



MALAYSIA AND THE HAMAS CONNECTION

Dr. Shaul Shay (Research Fellow, ICT)

September 2014

ABSTRACT

Malaysia's government has long been at odds with Israel. Support for the Palestinian cause runs deep in Malaysian society. 12 Malaysian members were on board the Mavi Marmara. After Operation "Pillar of Defense" in Gaza, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mohamad Najib Abdul Razak, arrived in Gaza and met with Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, and members of the Izadin Al Qassam Brigades.

Hamas suspects revealed to interrogators that members of a Hamas cell trained in Malaysia intended to carry out a cross-border attack using a powered parachute. In addition, Malaysia was one of the main supporters of Hamas in the recent conflict with Israel (Operation "Protective Edge").

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

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Islam has been at the forefront of Malaysian foreign policy since the 1960s, when it was used to foster Malaysian identity and counter the threat of Communism in the early days after independence.

Malaysia's government has long been at odds with Israel. Mahathir Mohamad, who served as Malaysia's Prime Minister for 22 years, constantly criticized Israel and its policies against the Palestinians. In the inaugural speech given by Mahatir Muhammad to the Islamic conference that convened in his country in 2003, Mahatir made the following statements: "The Europeans killed six million Jews out of twelve million, but today the Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them. 1.3 billion Muslims cannot be defeated by a few million Jews."¹

Mahatir's anti-Semitic remarks were applauded by the representatives of the 57 Islamic countries in the auditorium, and many of the participants expressed solidarity with his remarks. Mahatir's outburst should not have surprised the global community, since he had a long record of making statements in a similar vein.

Support for the Palestinian cause runs deep in Malaysian society. Malaysian NGOs like Viva Palestina Malaysia, Aman Palestin, Aqsa Syarif and Lifeline4Gaza are very active in advocating the Palestinian cause and have been conducting awareness campaigns intensively throughout the years, focusing on humanitarian aid.

Over the years, Malaysia has provided assistance to many foreigners through the *Malaysia My Second Home* Program (MMSHP), and people from Middle East countries, including Palestinians, came to Malaysia for purposes of education, business and medical tourism as well as tourism in general. It has been cited by the local media that certain universities in Malaysia served as breeding grounds for extremist and terrorist operatives.

Malaysia's "goodwill approach", however, has been compromised by radical and extremist groups as well as by terrorist operatives who have used it" to their advantage in order to establish terrorist bases within the country.

Malaysia and Hamas

The "Free Gaza Flotilla I"

Lifeline4Gaza (or, in Malay, "Talian Hayat Untuk Gaza") was a collaborative effort between Malaysian NGOs to join an international campaign to support Hamas's effort to break years of the Israeli siege on

¹ The Star, October 16, 2003; The Straits Times, October 16, 2003.

Gaza. Lifeline4Gaza joined the "Free Gaza Flotilla I", which was orchestrated by a coalition of six organizations, including the Free Gaza Movement, **IHH**, the European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza (ECESG), the International Committee to End the Siege on Gaza, the Greek Ship to Gaza Campaign and the Swedish Ship to Gaza.

The flotilla was originally composed of eight ships but only six managed to gather on May 30, 2010 in international waters far south of the island of Cyprus and west of Israel. In the case of Lifeline4Gaza, **12 Malaysian members were on board the Mavi Marmara.**

Despite the raid on the Mavi Marmara, which killed nine Turkish activists and injured 50 others, all 12 Malaysians on board were arrested and later released by Israel on June 2, 2010, and safely transferred to Jordan.

In June 2010, Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak, said regarding Israel's interception of the Gaza Flotilla:

"The Israeli commandos shot the activists point blank and even from the back, and this is an act of a coward that cannot be forgiven. These blatant acts occurred because the world gangsters, Israel, feel they are protected by a world power."

Operation "Pillar of Defense"

On January 22, 2013, following Operation "Pillar of Defense" in Gaza, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mohamad Najib Abdul Razak, arrived in Gaza via the Rafah crossing with his Foreign Minister, Anifah Aman, and other officials for a short visit. Razak met with members of Parliament and with Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh. Razak also met with members of the Izadin Al Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military wing.²

Haniyeh lauded Malaysia for the diplomatic visit. "Malaysia is an Islamic state with a great civilization," said Haniyeh at a press conference according to state-owned MENA, "Malaysia embodies the story of remarkable prosperity and growth and supports the Palestinian right to liberation."

Razak said that his visit to the Gaza Strip was an expression of solidarity with the Palestinian people against Israeli aggression. He also advocated an accelerated path to a united Palestinian government between the West Bank and Gaza. The two sides also affirmed a new chapter in relations between Palestine and Malaysia.

Najib's visit drew criticism from the office of President Mahmoud Abbas, who released a statement saying the Palestinian Authority "announces its rejection and condemnation of the Malaysian prime minister's visit to Gaza. It undermines Palestinian representation and reinforces the division and does

² Basil El Dabah, Malaysian prime minister visits Gaza, Daily News Egypt, January 22, 2013.

not serve Palestinian interests" further adding that Abbas's bureau would ask Kuala Lumpur "for clarification."

Hamas – Malaysia Relations (2013 – 2014)

On December 1, 2013, a Hamas delegation led by the head of Hamas's political bureau, Khaled Mashaal, arrived in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur. Hamas sources said that Mashaal met with the Malaysian President and the head of the ruling United Malays National Organization political party, as well as with other officials. This was the first official visit of Hamas representatives to Malaysia.³

In 2013, the Malaysian government donated \$6.4 million for construction projects in the Gaza Strip. The Secretary-General of the Hamas-run cabinet, Abdul-Salam Siyam, said that a delegation from Gaza visited Malaysia and signed an agreement with the government. According to Siyam, \$4 million would be allocated for the construction of a Malaysian technical school in Gaza City, \$1 million would be allocated for the construction of administrative offices for Hamas' cabinet, \$700,000 would be allocated for the addition of a new floor to a Gaza City hospital, and a similar amount would be allocated for the rebuilding of a mosque destroyed during Israeli attacks.⁴

On June 22, 2014 Khaled Mashaal phoned Malaysian Premier Razak and briefed him on the latest developments in the Palestinian arena. Mashaal highlighted Israel's mass arrest campaign in the West Bank (after the abduction of three Israeli boys in the West Bank), the blockade on the Gaza Strip and the suffering of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Mashaal criticized the double standard of the international community and the UN when it comes to Israel's violations against the Palestinian people. He urged the Malaysian premier to move diplomatically at the international level to curb Israel's violence against the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and pressure it to release the hunger striking administrative detainees. A telephone conversation also took place between Mashaal and the Malaysian Minister of Interior, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.⁵

Malaysia not only generously donated to Hamas, but it also permitted the training of Hamas militants in the country.

Training of Hamas Militants in Malaysia

Hamas suspects revealed to interrogators that members of a Hamas cell trained in Malaysia intended to carry out a cross-border attack using a powered parachute.. On July 21, 2014 the IDF arrested a Hamas cell commander in Khan Yunis who was a part of the group's regional battalion.⁶

³ Ma'an News Agency, December 1, 2013.

⁴ Malaysia donates \$6.4 million for Gaza construction projects, Ma'an, March 5, 2013.

⁵ Mashaal phones Malaysian premier Mohamed Abdul Razak, AhlulBayt News Agency, June 22, 2014.

⁶ Yaakov Lappin, Hamas terrorists trained in Malaysia for parachute attack, Shin Bet says, Jerusalem Post, July 30, 2014.

The suspect told Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) officers in Gaza that he joined Hamas in 2007 and became a part of its military wing, the Izadin Al Qassam Brigades. The suspect traveled to Malaysia in 2012, where he and nine other Hamas members learned in a week-long military-style exercise how to fly a powered parachute. The cell members underwent repeated training sessions on how to fly into Israel and carry out attacks, and were ordered by their Hamas commanders to keep their training top secret.⁷

Home Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, has dismissed Israel's claims that Malaysia is serving as a training ground for Hamas fighters in Palestine. He said that Malaysia supported the Palestinian struggle from a moral and humanitarian standpoint and enjoyed diplomatic relations with the embattled nation's leaders, a fact that may have irked Israel.

"To date, we enjoy a diplomatic, trade and cultural relationship with the state of Palestine and are strong supporters of the humanitarian struggle there."⁸

The Israeli security agency, Shin Bet, is merely attempting to devise propaganda to tarnish Malaysia's image with baseless accusations," he said. He challenged the Israeli authorities to provide proof of the allegations, which surfaced following the international community's condemnation of the atrocities committed by the Zionist regime in Gaza.

Malaysia's Deputy Home Affairs Minister, Wan Junaidi Jaafar, denied that his country had ever allowed Hamas fighters to train on its soil. The statement came a day after the Israeli Shin Bet said that it had apprehended a highly trained operative from Hamas who claimed to have taken part in powered parachute training in Malaysia.⁹

"It does not matter what kind of freedom-fighting group they belong to, even those against Israel, we have never given permission to have such training here," Jaafar told local Malaysian media, according to the Bangkok Post. Jaafar added that although his country backs the Palestinians' national ambitions, "the report is incorrect."¹⁰

The Hamas Terrorist Network in the West Bank – Targeting the PA and Israel

In May 2014, Israel arrested 93 Hamas militants in the West Bank on suspicion of setting up a network of cells to commit attacks against Israel and to carry out a coup of the Palestinian Authority. The cells in the West Bank and Jerusalem planned to destabilize the region through a series of deadly terrorist attacks in Israel and then topple the Fatah-ruled Palestinian Authority. The Turkey-based Hamas overseas

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Akil Yunus, Zahid: Israel out to tarnish image with 'Malaysia training Hamas' accusation, The Star Online, August 1, 2014.

⁹ Adiv Sterman, Malaysia denies it trained Hamas operatives, The Times of Israel, July 31, 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid.

headquarters orchestrated the plot, which centered on a string of mass casualty terrorist attacks against Israeli targets. The end goal was to destabilize the Palestinian territories and use the instability to carry out a military coup, overthrowing the government of PA President Mahmoud Abbas. According to sources, Khaled Mashaal, Hamas's overseas wing leader in Qatar, was aware of the plot although there was no involvement from Hamas in Gaza.

As a result of the arrests and interrogations, the Shin Bet, Israel Police and Israel Defense Forces seized approximately 600,000 shekels (\$171,000); 24 rifles, mostly M-16s; six pistols; seven rocket launchers; and a large quantity of ammunition. Defense sources estimated the cost of the arms and ammunition at several million shekels.¹¹

One of the key members of the terrorist network is Dr. Majdi Mafarja, a resident of Beit Likiya with a doctorate in computer science specializing in encryption and cyber warfare. **Hamas sent Mafarja to Malaysia**, where he trained in message encryption and computer hacking. Security sources described Mafarja as representative of "a new generation of Hamas members," adding that he is "highly intelligent" and fluent in computer programming. According to the Shin Bet, he was arrested on May 22, 2014, and admitted during interrogation that he had served as courier for apparently encoded messages for the military wing of Hamas.

Malaysia and Operation “Protective Edge”

On July 15, 2014 Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak, reaffirmed Malaysia’s support for Hamas. In a phone call to Hamas Chairman, Khaled Mashaal, Najib expressed his sympathy for the Palestinians "especially those facing brutal Israeli aggression in Gaza currently". The Palestinian Cultural Organization of Malaysia (PCOM) said that Mashaal, for his part, highlighted the suffering of the Palestinian people in Gaza and other parts of Palestine. It said that he called on the Malaysian premier to lobby world leaders to end the Israeli aggression and bring Israel to task. Mashaal also thanked Najib Razak for Malaysia’s active humanitarian role in Gaza and called for these efforts to increase and continue.¹²

The government of Malaysia decided to send a humanitarian mission to Gaza. Prime Minister Najib Razak said that Malaysia would send a humanitarian mission with medical experts and orthopedic surgeons. "Malaysia strongly condemns the attacks in Gaza and I have relayed the sympathy felt by Malaysians to the lives lost through the deadly attacks. We hope the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) will hold diplomatic discussions to find a solution. What the Zionists are doing is unacceptable. They need to stop before more innocent lives are killed. I spoke to

¹¹ Gil Cohen, Israel arrested 93 Hamas men in West Bank over terror network targeting PA, Israel, Haaretz, August 18, 2014.

¹² ‘We stand by Palestine against Israeli aggression’, The Rakyat Post, July 15, 2014.

Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal last night and conveyed Malaysia's stance on the Israeli attacks," Najib Razak said at his official residence at Seri Perdana.¹³

The President of Malay rights group, Perkasa, Datuk Ibrahim Ali, called on Muslim countries all over the world to combine forces and attack the "crazy Zionists" in Israel. "Those who can do something are leaders of Muslim nations, like all the kings, Presidents and Prime Ministers. The numbers are huge. Assemble all the strength and together with OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation), attack the cruel Israeli Zionists," he said in a statement. "Put together all your armies and weapons from Muslim countries and just attack the crazy Zionists and pray to Allah." He added that Allah was testing the leaders of Muslim countries and not just the suffering Palestinians.¹⁴

Malaysian Anti-Israel Campaigns

The recent escalation in Gaza intensified Palestinian solidarity activism in Malaysia. The popular boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against companies or international franchises that profit from business with Israel is hugely popular in Malaysia, especially among its majority Muslim citizens. Activists have gone to great lengths to scrutinize any business deals that might involve Israeli companies. The latest high-profile call is to boycott Malaysia's largest television service provider, Astro, which allegedly concluded a business deal with Amdocs, an Israeli software and service provider.

Malaysian activists and NGOs are lambasting other multinational companies and franchises that have their footholds in Malaysia, like McDonalds and Tesco, for their alleged business relations with Israeli government. The corporations, in turn, are working very hard to manage the negative public perceptions by downplaying the political dimension of their economic footprint in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. To this end, they have constantly highlighted their contribution to the social wellbeing of Malaysian consumers by providing job opportunities and economic growth for the country.

As violence continues in Gaza, Malaysian civil society activists are waging their own campaign to create more awareness about the BDS initiative. They are delivering a strong message to any company that has any ties with Israel, no matter how small and indirect they might be, that Malaysians will not support or tolerate Israel's aggressions against Palestinians.

In 2014, former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad called on Malaysians to extend help, even in a small way, to ease the pain of Palestinians who are under siege by the Israeli military. He said that the Perdana Global Peace Foundation had set up a fund, which could be accessed via the Internet, to enable the public to donate to the people of Gaza, Palestine. "To date, we've collected RM500,000 and we accept any amount, even RM1," he told reporters today after launching a book, "TPPA: Malaysia is not for Sale".

¹³ Malaysia to send mission to Gaza, New Strait Times Online, July 16, 2014.

¹⁴ Robert Spencer, Malaysia: Muslim leader says Muslims must unite to attack Israel, Jihad Watch, and July 27, 2014.

Dr. Mahathir, who also serves as the President of the Perdana Global Peace Foundation, said that the foundation would seek help from Palestine's neighbors to bring the aid, including money and medicines, to the Palestinians.¹⁵

Summary

Malaysia is one of the strongest economies in Southeast Asia, with a population of approximately 30 million people, and is considered to be an example of a country that has successfully managed to integrate Islamic law and democratic values. However, the country's Muslim majority – although it comprises only a little over 50% of the population – seems to exercise hostility toward many of the country's minorities, which could perhaps account for the fact that the country is infected with anti-Semitism even though there are hardly any Jews living there.

Ever since Malaysia's independence, and especially under the rule of Mahathir, there has been an effort to strengthen the economic, political and public status of Muslims in the country. From the 1970s onwards, a clear process of Islamic radicalization has been underway, and the Palestinian issue and subsequent anti-Semitic atmosphere have played a dominant role in that radicalization, which helps to explain the close relations between Malaysia and Hamas.

Malaysia has a consistent anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian foreign policy. Malaysia is the only country in the world whose citizens' passports clearly state that "this passport is valid for all countries except Israel." A statement on the Malaysian Foreign Ministry's Web site explains that "Malaysia would consider beginning relations with Israel only when a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian people is successfully concluded."¹⁶

Malaysia, Turkey and Qatar were the main supporters of Hamas in its war against Israel in July – August 2014. Malaysia is a strategic ally of the US in the war against terrorism (like Turkey and Qatar) but it publicly supports Hamas, a designated terrorist organization.

Malaysia has never suffered a terrorist attack on its soil. This success is mostly due to its hard work and cooperation with its neighbors and key partners, including the United States and Australia. However, the present challenge for Malaysia is whether it can keep pace with the changing terrorism threats originating from the Middle East that face Southeast Asia.

The emerging terrorist threat to Malaysia is a new generation of fighters returning home after participating in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. The Syrian government says that at least 30 Malaysians are fighting in Syria and reports that another 15 have been killed there. In Iraq, a Malaysian national drove a car bomb into a police station as part of an ISIS) attack, killing 25 Iraqi soldiers. These developments have renewed fear in Malaysia that veterans from these conflicts will bring home

¹⁵ Dr Mahathir urges Malaysians to donate to Palestinians, Bernama, July 11, 2014.

¹⁶ Wan Ahmad Fayhsal, Malaysia's Relationship With Israel Gets Frostier, Foreign Policy in Focus, August 21, 2014.

extremist ideology, skills, and experience, much as Southeast Asians fighting in Afghanistan in the 1990s returned home and joined the newly-formed Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf.¹⁷ Hamas is supporting the opposition forces to the Assad regime, including foreign fighters from Malaysia.

In contradiction to the Malaysian anti-Israeli foreign policy, official data published by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) tells of a booming, but very discreet, trade relationship that is blossoming between the two countries.

Supporting any type of radical Islamic organization including Hamas can be risky for Malaysia, which tries to maintain a fragile balance between Islam and modernity and democracy. Malaysia has to learn from the experience of other Muslim states, which found radical Islam to be a "double edge sword", and halt its assistance to Hamas and other radical Islamic terrorist organizations.

¹⁷ Nigel Cory, The Middle East and Malaysia: The Race to Adapt to Changing Terrorism Threats, CSIS Asia Program, August 7, 2014.