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THE ORIGINS AND EMERGENCE OF MALAYSIA'S PALESTINE-ORIENTED NGOS (PONGOS)

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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 organizations (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 endeavors to illuminate the genesis of an expanding collective of Malaysian NGOs, which actively contribute to the formulation of Malaysia's foreign policy pertaining to Palestine—referred to herein as Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs). Drawing upon a diverse array of primary sources, including interviews and official documents, and anchored in a robust theoretical framework addressing the emergence of NGOs, this qualitative empirical inquiry establishes a pioneering analysis of the inception of Malaysian PONGOs. Employing a thematic analysis methodology, this study harnesses theories of NGO genesis in conjunction with concepts pertaining 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 stratum, this investigation delves into and endeavors to gauge the roles played by

several socio-political and socio-economic determinants, the reverberations of public sentiment, as well as the intricate interplay of various factions within the realm of political Islam. Concurrently, at 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 Palestinian NGOs, 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 Palestine-oriented NGOs is poised for sustained expansion in the forthcoming years.

Keywords: Palestine-Oriented NGOs (PONGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 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 organizations (NGOs) emphasizing the Palestinian issue. In conjunction with these specialized entities, several established Malaysian NGOs expanded their advocacy to encompass the Palestinian issue on both domestic and international fronts. The cumulative efforts of these organizations significantly influenced Malaysia's diplomatic stance towards Palestine. Their endeavors ranged from heightening public consciousness about the Palestinian situation and mobilizing financial support to facilitating dialogues and shaping policy perspectives. Moreover, their direct involvement in policy formulation and execution underscored the prioritization of the Palestinian issue in Malaysia's foreign policy agenda. This cohort included a diverse array of

organizations 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 specialized subset of NGOs, exclusively concentrating on the Palestinian narrative, termed Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs). Table 1 delineates these active Malaysian PONGOs, systematically categorized 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 Organization 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
Humanitarian Relief PONGOs	Aman Palestin	2004
	Aqsa Syarif (later MyCare)	2009 (2014)
	Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM)	2010
	Cakna Palestin	2008
	Cinta Gaza Malaysia (CGM)	2014
Palestine Advocacy Networks	LifeLine4Gaza	2009
	Global March to Jerusalem (MyGMJ)	2012
	Save Al-Quds Campaign	2014
	MyAqsa Defenders	2021
	Aid4Palestine	2021

THEORY

The evolution of Palestine-oriented NGOs 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, notable scholars in NGO studies, describe NGOs as entities with distinct origins and sometimes, endings. They emphasize the importance of examining an NGO's genesis to understand its political influence (Ahmed and Potter 2006).

Ahmad and Potter, drawing from theories on interest group formation, propose three explanations for NGO emergence: an entrepreneurial model, growth from pre-existing groups, and what Tarrow terms as "franchising" (Ahmed and Potter 2006; Tarrow 2011). 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 1998; 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's 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 Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs).

DOMESTIC FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE EMERGENCE OF PONGOS

Exploring the swift rise of Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) in Malaysia requires understanding both domestic and external factors. A careful observation of the domestic environment in Malaysia since the time the first Palestine-oriented NGO emerged points to the following domestic factors:

Emerging sociopolitical and socioeconomic trends in the post-Mahathir Malaysia.

In the post-Mahathir era, Malaysia experienced significant sociopolitical and socioeconomic shifts. These included a move towards democratization impacting civil society, enhanced citizen welfare influencing political participation, and the information technology boom marked by widespread internet use and alternative media emergence. Such changes catalysed the rapid growth of Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs).

Some scholars noted that the post-Mahathir years in Malaysia witnessed a move towards democratization, leading to a significant growth in Malaysian civil society (Welsh 2013). While the Malaysian constitution emphasizes democratic ideals, there is debate among scholars about its actual democratic nature. William Case viewed Malaysia as “semi-democratic,” highlighting governmental restrictions on societal organization (Case 1993). Alternatively, Gordon Means labelled it “soft authoritarianism,” and Zakaria Haji Ahmad termed it a “quasi democracy” (Means 1996; Ahmad 1989). Civil society faced challenges due to the Barisan Nasional regime's prolonged dominance, painting a picture of Malaysia 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 Alatas 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 (Alatas 2003). The rise of Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) from 2004, often supported by the Malaysian government, contrasts with the scrutiny domestic human rights and electoral reform groups faced (Waleed 2021).

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 democratization 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 (Bridget 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 (Abdullah Zaik 2017). Sidney Tarrow's concept of "political opportunity structure" aligns with the rise of PONGOs in the post-Mahathir years. Tarrow emphasized certain signals that influence social movement formation, such as access to power and elite divisions (Tarrow, 1996). Many Islamic mass organizations, reading these signals, formed Palestine-oriented NGOs, like Aman Palestin and Aqsa Syarif (Zaik 2017; Mohd Noor 2017).

The subsequent pivotal change in Malaysia's socioeconomic landscape was the marked enhancement in citizens' well-being, stemming from decades of modernization and late 20th-century industrialization. This economic progress profoundly impacted the mindsets of urban Malaysians. Lester Salamon highlights the link between global economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s and the surge in

NGOs, a trend mirrored in Malaysia (Salamon 1994). Ahmad and Potter encapsulate this shift, noting that growing affluence led to a transition in values towards social equity, quality of life, and citizen empowerment (Ahmed and Potter 2006).

Post-Mahathir Malaysia saw the fruition of industrialization and modernization, transforming citizens' lifestyles. The country's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita soared from the early 1970s, with notable leaps in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (MacroTrends 2024). This economic growth influenced peoples' attitudes as it led to a 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 (Mohamad 2017; Awang 2017; Ku Shaari 2017). 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, characterized 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 emails, mobile communication, and social media, empowered like-minded Malaysians—individuals and institutions—to unite, cooperate, advocate, and share insights on various subjects, including the Palestine issue (Zaik 2017; Mohd Noor 2017; Abdul Hamid 2018; Z. Ismail 2017).

Competition between rivalling political parties and groups.

Since its independence, Malaysia has embraced a multi-ethnic, 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 from independence until 2018, was pivotal in sculpting the country's political direction in concert with other political entities (Welsh 2016). Notably, post-2005, UMNO's ideological shift from a center-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" (Liew 2020).

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 a former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, proposed a progressive vision beyond the New Economic Policy (NEP).

During Najib's second term (2013-2018), there was a noticeable rise in Malay nationalism. With challenges such as 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, pushing him further to adopt 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 (Haji Ahmad 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. Dominik Muller elaborates on this, noting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict's adaptation to a specifically Malaysian context under the influence of PAS. This intertwining of domestic politics and international advocacy is evident in how civil society groups, shaped by their political leanings, approach Palestine. Discontent with governmental stances, some pro-opposition groups established Palestine-oriented NGOs to independently express their solidarity (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 (Saleh 2018). 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 (PR) firm behind the "1Malaysia" campaign had Israeli ties (Lee 2010). This claim persisted despite denials. Another retaliatory strategy saw the Pakatan Rakyat supporting Palestine-

oriented humanitarian groups, with Anwar backing various Gaza projects in 2012 (Waleed 2021).

The dynamics between political factions in Malaysia have directly influenced the rise of Palestine-oriented NGOs. This is seen when Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) established a "Palestine NGOs Secretariat" in 2013, streamlining Palestine advocacy among its members and affiliates (Mohamad Nawawi 2018). 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 aforementioned secretariat. This instance underscores the significant influence of inter-party competition on Malaysia's Palestine-oriented NGO 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 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 guiding the nation's trajectory, it's imperative to study its rendition 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 Joseph Chinyong Liow, John Funston, and Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, pinpointed an “Islamist turn” in UMNO starting in the Mahathir years (Liow 2009; Funston 2016; Abdul Hamid 2018). While UMNO maintains its foundational nationalist ideas, Mahathir's 1980s Islamization 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 Islamization, 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 Islamization 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 (Awang 2017). 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 publicized cordial relations between UMNO and Hamas in 2012, PAS and its associated NGOs essentially acted as an alternative diplomatic channel for Hamas in Malaysia (Mohd Nawi 2017).

The emergence of numerous Islamic NGOs post-Mahathir 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 Lepasn Institusi Pendidikan Malaysia* (HALUAN), and *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* (ISMA). Recognizing 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 (Waleed 2021). In 2010, Najib welcomed senior leaders from several Islamic parties attending the Islamic Parliamentarian 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 (Waleed 2021; Abu Bakar 2018).

UMNO's growing Islamist identity encouraged its leaders to try to co-opt or engage local Islamic mass organizations 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 Palestine-oriented NGOs. For instance, an Islamic group like IKRAM formed its own affiliated Palestine-oriented NGO, Aqsa Syarif which preferred to operate away from state control, although it accommodated government leaders at times (Mohd Hasan 2017; Mohd Noor 2017). Meanwhile, other activists comfortable with government co-option established MyAqsa in 2017 as a new pro-government Palestine-oriented NGO.

While most of Malaysia's Islamist organizations like ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA share a lot of commonalities in terms of ideology, organizational structure, and operations, competition and rivalry between these groups exist. This rivalry translated into the creation of more Palestine-oriented NGOs. 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 in 2009 establish Malaysia's LifeLine4Gaza advocacy network (Waleed 2021). Yet another Islamist group, ABIM, mobilized in 2014 a wide coalition of pro-Palestine NGOs under the banner of "Save Al-Quds Campaign", turning the coalition into another active Palestine-oriented group.

Interestingly, most of these new groups grew to become major Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) who not only continue to operate independent of each other, but also hardly 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 PNGO, the other groups react by establishing theirs. Moreover, every time one of these Islamist-linked PONGOs organizes a major program or campaign, the other groups organize their own programs 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 (VPM), but never with Aman Palestin. Interestingly, at times, some misunderstandings emerged when different Malaysian delegates were hosted together by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyyeh. In one occasion, representatives of one 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 favorably 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 analyzed. 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 Palestine-oriented NGOs.

Frustrated by peace process failures and the Palestinian Authority's inability to achieve independence, a second Intifada erupted in 2000 (Saleh 2018; Atawneh 2018). 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 (Saleh 2018). Initially non-violent, Palestinian resistance transformed into armed revolt due to Israel's militarized 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 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 (Saleh 2018). 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, utilizing

alternative diplomatic channels, such as NGOs, to shape its international relations (Hamdan 2018).

Israeli military assaults on Gaza following Hamas's ascent fueled the growth of Palestine-oriented NGOs globally (Atawneh 2018; Hamdan 2018). Noteworthy was the Israeli military attack on Gaza, dubbed by Israel as "Operation Cast Lead", from December 28, 2008, to January 29, 2009, which resulted in an unprecedented scale of destruction and casualties (Atawneh 2018). Despite this, it failed to dismantle Hamas or its resistance capabilities, altering the dynamics of the Palestinian struggle and the Palestinian political system (Saleh 2018; Atawneh 2018). Ongoing Israeli blockade and successive military operations in Gaza exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, drawing international attention and active involvement from humanitarian NGOs (Waleed 2021).

Growing frustration with Israeli Judaization 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 (Saleh, 2018). 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 Palestinian developments. This technological revolution facilitated greater awareness of the humanitarian crisis, prompting increased involvement in advocacy and relief efforts (A. Ismail 2017).

Growing Malaysian awareness of the Palestinian issue spurred increased involvement by advocacy and relief NGOs championing the Palestinian struggle (Hasan 2017). 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 Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) in Malaysia. Aqsa Syarif, Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM), Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM), and Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM) emerged immediately after these significant events (Mohd Noor 2017).

The Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS Malaysia), a prominent Malaysian Palestine-oriented NGO, arose after the 2014 Israeli military attack on Gaza (N. Ismail 2017). 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 (Balawi 2022). Additionally, the MyAqsa Defenders advocacy network emerged right after the May 2021 Israeli attack on Gaza (MyAqsa Defenders 2022). In response to

new political realities in Palestine, Malaysian civil society mobilized resources, leading to the establishment of new Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs).

The growing influence of Palestinian NGOs and Palestine-oriented Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) and their impact on the growth of Malaysian Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs).

Palestinian NGOs and transnational advocacy networks significantly influenced the growth of Malaysian Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) (Balawi, 2022). Seeking to establish what Sidney Tarrow terms "franchises," large Palestinian NGOs and advocacy networks engaged with Malaysian civil society groups. Tarrow defines franchises as a means for a small national umbrella organization to coordinate broad activities without the resource-intensive structures of a large mass organization (Tarrow 2011). 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 (Atawneh 2018). 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 main Palestinian NGOs and pro-Palestine Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) to establish Malaysian "franchises" (Balawi 2022).

Founded in January 2001 in Beirut, Al-Quds International Institution (QII) aimed to 'save Jerusalem, preserve its Arab identity, and protect its Islamic and Christian sanctuaries' (Saleh 2018). With the mission of 'uniting the Ummah's diverse streams to support Jerusalem,' QII established a Malaysian branch, Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM), in 2010 (Balawi 2022).

Inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement, Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS), established in 2005, responded to the "Palestinian Call for BDS against Israel" initiated in July 2005 by over 170 Palestinian organizations (Palestinian BDS National Committee, 2022). Post-2005, BDS campaign efforts intensified, leading to the inaugural Palestinian BDS Conference in November 2007 (Palestinian BDS National Committee, 2022). 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 (N. Ismail 2018).

The Malaysian chapter of the Global March to Jerusalem (GMJ), a franchise of larger pro-Palestine Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) also emerged in the same period (Balawi 2022). GMJ mobilized thousands of Palestinians as well as hundreds of pro-Palestine activists towards Israel's borders on "Palestine Land Day" on March 30, 2012. The Malaysian chapter which organized 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 (Mohd Noor 2017).

Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM), another significant Malaysian Palestine-oriented NGO, 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 like the Global Coalition for Al-Quds and Palestine, founded by Palestinian activists in Syria in the diaspora, influenced the creation of other Palestine-oriented NGOs in Malaysia (Waleed 2021). The Global Coalition's frequent visits and lobbying efforts in Malaysia contributed to the establishment of NGOs like Aqsa Syarif in February 2010, Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia (QFM) in December 2010, and the Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM) in February 2011 (Hasan 2017; Balawi 2022).

This brief survey indicates that various Palestinian and Palestine-oriented NGOs and TANs had a significant direct impact on the emergence, rise, and proliferation of Malaysian Palestine-oriented NGOs (PONGOs) in the past two decades. These "mother organizations" 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 facilitated 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 (Hamdan 2018). 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 recognized that regular interactions with Hamas enhanced their domestic popularity, especially among Malay-Muslim constituencies (Waleed 2021). Hamas, in turn, saw close ties with Malaysian political parties and NGOs as a means to overcome the international blockade (Hamdan 2018). This form of "guerrilla diplomacy" provided Hamas alternative diplomatic channels, bypassing traditional restrictions (Ku Shaari 2017). This relationship facilitated the emergence of Palestine-oriented NGOs like the Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (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 (GPM) established offices in Gaza to implement humanitarian projects and strengthen ties with Palestinian society. Numerous humanitarian missions organized by Malaysian NGOs, particularly PONGOs, prompted the establishment of Gaza offices, deepening their involvement in Palestinian relief efforts (Hasan 2017). 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 the Malaysian civil society to establish new types of NGOs supporting the Palestinian cause (Hasan 2017). These Palestine-oriented NGOs serve the purpose of advancing the Palestinian issue in Malaysia and beyond. The Malaysian government's positive reception of these NGOs suggests the success of these groups in establishing common interests and understandings between the Palestinian and Malaysian sides (Mat Isa 2017).

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 (Awang 2017). 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 (Z. Ismail 2017).

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

In the late 1970s, ABIM increased Palestinian-Malaysian interactions by hosting Palestinian visitors and engaging with activists globally (Hairi and Ahmad 2020). During the 1980s, Malaysian doctors and activists provided humanitarian aid by visiting Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon (Z. Ismail 2017). In the 1990s, more Palestinians visited Malaysia, especially for education. Malaysian universities welcomed Palestinian students and academicians, with numerous Palestinians studying or working in institutions like the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) by the late 1990s (Saleh 2018).

By the early 2000s, Palestinian visits to Malaysia surged. Many received scholarships from Malaysian universities and charities like 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 (Shehadah 2020). The influx of Palestinians into Malaysia continued until the coming of COVID19 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 socio-cultural exchange directly fueled the growth of Palestine-oriented NGOs (Waleed 2021).

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