

Foreign Policy of Malaysia for Resolving Conflicts in the Middle East*

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Abstract

This paper looks at the foreign policy of Malaysia with regard to conflicts that have occurred or are occurring in the Middle East. It begins with explaining the relationships that Malaysia has with Middle Eastern countries. The paper looks at Malaysia's policy with regard to the struggle of the Palestinian people, the Arab Spring and the Saudi-Yemen conflict. The paper finds Malaysia's policy has been that of non-interference. Malaysia has not been successful in helping to resolve the conflicts, but its neutral policy allows it to have access to victims of the conflicts.

Malaysia has developed multi-dimensional relationships with Middle Eastern countries. The main factor for the relationships is religion. Malaysia is a Muslim majority State and the Middle East has been the centre of Islam and its studies. Malaysia has sent a large number of students, mostly to pursue Islamic studies, to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Morocco.

According to Nour Altala, Malaysia's policy with regard to the Middle East was extended to international politics during its crisis with Indonesia in 1963. In order to strengthen its position, Malaysia sought support from the Middle East¹.

All Prime Ministers of Malaysia, past and present, have visited Middle Eastern countries. Many leaders of Middle Eastern countries have visited Malaysia, including Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (1984, 2000, 2001 & 2012), Saudi King Faisal (1970), Saudi King Abdullah (2006), Saudi King Salman (2017), King Abdullah II of Jordan (2003 & 2008) and King of Bahrain (2017).

Malaysia's relationships with Middle Eastern countries are also developed through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Former Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, was appointed as the Secretary-General of the OIC. During the Iran-Iraq War

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¹ Nour Altala, "Malaysia and the Arab world – the past and the present", *New Straits Times*, 9 April 2017, <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2017/04/228631/malaysian-and-arab-worls-past-and-present>, accessed on 10 April 2017.

in 1980-1988, Malaysia was prepared to mediate the conflict and participated in the Islamic Peace Committee of the OIC².

Palestinian People

Since independence, Malaysia has been championing the cause of the Palestinian people and opposing the Israeli occupation of Arab lands. Malaysia has been voicing out its support for the restoration of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people in various international forums, including at the United Nations (UN), OIC, Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Malaysia's policy regarding the Palestinian people is in accordance with the principle of the right to self-determination of peoples, which is embodied in Article 1(2) of the UN Charter, and Common Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 and of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966.

Malaysia has consistently rendered assistance and contributions to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people, by channelling it via the UN and the OIC, through government-to-government channels, and through Malaysia's non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Malaysia has also been involved in several humanitarian projects in Gaza³.

The Arab Spring

When the Security Council (SC) adopted Resolution 1973 on 17 March 2011 to authorize military intervention in the Libyan Civil War, Malaysia (who was at that time not a member of the SC) disapproved the resolution. Malaysia argued that if the international community apply pressure only on the President of Libya and subsequently dissuade him from employing violence against the people, the conflict could be brought to a permanent resolution⁴.

However, when the General Assembly adopted Resolution GA/11372 on 15 May 2013 which condemned violence in Syria and called all sides to immediately end the hostilities, Malaysia supported the resolution. Nevertheless, Malaysia expressed concern over the

² CSIS Southeast Asia Initiative, *U.S. Alliances and Emerging Partnerships in Southeast Asia: Out of the Shadows*, Centre for Strategic & International Studies, 2009, p. 63; Fred R. Von der Mehden, *Two Worlds of Islam: Interaction Between Southeast Asia and the Middle East*, University Press of Florida, 1993, p. 65; Nour Altala, "Malaysia and the Arab world – the past and the present", *New Straits Times*, 9 April 2017, <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2017/04/228631/malaysian-and-arab-worls-past-and-present>, accessed on 10 April 2017.

³ Bernama, "Malaysia, Palestine to strengthen ties", *New Straits Times*, 16 August 2016, <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/08/165891/malaysia-palestine-strengthen-ties>, accessed on 10 April 2017.

⁴ Bulent Aras & Sinan Ekim, "Malaysia and the Arab Spring", *Pomeas Policy Paper*, No. 7, 2015, p. 1.

choice of weapons in the conflict and maintained its policy of non-interference. Malaysia was of the opinion that violence could only be resolved politically, and not militarily⁵.

Malaysia's response to Resolution GA/11372 on Syria was different from its response to SC Resolution 1973 on Libya, because the former did not commit the international community to military intervention, which the latter did.

In 2016, Malaysia told the international community that the time had come to resolve the conflict in Syria once and for all. Malaysia noted that the conflict had created an environment for the growth of terrorism. At the UN, Malaysia asked the SC to remain resolute so that it could effectively discharge its primary responsibility of maintaining international peace and security. Malaysia condemned the flagrant violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), and pledged to provide assistance and contribution, including for the Syrian refugees⁶.

Malaysia has not made any statement regarding the position of the President of Syria. This attitude is according to Malaysia's non-interference policy. Previously, in 1979, Malaysia took the stand that the formation of the revolutionary government in Iran was part of the internal affairs of Iran⁷.

Malaysia's non-interference policy is in accordance with the non-interference principle in international law. This principle is embodied in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, the Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations⁸, and the Declaration on Inadmissibility of Intervention⁹. This principle is based on the premise of State sovereignty.

The non-interference policy of Malaysia is also consistent with the principle of self-determination of peoples. In other words, it is up to the people of Syria who they want as their leader. It is not up to other countries including Malaysia. However, Malaysia raised the

⁵ "General Assembly Adopts Text Condemning Violence in Syria, Demanding That All Sides End Hostilities", <https://www.un.org/press/en/3013/ga11372.doc.htm>, accessed on 7 May 2017.

⁶ Bernama, "Zahid: Syrian conflict has to end now", *themalaymailonline*, 22 September 2016, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/zahid-syrian-conflict-has-to-end-now>, accessed on 12 April 2017; "Malaysia pushes for an end to Syrian conflict", *middleeastmonitor*, 18 October 2016, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161018-malaysia-pushes-for-an-end-to-syrian-conflict/>, accessed on 12 April 2017; Roy Goh, "Zahid: Malaysia stands firm with UN Security Council decisions on Syria", *New Straits Times*, 22 September 2016, <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/09/175000/zahid-malaysia-stands-firm-un-security-council-decisions-syria>, accessed on 12 April 2017.

⁷ Fred R. Von der Mehden, *Two Worlds of Islam: Interaction Between Southeast Asia and the Middle East*, University Press of Florida, 1993, pp. 64-65.

⁸ GA Resolution 2625 (XXV), 1970.

⁹ GA Resolution 2131 (XX), 1965.

concerns on the menace of terrorism, alleged violations of IHL, and the plight of refugees. There are many Syrians who have fled the civil war taking shelter in Malaysia¹⁰.

Although Malaysia told the international community that the conflict must end and that the Security Council (SC) must remain resolute, it is difficult to resolve the conflict because of the politicking of Russia, Iran and the United States (US). Russia and the US are veto powers who side opposing belligerents, thus taking action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter against any side will be very unlikely.

Saudi-Yemen Conflicts

Malaysia has maintained no interference stand on the Saudi-Yemen conflict¹¹. The report that Malaysia had joined the Saudi-led coalition¹² has been denied by Malaysia¹³. Malaysia's policy on the conflict involving the two States is also according to international law on the non-interference principle and the prohibition on use of force.

The prohibition on use of force is embodied in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. Joining the Saudi-led coalition (which Malaysia did not do) would not fall within the express exceptions of the prohibition, namely: self-defence under Article 51, and enforcement action under Chapter VII. This is not a case of self-defence, and there has not been any authorization from the SC under Chapter VII for the coalition to intervene in Yemen.

Malaysia's stand is also consistent with the principle of self-determination of peoples. In other words, it is up to the people of Yemen who they want as their leader. It is not up to other States such as Saudi Arabia or Malaysia to determine. Nevertheless, Malaysia has not

¹⁰ Nicholas Cheng & Justin Zack, "Another 68 Syrians arrive in Malaysia", *The Star Online*, 29 May 2016, www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/05/29/another-68-syrians-arrive-in-malaysia/, accessed on 6 May 2017; Kate Mayberry, "Malaysia's stranded Syrian refugees: The number of Syrians fleeing the civil war and seeking shelter in Malaysia has nearly tripled in recent months", *Al Jazeera*, 12 February 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/02/malaysia-stranded-syrian-refugees-201421174821761925.html>, accessed on 12 April 2017.

¹¹ Melissa Darlyne Chow, "Malaysia maintains no interference stand on Saudi-Yemen conflict", *New Straits Times*, 15 March 2017, <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2017/03/220991/malaysia-maintains-no-interference-stand-saudi-yemen-conflict>, accessed on 12 April 2017.

¹² "Malaysian forces arrive to join Saudi-led Yemen offensive", *middleeastmonitor*, 10 May 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150510-malaysian-forces-arrive-to-join-saudi-led-yemen-offensive/>, accessed on 12 April 2017; "Malaysian forces join Saudi-led coalition in Yemen", *Al Arabiya News*, 10 May 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/05/10/Malaysian-vanguards-joining-Arab-led-collation-arrive-in-Saudi.html>, accessed on 12 April 2017.

¹³ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Why Is Malaysia in Saudi-Led War Games in the Middle East?", *The Diplomat*, 18 February 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/why-is-malaysia-in-saudi-led-war-games-in-the-middle-east/>, accessed on 12 April 2017; Michelle Nichols, "U.N. experts warn Saudi-led coalition allies over war crimes in Yemen" *Reuters*, 29 January 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-un-idUSKBN15D0SB>, accessed on 12 April 2017.

voiced objection to Saudi's interference in Yemen, probably to preserve good relations with Saudi.

Conclusion

Except with regard to the issue of the Palestinian people, Malaysia has been taking a neutral attitude of not outwardly supporting any side to any of the other conflicts in the Middle East. Malaysia has not furthered the interests of any party to a conflict nor has it jeopardized those of the other. It has been Malaysia's longstanding policy of not meddling in the internal affairs of other countries. Although Malaysia has not been able to help much in resolving the conflicts in the Middle East, at least, Malaysia's policy allows it to have access to provide humanitarian assistance to victims of the conflicts.