

THE ORIGINS AND EMERGENCE OF MALAYSIA'S PALESTINE-ORIENTED NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

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Published online: 31 October 2025

To cite this article: Muslim Imran, Roy Anthony Rogers and K.S. Balakrishnan. 2025. The origins and emergence of Malaysia's Palestine-oriented non-governmental organisations. *Kajian Malaysia* 43(2): 123–142. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2025.43.2.7>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2025.43.2.7>

ABSTRACT

While considerable scholarly attention has been directed towards the analysis of Malaysia's foreign policy throughout the years, there remains a notable dearth in the literature regarding the contributions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to the shaping of this policy. Furthermore, scant scholarly effort has been devoted to comprehending the origins and ascent of these consequential non-state actors. This study aims to illuminate the genesis of an expanding collective of Malaysian NGOs that actively contribute to the formulation of Malaysia's foreign policy regarding Palestine—referred to herein as Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs). Drawing upon a diverse array of primary sources, including interviews and official documents, and grounded in a robust theoretical framework that addresses the emergence of NGOs, this qualitative empirical inquiry presents a pioneering analysis of the inception of Malaysian PONGOs. Employing a thematic analysis methodology, this study integrates theories of NGO genesis with concepts related to Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs). Encompassing both domestic and international influences that underlie the emergence of these NGOs, this study is notably comprehensive. At the domestic level, this investigation examines and attempts to assess the roles played by several sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors, the impact of public sentiment, as well as the intricate interplay of various factions within the realm of political Islam. Concurrently, in the international sphere, this study meticulously examines the ramifications of the information technology revolution in disseminating information concerning Palestine. It delves into the roles enacted by PONGOs, unveils the symbiotic alignment of interests uniting Palestinian and Malaysian stakeholders, and delves into the sociocultural exchange between these two nations. Conclusively, the analysis discerns that due to the perpetual and evolving roles assumed by these

distinct influencing factors, the trajectory of Malaysian PONGOs is poised for sustained expansion in the forthcoming years.

Keywords: Palestine, Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs), non-governmental organisation (NGO), Malaysia, Malaysia’s foreign policy

INTRODUCTION

In the initial decades of the 21st century, there was a marked increase in the establishment of Malaysian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) emphasising the Palestinian issue. In conjunction with these specialised entities, several established Malaysian NGOs expanded their advocacy to encompass the Palestinian issue on both domestic and international fronts. The cumulative efforts of these organisations significantly influenced Malaysia’s diplomatic stance towards Palestine. Their endeavours ranged from heightening public awareness about the Palestinian situation and mobilising financial support to facilitating dialogues and shaping policy perspectives. Moreover, their direct involvement in policy formulation and execution underscored the prioritisation of the Palestinian issue in Malaysia’s foreign policy agenda. This cohort included a diverse array of organisations, such as faith-based entities, humanitarian NGOs, human rights proponents, advocacy groups, and academic institutions. Many played pivotal roles in steering Malaysia’s diplomatic approach towards Palestine. Concurrently, this era witnessed the rise of a specialised subset of NGOs, exclusively concentrating on the Palestinian narrative, termed Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs). Table 1 delineates these active Malaysian PONGOs, systematically categorised into advocacy-oriented, humanitarian relief-focused, and overarching Palestine advocacy networks.

Table 1: Malaysian Palestine-oriented NGOs since 2004

PONGO sub-category	PONGO name	Year of inception
Advocacy PONGOs	Palestinian Cultural Organisation Malaysia (PCOM)	2011
	Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM)	2011
	Boycott Divest Sanctions (BDS)	2014
	Yayasan MyAqsa	2017
	Friends of Palestine Network	2018
	Justice for Palestine Action Front (JPAF)	2020

(Continued on next page)

Table 1 (Continued)

PONGO sub-category	PONGO name	Year of inception
Humanitarian relief PONGOs	Aman Palestin	2004
	Aqsa Syarif (later MyCare)	2009 (2014)
	Viva Palestina Malaysia	2010
	Cakna Palestin	2008
	Cinta Gaza Malaysia (CGM)	2014
Palestine advocacy networks	LifeLine4Gaza	2009
	Global March to Jerusalem (GMJ)	2012
	Save Al-Quds Campaign	2014
	MyAqsa Defenders	2021
	Aid4Palestine	2021

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of PONGOs after 2003 in the post-Mahathir era can be attributed to both domestic and international factors. Delving into theoretical works on the origins of NGOs in global politics underscores the sociopolitical and socioeconomic elements shaping these civil society entities. Ahmed and Potter (2006) notable scholars in NGO studies, describe NGOs as entities with distinct origins and sometimes, endings. They emphasise the importance of examining an NGO's genesis to understand its political influence.

Ahmed and Potter (2006), drawing from theories on interest group formation, propose three explanations for NGO emergence: an entrepreneurial model, growth from pre-existing groups, and what Tarrow (2011) terms as franchising. These theories aptly capture the origins of many Malaysian PONGOs. Another perspective highlights the rise of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) – interconnected entities enabling NGOs to rally support and pool resources cost-effectively (Keck and Sikkink 2018). This lens is particularly insightful for comprehending the genesis of Palestine advocacy networks in Malaysia, as their establishment mirrors TANs. Both are steered by proactive NGOs, sharing similar formation dynamics.

To comprehensively understand the birth and growth of Malaysian PONGOs, it is crucial to consider both local and global influencing factors. This study employs a qualitative approach, leveraging primary sources, particularly in-depth interviews with NGO leaders and foreign policy stakeholders. Thematic analysis of these interviews and associated texts uncovers the driving forces behind the ascent of PONGOs.

DOMESTIC FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE EMERGENCE OF PONGOs

Exploring the rapid rise of PONGOs in Malaysia requires an understanding of both domestic and external factors. A careful observation of the domestic environment in Malaysia since the time the first PONGOs emerged points to the following domestic factors:

Emerging Sociopolitical and Socioeconomic Trends in the Post-Mahathir Malaysia

Following the Mahathir era, Malaysia underwent significant sociopolitical and socioeconomic shifts. These included a move towards democratisation, impacting civil society; enhanced citizen welfare, influencing political participation; and the information technology boom, marked by widespread internet use and the emergence of alternative media. Such changes catalysed the rapid growth of PONGOs.

Some scholars have noted that the post-Mahathir years in Malaysia witnessed a move towards democratisation, leading to significant growth in Malaysian civil society (Welsh 2013). While the Malaysian constitution emphasises democratic ideals, there is debate among scholars about its actual democratic nature. Case (1993) viewed Malaysia as 'semi-democratic', highlighting governmental restrictions on societal organisation. Alternatively, Means (1996) labelled it 'soft authoritarianism', and Zakaria (1989) termed it a 'quasi democracy'. Civil society faced challenges due to the Barisan Nasional regime's prolonged dominance, which painted a picture of Malaysia as not being fully democratic. Yet, many NGOs, especially those focused on the Palestinian issue and foreign policy issues in general, seemed exempt from this narrative.

Sharifah Munirah (2003) pinpointed the start of Malaysian NGO involvement in foreign policy to the Mahathir era, with a surge in non-state actor influence following his departure from power in 2003. The rise of PONGOs from 2004, often supported by the Malaysian government, contrasts with the scrutiny faced by domestic human rights and electoral reform groups.¹

The Malaysian political landscape began shifting post-2018, with the nation witnessing its first regime change, hinting at a more active democratic transformation. However, it is worth noting that the brief phases of democratisation which took place in the early Abdullah years and again in the early Najib years had a direct impact on the growth of NGOs and civil society groups (Welsh 2013). Abdullah opened more space for the opposition, while Najib started his years with some political and economic reforms. Their policies expanded civic spaces, prompting the formation of new NGOs.² Tarrow's (1996)

concept of 'political opportunity structure' aligns with the rise of PONGOs in the post-Mahathir years. Tarrow (1996) emphasised specific signals that influence the formation of social movements, such as access to power and elite divisions. Many Islamic mass organisations, reading these signals, formed PONGOs, like Aman Palestin and Aqsa Syarif.^{3,4}

The subsequent pivotal change in Malaysia's socioeconomic landscape was the marked improvement in citizens' well-being, stemming from decades of modernisation and late 20th-century industrialisation. This economic progress profoundly impacted the mindsets of urban Malaysians. Salamon (1994) highlights the link between global economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s and the surge in NGOs, a trend mirrored in Malaysia. Ahmed and Potter (2006) encapsulate this shift, noting that growing affluence led to a transition in values towards social equity, quality of life, and citizen empowerment.

Post-Mahathir Malaysia saw the fruition of industrialisation and modernisation, transforming citizens' lifestyles. The country's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita increased significantly from the early 1970s, with notable jumps in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (MacroTrends 2024). This economic growth influenced people's attitudes, leading to heightened political participation and an increased interest in global affairs among citizens. The Palestinian issue, in particular, has always been the global issue with a special position in the hearts of the Malaysian people.^{5,6,7} The economic affluence only helped to fuel Malaysian advocacy for Palestinian rights. This was manifested in the growing humanitarian support championed by the many expanding PONGOs that emerged in the post-Mahathir years.

Another pivotal shift in Malaysia's post-Mahathir era was the remarkable rise of information technology, profoundly influencing both the socioeconomic and sociopolitical spheres. This technology revolution, characterised by the rapid expansion of the internet and other mass communication tools, propelled the growth of new and unconventional media outlets. These modern channels, encompassing email, mobile communication, and social media, have empowered like-minded Malaysians—individuals and institutions—to unite, cooperate, advocate, and share insights on various subjects, including the Palestinian issue.^{8,9,10,11}

Competition between Rivalling Political Parties and Groups

Since its independence, Malaysia has adopted a multi-ethnic and multi-religious identity. Historically, the nation's policy decisions, especially in foreign affairs, have predominantly been shaped by the Malay Muslim elite, drawing from mainstream interpretations of Islam and Malay culture (Nair 1997). The Malay nationalist party, UMNO, which governed the country from independence

until 2018, played a pivotal role in shaping the country's political direction in concert with other political entities (Welsh 2016). Notably, post-2005, UMNO's ideological shift from a centre-right stance to a pronounced ultra-nationalist orientation reshaped national policies and discourse. The conversation evolved from 'Malay leadership of a multicultural Malaysia' to 'Malay dominance in the Islamic state of Malaysia'.¹²

The 2008 General Elections signaled a turning point for the Barisan Nasional (BN) government as many non-Malay voters opted for the multi-ethnic Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition. Additionally, a segment of the urban Malay demographic veered towards this opposition. For the first time in Malaysia's recent history, a Malay-led, multi-ethnic coalition was challenging not just BN's hold on power, but also the prevailing socioeconomic policy narrative. The PR, under the leadership of former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim, proposed a progressive vision that went beyond the New Economic Policy (NEP).

During Najib's second term (2013–2018), a noticeable rise in Malay nationalism was observed. Following the 1MDB scandal in 2015, Najib sought to pacify UMNO's nationalist and Islamist factions. The political environment became even more complex in 2016 when both former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and ex-Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin sided with the opposition. Their strong Malay nationalist backgrounds, particularly Mahathir's, posed a genuine challenge to Najib, prompting him to adopt more right-leaning stances in both domestic and foreign policies, including his approach towards Palestine.

Malaysia's diverse population often sees political issues framed in communalist terms (Zakaria 1989). Given its race-based politics, even international concerns, like the Palestinian struggle, are viewed through racial and religious lenses. The 'Malay Muslim' narrative employed by certain political parties occasionally domesticates the Palestinian issue into a communal contest. Muller (2015) elaborates on this, noting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict's adaptation to a specifically Malaysian context under the influence of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). This intertwining of domestic politics and international advocacy is evident in how civil society groups, shaped by their political leanings, approach the issue of Palestine. Discontent with governmental stances, some pro-opposition groups established PONGOs to express their solidarity independently (Muller 2015).

This blending of domestic politics and Palestine-advocacy is further illustrated when political figures, such as Prime Minister Najib, leveraged Palestine-oriented activities for political gains.¹³ For example, Anwar Ibrahim's 2012 controversial *Wall Street Journal* interview, where he appeared to support

Israel's security, was seized upon by UMNO leaders to paint him as pro-Israel – a politically perilous stance in Malaysia (Mahtani 2012). In response, the opposition leveraged social media to defend Anwar and critique Najib. They reignited the 'Zionist APCO' narrative, suggesting that the Public Relations firm behind the '1Malaysia' campaign had Israeli ties (Lee 2010). This claim persisted despite denials. Another retaliatory strategy saw the Public Relations supporting Palestine-oriented humanitarian groups, with Anwar backing various Gaza projects in 2012.¹⁴

The dynamics between political factions in Malaysia have directly influenced the rise of PONGOs. This is evident when PAS established the 'Palestine NGOs Secretariat' in 2013, streamlining Palestine advocacy among its members and affiliates.¹⁵ Increased ties between Hamas and UMNO during 2012–2013 disrupted PAS's narrative of being a counterpart to Hamas, as opposed to UMNO's supposed alignment with Fatah (Muller 2015). This necessitated a more proactive Palestine advocacy by PAS, culminating in the formation of the secretariat as mentioned earlier. This instance underscores the significant influence of inter-party competition on Malaysia's PONGOs landscape and proliferation.

The Rise of Islamic Mass Movements in Foreign Policy and Intra-Islamist Competition

Islam has long been a defining force in Malay politics and society. The ruling elite in Malaysia predominantly consists of Malay Muslims, deeply identifying with Islam both as a religion and an identity marker. Despite Malaysia's diverse ethnic backdrop, its decision-making apparatus is majorly influenced by Malay Muslims. For them, Islam "provided the symbol of their exclusivity and prerogative rights to the country, invigorating intellectual and political exchange and securing significant influence in nationalist agitation" (Nair 1997). This symbiotic relationship between Islam and Malay nationalism stands in contrast to many Muslim nations, where nationalism clashed with Islamic ideologies. This can be attributed to "the sense of particularism and cohesion that religious identity offered within an increasingly ethnically plural society" (Nair 1997).

Malay rationalism, distinct from the secular leanings of Arab or Turkish nationalisms, is deeply rooted in Islamic ideology. In Malaysia, the constitution defines a 'Malay person' as an adherent of Islam, underscoring the intertwined nature of Malay identity and Islam. Given UMNO's pivotal role in shaping the nation's trajectory, it is imperative to examine its interpretation of Malay nationalism. Additionally, observing the roles of various Islamic political and societal actors is essential, as the interplay between Malaysia's Islamists and Islamic nationalists has profoundly influenced the nation's political dialogue.

After Mahathir, UMNO's 'Malay nationalism' increasingly aligned with mainstream Islamic/Islamist ideologies seen in global political Islam. Scholars, including Liow (2009) and Funston (2016) pinpointed an 'Islamist turn' in UMNO starting in the Mahathir years. While UMNO maintains its foundational nationalist ideas, Mahathir's 1980s Islamisation policy introduced fresh ideological nuances. Key figures like Anwar Ibrahim from the Islamist Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) joining UMNO, alongside Mahathir's vision of an Islamic revival, birthed a novel Islamic democracy. With UMNO's intensified Islamisation, particularly to outpace rival PAS, initiatives like Abdullah Badawi's 'Islam Hadhari' emerged, seemingly to counter the combined threat of PAS and Anwar.

UMNO's deepening Islamisation and its rivalry with PAS significantly influenced Malaysian politics, framing the Palestinian issue predominantly as an Islamic concern (Muller 2015). This intense competition over 'Islam' spurred certain PAS-affiliated civil society groups to advocate for the Palestinian cause differently from the UMNO-led government. For example, during the Badawi era, PAS and its linked NGOs lobbied ardently for Malaysia's recognition of the Hamas government.¹⁶ Even as the government hesitated to engage with Hamas, PAS NGOs and supporters invited Hamas dignitaries to Malaysia and made trips to the Gaza Strip. Before the publicised cordial relations between UMNO and Hamas in 2012, PAS and its associated NGOs essentially acted as an alternative diplomatic channel for Hamas in Malaysia.¹⁷

The emergence of numerous Islamic NGOs following Mahathir's tenure compounded the intricate Islamic political landscape. By 2009, when Najib assumed power, UMNO faced the challenge of out-performing not just PAS and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), but an expanding array of Islamic NGOs like ABIM, Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia (IKRAM), Pertubuhan Himpunan Lepas Institut Pendidikan Malaysia (HALUAN), and Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA). Recognising this, Najib amplified the Islamic tenor of his policies and speeches. This strategy intensified the battle of 'identity politics', a situation which would explode further after UMNO's 2018 electoral loss (Welsh 2020).

Seeking to have a more influential Islamic stance than its rivals, UMNO fostered relationships with prominent Islamic parties globally.¹⁸ In 2010, Najib welcomed senior leaders from several Islamic parties attending the Islamic Parliamentary Forum in Langkawi. Shortly after, Najib's government-initiated ties with Hamas, culminating in a groundbreaking visit by Najib himself to the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip in January 2013. Subsequent years saw UMNO extend its diplomatic outreach to Islamist parties in countries like Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Indonesia, even incorporating them into its annual gatherings.¹⁹

UMNO's growing Islamist identity encouraged its leaders to try to co-opt or engage local Islamic mass organisations and NGOs. While this move helped raise the ceiling for many Islamic groups in their demands for more assertive Islamic policies, some groups were uncomfortable with UMNO's approach. This was translated, in the context of Malaysia's advocacy for Palestine, into the creation of new Islamic PONGOs. For instance, an Islamic group like IKRAM formed its own affiliated PONGO, Aqsa Syarif which preferred to operate away from state control, although it accommodated government leaders at times.^{20,21} Meanwhile, other activists comfortable with government co-option established MyAqsa in 2017 as a new pro-government PONGO.

While most of Malaysia's Islamist organisations like ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA share a lot of commonalities in terms of ideology, organisational structure, and operations, competition and rivalry between these groups exist. This rivalry translated into the creation of more PONGOs. For example, both IKRAM and ISMA trace their roots to the defunct Jamaah Islah Malaysia (JIM) whose members established Aman Palestin in 2004. When the two Islamist groups parted ways in the following years, IKRAM activists formed Aqsa Syarif in 2010 as a counterpart for the ISMA-affiliated Aman Palestin. Another third Islamist group which shares the same origins, HALUAN, created its own Palestine secretariat in the name of HALUAN Palestin. HALUAN Palestin leaders helped establish Malaysia's LifeLine4Gaza advocacy network in 2009.²² Yet another Islamist group, ABIM, mobilised a broad coalition of pro-Palestine NGOs in 2014 under the banner of Save Al-Quds Campaign, turning the alliance into another active Palestine-oriented group.

Interestingly, most of these new groups evolved into major PONGOs, which not only continue to operate independently of each other but also rarely cooperate in their activities. For example, when Israel attacked the Freedom Flotilla in the Mediterranean Sea in May 2010, Aman Palestin called for a rally in front of the Turkish embassy in solidarity with the Turkish victims. Meanwhile, Aqsa Syarif joined other NGOs in demonstrating in front of the US embassy on the same day. The two rallies were held at different times. The rivalry persisted in the following years as each of the two PONGOs tended to stay out of any advocacy networks formed by the other.

Eventually, a pattern emerged, where every time one of these major Islamist mass movements forms one PONGO, the other groups react by establishing theirs. Moreover, every time one of these Islamist-linked PONGOs organises a major programme or campaign, the other groups organise their own programmes or campaigns. For instance, many of these PONGOs sent separate humanitarian missions to Gaza. While they were willing, at times, to work with other 'secular' NGOs in these missions, they avoided working with other Islamists most of the time. For instance, Aqsa Syarif cooperated in several missions with Viva

Palestina Malaysia, but never with Aman Palestin. Interestingly, at times, some misunderstandings emerged when Prime Minister Ismail Haniyyeh hosted different Malaysian delegates together. On one occasion, representatives of an Islamist-linked PONGO sent an official protest to the Palestinian Prime Minister's Office because the leader of another Islamist-linked PONGO received a souvenir of appreciation from Haniyyeh on behalf of all Malaysian delegates. However, this rivalry and competition played favourably into the expansion of pro-Palestine advocacy and humanitarian aid in Malaysia.

EXTERNAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE EMERGENCE OF PONGOS

In addition to the domestic factors explored earlier, external factors unrelated to Malaysia's internal dynamics ought to be analysed. Key external factors observed in this study include:

The New Political Reality in Palestine after the Second Intifada and the Impact of the Information Technology Revolution on the Emergence of PONGOs

Frustrated by peace process failures and the Palestinian authority's inability to achieve independence, a second Intifada erupted in 2000.^{23,24} The discontent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza due to Israel's repressive policies, coupled with the failure of the Camp David II talks, triggered a new uprising lasting from September 2000 to mid-2005.²⁵ Initially non-violent, Palestinian resistance transformed into armed revolt due to Israel's militarised approach. Global solidarity prompted the emergence of numerous international humanitarian and advocacy NGOs.

By November 2004, Yasser Arafat's demise created a power vacuum in the Palestinian political system. The election of pacifist Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) leader Mahmoud Abbas in 2005 and Hamas's rise after the January 2006 parliamentary elections complicated the Palestinian political landscape. Hamas's parliamentary victory, coupled with Fatah's resistance to the new government, led to an internal Palestinian political rift.²⁶ The Hamas government, boycotted by Western countries, gained support from some Muslim-majority nations and non-state actors worldwide. This influenced Hamas's foreign policy, utilising alternative diplomatic channels, such as NGOs, to shape its international relations.²⁷

Israeli military assaults on Gaza following Hamas's ascent fueled the growth of PONGOs globally.^{28,29} Noteworthy was the Israeli military attack on Gaza, dubbed by Israel as Operation Cast Lead, from 28 December 2008 to 29 January

2009, which resulted in an unprecedented scale of destruction and casualties.³⁰ Despite this, it failed to dismantle Hamas or its resistance capabilities, altering the dynamics of the Palestinian struggle and the Palestinian political system.^{31,32} Ongoing Israeli blockade and successive military operations in Gaza exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, drawing international attention and active involvement from humanitarian NGOs.³³

Growing frustration with Israeli Judaisation and annexation policies in the West Bank further impacted the international solidarity movement. Following the collapse of the 2014 Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, continuous expansion of illegal Israeli settlements and crackdowns on Al-Aqsa Mosque fueled new Palestinian uprisings starting in October 2015.³⁴ Years of confrontations between Israeli forces and illegal settlers on one hand, and Palestinian protestors on the other, ensued across the West Bank. Ongoing Israeli crackdowns, particularly on Al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem, led to continuous unrest in Palestine and the Muslim world. Groups advocating for the protection of Islamic and Christian sanctuaries emerged globally. In Malaysia, the Save Al-Quds Campaign formed in December 2014, grew rapidly to include more than 42 Malaysian NGOs (Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia 2019).

Major Palestinian developments of the past two decades received extensive coverage by international and Malaysian media, with notable attention from mainstream and other outlets. Events such as the Israeli attacks on Al-Aqsa and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza frequently featured in the news. Mainstream media reporting was complemented by increased social media engagement, exposing more Malaysians to daily developments in Palestine. This technological revolution facilitated greater awareness of the humanitarian crisis, prompting increased involvement in advocacy and relief efforts.³⁵

Growing Malaysian awareness of the Palestinian issue spurred increased involvement by advocacy and relief NGOs championing the Palestinian struggle.³⁶ This heightened engagement led to more Malaysian humanitarian NGOs participating in fundraising and implementing projects in Palestine, as well as increased advocacy efforts and network participation by Malaysian NGOs. Notably, the aftermath of the 2008/2009 Israeli war on Gaza and the May 2010 attack on the Freedom Flotilla off Gaza's coast played a crucial role in inspiring the establishment of numerous PONGOs in Malaysia. Aqsa Syarif, Viva Palestina Malaysia, Palestinian Cultural Organisation Malaysia (PCOM), and Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM) emerged immediately after these significant events.³⁷

The Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS Malaysia), a prominent Malaysian PONGO, arose after the 2014 Israeli military attack on Gaza.³⁸ The expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the 2015-2016 developments in Al-Aqsa

Mosque and Jerusalem spurred the formation of the Save Al-Quds advocacy network and the MyAqsa advocacy NGO.³⁹ Additionally, the MyAqsa Defenders advocacy network emerged right after the May 2021 Israeli attack on Gaza (MyAqsa Defenders n.d.). In response to new political realities in Palestine, Malaysian civil society mobilised resources, leading to the establishment of new PONGOs.

The Growing Influence of Palestinian NGOs and Palestine-Oriented TANs and Their Impact on the Growth of Malaysian PONGOs

Palestinian NGOs and transnational advocacy networks significantly influenced the growth of Malaysian PONGOs.⁴⁰ Seeking to establish what Sidney Tarrow terms ‘franchises,’ large Palestinian NGOs and advocacy networks engaged with Malaysian civil society groups. Tarrow (2011) defines franchises as a means for a small national umbrella organisation to coordinate broad activities without the resource-intensive structures of a large mass organisation. Over the past two decades, Palestinian NGOs proliferated, establishing branches globally. These branches, acting as franchises, facilitated cost-effective message delivery to various local communities within the international solidarity movement.

In response to the failure of Palestinian political institutions in achieving independence, the Palestinian civil society, inspired by ongoing developments, heightened its activism.⁴¹ The post-2000 Intifada era witnessed the emergence of numerous civil society groups, with some assuming crucial political and advocacy roles, while others focused on relief efforts. Originating both within Palestine and the diaspora, these NGOs contributed to diverse aspects of Palestinian society. Al-Quds International Institution (QII), Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS), and the Global March to Jerusalem (GMJ) were among the leading Palestinian NGOs and pro-Palestine TANs to establish Malaysian ‘franchises’.⁴²

Founded in January 2001 in Beirut, QII aimed to ‘save Jerusalem, preserve its Arab identity, and protect its Islamic and Christian sanctuaries’.⁴³ With the mission of ‘uniting the Ummah’s diverse streams to support Jerusalem,’ QII established a Malaysian branch, QFM, in 2010.⁴⁴

Inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement, BDS was established in 2005 in response to the ‘Palestinian Call for BDS against Israel,’ initiated in July 2005 by over 170 Palestinian organisations (Palestinian BDS National Committee, n.d.). Following 2005, BDS campaign efforts intensified, culminating in the inaugural Palestinian BDS Conference in November 2007 (Palestinian BDS National Committee, n.d.). The BDS National Committee (BNC), formed during this conference, coordinated the global BDS campaign, establishing chapters worldwide, including in Malaysia. In 2015, Malaysian activists founded the Malaysian BDS Movement, aiming to promote the BDS Call.⁴⁵

The Malaysian chapter of the GMJ, a franchise of the larger pro-Palestine TAN, also emerged in the same period.⁴⁶ GMJ mobilised thousands of Palestinians as well as hundreds of pro-Palestine activists towards Israel's borders on Palestine Land Day on 30 March 2012. The Malaysian chapter, which organised a major rally near the capital, included more than a dozen Malaysian NGOs like Aqsa Syarif, PCOM, and Perdana Global Peace Foundation, and was chaired by Aqsa Syarif Board member, Dr. Tahir Abdul Rahman.⁴⁷

Viva Palestina Malaysia, another significant Malaysian PONGO, originated as a derivative of a pro-Palestine transnational advocacy network, Viva Palestina International. Formed as a coalition of Malaysian NGOs responding to the 2008/2009 Israeli military attack on Gaza, it subsequently transformed into the Malaysian branch of the United Kingdom-based Viva Palestina International.

Other major Palestinian NGOs, such as the Global Coalition for Al-Quds and Palestine, founded by Palestinian activists in Syria in the diaspora, influenced the creation of other PONGOs in Malaysia.⁴⁸ The Global Coalition's frequent visits and lobbying efforts in Malaysia contributed to the establishment of NGOs like Aqsa Syarif in February 2010, QFM in December 2010, and the PCOM in February 2011.^{49,50}

This brief survey suggests that various Palestinian and PONGOs, as well as TANs, have had a significant direct impact on the emergence, rise, and proliferation of Malaysian PONGOs over the past two decades. These 'mother organisations' directly influenced Malaysian civil society and the political elite through personal connections and interactions. Repeated visits to Malaysia by leaders of these NGOs and TANs, along with interactions between Malaysian activists and these groups in Palestine and the diaspora, played an instrumental role in the emergence and growth of Malaysian PONGOs.

Active Mutual Constitution of Interests and Identities between Palestinian Political Actors (Mainly Hamas) and The Malaysian Political and Civil Society Groups

Over the years, increasing interaction between Palestinian political actors and Malaysian counterparts facilitated the emergence of common ideas, identities, and interests. This interaction extended to civil society, where continuous engagement shaped mutual interests and encouraged cooperation. Hamas, facing restrictions due to the Israeli blockade and Western boycott, sought alternative communication channels, establishing strong bilateral and multilateral relations globally. These relations were strengthened by frequent visits of international activists to Gaza and other active Hamas locations.⁵¹ Visits by Hamas leaders and Gaza government officials to various countries further enhanced these relations.

The frequent visits of Palestinian political leaders, especially from Hamas and its government, influenced Malaysian advocacy groups, shifting their focus to Gaza to align with Hamas's rise and its struggle against Israel. Malaysian politicians and civil society groups recognised that regular interactions with Hamas enhanced their domestic popularity, especially among Malay-Muslim constituencies.⁵² Hamas, in turn, saw close ties with Malaysian political parties and NGOs as a means to overcome the international blockade.⁵³ This form of 'guerrilla diplomacy' provided Hamas with alternative diplomatic channels, bypassing traditional restrictions.⁵⁴ This relationship facilitated the emergence of PONGOs like the PCOM, playing a mediating role benefiting Hamas, the Malaysian political elite, and the NGO itself (Koss 2019).

The consistent interaction extended beyond political actors, encompassing Palestinian and Malaysian NGOs, fostering shared interests through frequent exchanges. NGOs such as Aman Palestin, Aqsa Syarif, Muslim Care, and Global Peace Mission established offices in Gaza to implement humanitarian projects and strengthen ties with Palestinian society. Numerous humanitarian missions organised by Malaysian NGOs, particularly PONGOs, prompted the establishment of Gaza offices, deepening their involvement in Palestinian relief efforts.⁵⁵ These missions engaged hundreds of Malaysian activists, professionals, and public figures in rebuilding infrastructure and supporting Gaza's health and education sectors.

The exchanges between Palestinian and Malaysian NGOs not only fostered a shared understanding of the Palestinian situation but also motivated Malaysian civil society to establish new types of NGOs that support the Palestinian cause.⁵⁶ These PONGOs serve the purpose of advancing the Palestinian issue in Malaysia and beyond. The Malaysian government's positive reception of these PONGOs suggests the success of these groups in establishing common interests and understandings between the Palestinian and Malaysian sides.⁵⁷

The Unprecedented Growth in Sociocultural Interactions between Malaysia and Palestine in the Post-Mahathir Years

Palestinian-Malaysian social and cultural interactions have historical roots, with Malaysian students and *ulama* visiting Palestine for centuries.⁵⁸ Modern interactions began in the 1960s when Malaysia embraced the Palestinian struggle, welcoming visits from Palestinian political leaders. From the 1970s onward, more Palestinian leaders and activists visited Malaysia, receiving warm welcomes. The PLO established a representative office in Kuala Lumpur in the early 1970s, evolving into the Embassy of Palestine by the early 1980s.⁵⁹

However, interactions and exchanges between Malaysian people and Palestinian people remained limited to the diplomatic and political spheres, and only a few exchanges took place at the level of civil society.

In the late 1970s, ABIM increased Palestinian–Malaysian interactions by hosting Palestinian visitors and engaging with activists globally (Nur Atikah and Norhafizah 2020). During the 1980s, Malaysian doctors and activists provided humanitarian aid by visiting Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.⁶⁰ In the 1990s, more Palestinians visited Malaysia, especially for education. Malaysian universities welcomed Palestinian students and academics, with numerous Palestinians studying or working in institutions such as the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) by the late 1990s.⁶¹

By the early 2000s, the number of Palestinian visits to Malaysia had surged. Many received scholarships from Malaysian universities and charities, such as Yayasan Albukhary, with others seeking refuge after the 2003 Iraq War. The influx of scholarships and Palestinian refugees increased the community to almost a thousand by the end of Abdullah Badawi's era. During Najib's era, the Palestinian population in Malaysia grew significantly, surpassing 3000 students and over a thousand refugees, especially Palestinians from Syria.⁶² The influx of Palestinians into Malaysia continued until the coming of COVID-19 and the travel restrictions associated with the pandemic.

The rising Palestinian arrival into Malaysia paralleled an increase in Malaysians visiting Palestine for various purposes. Hundreds of humanitarian activists flocked into Gaza, while many other Malaysians visited Jerusalem for pilgrimage. Simultaneously, Malaysian NGOs either established offices in Gaza or employed Palestinian activists in Malaysia. This expanding sociocultural exchange directly fueled the growth of PONGOs.⁶³

CONCLUSION

The emergence and evolution of Malaysia's PONGOs represent a multifaceted process shaped by a confluence of domestic and international factors. This study demonstrates that the rise of these NGOs cannot be attributed to a single cause but rather to an intricate interplay between Malaysia's internal sociopolitical transformations, global developments surrounding the Palestinian struggle, and the increasing interconnectedness of transnational advocacy networks.

Overall, Malaysia's expanding civic space, Islamic political competition, and global solidarity with Palestine collectively spurred PONGO proliferation. Transnational networks, Palestinian partnerships, and mutual religious-political interests deepened engagement. PONGOs thus transformed Malaysia's state-led solidarity into a broad societal movement that will likely continue expanding alongside Malaysia's evolving civil society and enduring support for Palestine.

NOTES

1. Dr. Abdullah Waleed. Director of Strategic Communications in the Prime Minister's Office – Gaza and former Deputy President of PCOM, Kuala Lumpur. Interview on 4 February 2020.
2. Abdullah Zaik. Chairman of Aman Palestin Berhad and Amir of ISMA, Bangi, Selangor. Interview on 11 October 2017.
3. Ibid.
4. Dr. Hafidzi Mohd Noor. Chairman of Humanitarian Care Malaysia (MyCare), Serdang, Selangor. Interview on 6 June 2018.
5. Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur. Interview on 4 October 2017.
6. Dato Seri Abdul Hadi Awang. President of PAS, Selangor. Interview on 16 October 2017.
7. Dato Ku Jafar Ku Shaari. D8 Secretary General and former Malaysian diplomat, and ambassador of Malaysia to Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine, Kuala Lumpur. Interview on 2 October 2017.
8. Abdullah Zaik. Interview.
9. Dr. Hafidzi Mohd Noor. Interview.
10. Azmi Abdul Hamid. President of MAPIM, Kuala Lumpur. Interview on 27 March 2018.
11. Dr. Zulaiha Ismail. Trustee of Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF), Kuala Lumpur. Interview on 27 September 2017.
12. Senator Liew Chin Tong. Deputy Defence Minister (2018–2020) and senior DAP leader, Kuala Lumpur. Interview on 3 November 2020.
13. Dr. Mohsen Saleh. Director of Alzaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations, Istanbul, Turkey. Interview on 4 February 2018.
14. Dr. Abdullah Waleed. Interview.
15. Faiz Mohd Naw. Former Secretary of PAS International Relations Committee. Interview on 1 January 2018.
16. Dato Seri Abdul Hadi Awang. Interview.
17. Faiz Mohd Naw. Interview.
18. Dr. Abdullah Waleed. Interview.
19. Hafizah Abu Bakar. Head of UMNO's Protocol Department. Interview on 20 January 2020.
20. Dr. Fauziah Mohd Hasan. Advisor of Rose2Rose, Serdang, Selangor. Interview on 20 October 2017.

21. Dr. Hafidzi Mohd Noor. Interview.
22. Dr. Abdullah Waleed. Interview.
23. Dr. Mohsen Saleh. Interview.
24. Dr. Ahmad Atawneh. Director of Vision Center, Istanbul, Turkey. Interview on 27 October 2017.
25. Dr. Mohsen Saleh. Interview.
26. Ibid.
27. Osama Hamdan. Senior Hamas leader and Head of International Relations, Kuala Lumpur. Interview on 20 August 2018.
28. Dr. Ahmad Atawneh. Interview.
29. Osama Hamdan. Interview.
30. Dr. Ahmad Atawneh. Interview.
31. Dr. Mohsen Saleh. Interview.
32. Dr. Ahmad Atawneh. Interview.
33. Dr. Abdullah Waleed. Interview.
34. Dr. Mohsen Saleh. Interview.
35. Ashwad Ismail. Astro Awani TV anchor and Freedom Flotilla 2010 participant, Kuala Lumpur. Interview on 15 November 2017.
36. Dr. Fauziah Mohd Hasan. Interview.
37. Dr. Hafidzi Mohd Noor. Interview.
38. Professor Dr. Nazari Ismail. Chairman of BDS Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. Interview on 25 July 2018.
39. Dr. Mohamad Makram Balawi. Director of Parliamentarians for Jerusalem and founding Chief Executive Officer of Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM), Istanbul. Interview in February 2022.
40. Ibid.
41. Dr. Ahmad Atawneh. Interview.
42. Dr. Mohamad Makram Balawi. Interview.
43. Dr. Mohsen Saleh. Interview.
44. Dr. Mohamad Makram Balawi. Interview.
45. Professor Dr. Nazari Ismail. Interview.
46. Dr. Mohamad Makram Balawi. Interview.
47. Dr. Hafidzi Mohd Noor. Interview.
48. Dr. Abdullah Waleed. Interview.

49. Dr. Fauziah Mohd Hasan. Interview.
50. Dr. Mohamad Makram Balawi. Interview.
51. Osama Hamdan. Interview.
52. Dr. Abdullah Waleed. Interview.
53. Osama Hamdan. Interview.
54. Dato Ku Jafar Ku Shaari. Interview.
55. Dr. Fauziah Mohd Hasan. Interview.
56. Ibid.
57. Dato Dr. Nasharudin Mat Isa. Former PAS deputy president, former Global Movement of the Moderates Foundation (GMMF) CEO, and chairman of the board of directors of Yayasan al-Quds Malaysia (QFM), Putrajaya. Interview on 26 September 2017.
58. Dato Seri Abdul Hadi Awang. Interview.
59. Dr. Zulaiha Ismail. Interview.
60. Ibid.
61. Dr. Mohsen Saleh. Interview.
62. Dr. Ziyad Shehadah. Head of Palestinian Community Affairs in the Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM) 2015–2020 and CEO of MyCare Gaza office since December 2020. Interview on 3 November 2020.
63. Dr. Abdullah Waleed. Interview.

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