

Palestinian issue, had become even more pronounced and assertive with his co-option of Anwar Ibrahim, the former President of ABIM, into the government in 1982. Another factor for this commitment to Islam as a policy tool, is to maintain socio-political and religious stability amidst the challenge of *da'wah* movements resulting from the global Islamic resurgence since the late 1970's. The Iranian revolution, which took place at the close of 1979, posed a serious challenge to many 'secular-oriented' Muslim governments including Malaysia. Being fully aware of the power and influence of this movement, the government decided not to leave it to the manipulation or exploitation of the opposition Islamic parties. Since curtailment was expected at any rate to be injurious to the government reputation, it was thus persuaded, if not compelled, to respond to Islamic demands, especially to review its domestic Islamic policies, and its image within the Islamic world. 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 groups⁵¹ on Islamic issues, thus motivated his

⁵¹ 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*

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 Asian region, and the second country in the world, to do so.⁵²

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 the Holy Bait Al-Maqdis, until the rights of the Palestinian people to a sovereign state in their homeland is recognized and fulfilled."⁵³ He also proudly referred to the recent decision to upgrade the status of the PLO

movement or Malay-Muslim Non-Governmental Organization (NGO's) and Government-Oriented NGO's (GONGO's) mainly ABIM and PERKIM have also become a great challenge to UMNO's Islamic credentials. For details on the concept of civil society in Malaysia, see, NorAzizan 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.

⁵² See, *Islamic Herald*, vol. 5, no. 7&8, 1981, p. 41 and Chin Kin Wah, "New Assertiveness in Malaysia's Foreign Policy", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1982, p.28.

⁵³ *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, vol. 14, September 1981, p.271.