

Under the leadership of Dr. Mahathir, Malaysia's pro-Palestinian attitude became even more vocal and positive than that adopted by his predecessors. In spite of the challenge of Islamic revivalism, Dr. Mahathir's era witnessed increasing awareness among various civil society groups³¹ of Islamic issues, thus motivated his government to be more assertive towards them. Hence, in analyzing the role of the Malaysian government towards the Palestinian issue in the 1980's, one would not fail to note the increasing competition and collaboration between it and the civil society groups in Malaysia.

Shortly after assuming office, in October 1981, Dr. Mahathir decided to upgrade the PLO representation in the country to full diplomatic status. Malaysia was thus the only country in the Southeast Asia region, and the second country in the world, to do so.³² The Foreign Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, in his statement on the occasion of Al-Aqsa Day, in August 21, 1981, pledged Malaysian support for the cause of the Palestinians by saying, "Malaysia will continue to call on the International community to pressure Israel to withdraw from all Arab territories, including Holy Bait Al-Maqdis, until the rights of the Palestinian people to a sovereign state in their homeland is recognized and fulfilled"³³ He also proudly referred to the recent decision to upgrade the status of the PLO representation in Malaysia by saying:

"It gives a great pleasure for me to announce that, consistent with our policy on the Palestinian question and our desire to further strengthen relation with the PLO,

31. In totalitarian context, civil society naturally defines itself in opposition to the state. It takes its meaning from being not of the state. In Malaysia, each ethnic group is not monolithic. There are internal divisions that are expressed in institutional form, i.e., through political parties. For instance, PAS, the main rival for the ruling Malay party UMNO, claims to be more Islamic than the latter. Other opposition parties like PRM and Semangat 46 also posed great challenge to UMNO in winning over the Malay-Muslim voters. Beside the oppositional Malay-Muslim political parties, *da'wah* movement or Malay-Muslim Non-Governmental Organization (NGO's) and Government-Oriented NGO's (GONGO's) mainly ABIM and PERKIM has also become a great challenge to UMNO's Islamic credentials. For details on the concept of civil society in Malaysia, see, Nor Azizan Idris, "A Historical Analysis on the Competitive Role of State and Civil Society Groups towards the Palestinian Issue", paper presented at the 16th Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, 27-31 July 2000.

32. See, *Islamic Herald*, vol. 5, no. 7&8, 1981, p. 41 and Chin Kin Wah, "New Assertiveness in Malaysia Foreign Policy", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1982, p.28.

33. *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, vol. 14, September 1981, p.271.

the government has decided to extend full diplomatic status to the office and the representative of the PLO in Kuala Lumpur, as accorded to other resident diplomatic missions here."³⁴

The increasing role of the Malaysian government on the Palestinian issue could be clearly noted throughout the 1980's. Apart from its annual contribution of US\$5,000 (in 1981) to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Malaysian government contributed MR\$100,000 in 1982 to the camps' dwellers, following the Israel invasion of Lebanon (Nair, Shanti 1997: 207). Humanitarian aid came in other forms like medical assistance, scholarships for Palestinian students at Malaysian Universities and occupational training centers.³⁵

Another most recent disturbing challenge to the *Ummah* was the costly and long war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988) that may be regarded as one of the most tragic events in Islamic history. It resulted in heavy casualties in terms of human life and financial costs, and to a certain degree, threatened both the Middle East and world stability. The Malaysian government strongly believed in a political solution to the Iran-Iraq conflict, and the issue to her was purely political.³⁶

Deputy Premier, Datuk Musa, assured that Malaysia, being a non-Arab country which is not located in the area or conflict, and as a member of the OIC, would offer to undertake serious and long term efforts to find peace in the area of conflict. He commented on the stand of his government on the conflict as follows: "Considering that Malaysia maintains close relations with both Iran and Iraq, we would like to offer ourselves to find a solution to the conflict without appearing to take sides with either side".³⁷

It is also interesting to note that awareness of the Palestinian issue had widely spread throughout the 1980's among the Malaysian public. It was largely spearheaded by the government itself, the Malaysian dailies, and the non-governmental movement such as ABIM and PERKIM.

34. *Ibid.*

35. See, *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, vol. 17, no. 3 (September 1984), pp. 24-25. During Yasser Arafat's visit to Malaysia in 1984, a joint-communiqué was issued which mentioned Malaysia's offer of training and scholarship.

36. *Islamic Herald*, vol.6, no. 9 &10, 1982, p.42.

37. *Ibid.*