the Palestinian issue. These organizations have demonstrated a deep-rooted empathy and unwavering commitment to supporting the rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people.

Many books and research studies related to Palestine have been published in Malaysia and Indonesia, which contribute to spreading knowledge to the public about what is happening to the Palestinians and raising awareness about the conflicts that happen to the Palestinians. These books

⁶⁶ ‘MyAqsa defenders raises RM17.8 million for Palestine,’ The Sun Daily, May 20, 2021. (<https://www.thesundaily.my/local/myaqsa-defenders-raises-rm178-million-for-palestine-DG7877757>)

and intellectual contributions on the Palestinian issue increased in both Malaysia and Indonesia after 2000. These are publications that Malaysians and Indonesians are proud of because they contribute to raising awareness of the Palestinian situation.⁶⁷

Moreover, many NGOs provide humanitarian assistance to mitigate the destructive effects of wars and natural disasters.⁶⁸ The Palestine issue was made a special cause to Malaysia.⁶⁹ It was during Mahathir's administration that the government and the country became highly committed to helping to bring world attention to and to resolving the Palestine-Israel crisis.

There is an increase in participation in boycott campaigns of parties supporting the Israeli occupation (BDS). The response to boycott campaigns increases with the development of events and the increase in Israeli aggressions against Palestinians. Consumers are also evolving to become more knowledgeable and ethical in their consumption, sometimes choosing to boycott to force companies or brands to be more responsive to environmental, ethical, and social needs. It is noteworthy that the organized boycott campaign carried out by BDS against Israel, which was initiated by civil society in 2005 to advocate for the Palestinian struggle for freedom and equality. Malaysians also showed their solidarity with the Palestinians by participating in the boycott of

⁶⁷ Nor, M. R. M., & Dahalan, N. N. N. (2015). Penerbitan Buku-Buku Berkaitan Palestin Yang Diterbitkan Di Malaysia Dan Indonesia (Books Publication Related to Palestine Published in Malaysia and Indonesia). *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, 10(2), 1-15.

⁶⁸ Harun, M. S. (2021). The Downward vs Upward Accountability Practices: A Study of Malaysian-Palestine Non-Government Organizations (NGOs).

⁶⁹ Mohamed, A. M. H., Salleh, M. A., Ahmad, A. A., Haron, A. S., & Murshamshul, M. K. (2017). The impact of Malaysian foreign policy on Palestine during Tun Mahathir's era. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 25(1), 217-226.

companies that are confirmed to support or finance Israel, each time a new conflict broke out between Israel and Palestine.⁷⁰

In the twenty-first century, the talk is about the role of non-state actors in foreign policy. Increasingly, many realize that actors such as NGOs are one of the forces that can contribute to the foreign policy decision-making process. It can be said that the position of Malaysian leaders as well as Malaysian support for Palestine has been influenced and spread through these organizations, which play a very important role in strengthening relations and bilateralism between Malaysia and Palestine.⁷¹

Malaysian NGOs advocating the Palestinian issue have shown remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in their efforts. They have utilized various platforms and strategies to raise awareness, engage the public, and influence policy. Through grassroots mobilization, public awareness campaigns, and diplomatic initiatives, these NGOs have successfully garnered public support and influenced Malaysian government policies in favor of Palestine.

Furthermore, the presence of Palestine-oriented NGOs within Malaysia has been instrumental in fostering understanding and solidarity between Malaysians and Palestinians. These organizations have played a crucial role in building bridges of empathy and cultural exchange. By organizing cultural events, educational programs, and humanitarian projects, they have brought

⁷⁰ Hamzah, H., & Mustafa, H. (2018). Exploring consumer boycott intelligence towards Israel-related companies in Malaysia: an integration of the theory of planned behaviour with transtheoretical stages of change. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*.

⁷¹ Salleh, M. A., Nor, M. R. M., Abu-Hussin, M., Mohamed, A., Yusob, M. L., & Nazri, N. (2017). The Role of Malaysian NGOs on Palestinian issues: Aqsa syarif berhad. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 25, 133-142.

Malaysians closer to the Palestinian experience and cultivated a deeper appreciation of the struggles faced by Palestinians.

The collective efforts of Malaysian NGOs and PONGOs have contributed to shaping the discourse around the Palestinian issue within Malaysia and beyond. They have successfully amplified the voices of Palestinians, shedding light on their aspirations for self-determination and justice. Through their tireless advocacy, these organizations have also demonstrated the power of civil society in influencing public opinion and policy decisions.

As we conclude this chapter, it is evident that Malaysian NGOs and PONGOs have made a significant impact in advocating for the Palestinian issue. Their passion, dedication, and unwavering support have played a pivotal role in raising awareness, mobilizing resources, and fostering solidarity between Malaysians and Palestinians.

Looking ahead, these organizations must continue their efforts and explore new avenues of engagement. The evolving landscape of advocacy and the ever-changing dynamics of the Palestinian issue call for innovative approaches and sustained commitment. By harnessing the power of technology, social media, and international partnerships, Malaysian NGOs and PONGOs can extend their reach and create even greater impact in advocating for Palestinian rights.

Ultimately, the story of Malaysian NGOs and PONGOs advocating the Palestinian issue is one of solidarity, empathy, and hope. Their unwavering support has shown that regardless of geographical distance, the struggle for justice and self-determination knows no boundaries.

Through their collective efforts, Malaysians are contributing to a global movement that seeks to create a just and lasting resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.