

The Role of Malaysian NGOs on Palestinian Issues: Aqsa Syarif Berhad

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, discourse on the role of non-state actors in foreign policy has been growing and many scholars recognise that non-state actors such as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are one of the forces that could contribute to the foreign policy making process. Arguably, the attitude of Malaysian leaders as well as the support of Malaysian that favour Palestinians has led to the proliferation and establishment of numerous Muslim faith-based NGOs. These NGOs subsequently play a momentous role in enhancing the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Palestine. This paper explores this claim by studying the roles of Aqsa Syarif Berhad, a Malaysian Islamic faith-based NGO. It also attempts to assess the contributions of this NGO to Palestine as well as its role in shaping the future direction of Malaysia foreign policy towards Palestine. The paper contends that the role played by Malaysian NGOs has contributed to the enhancement of bilateral relations between Malaysia and Palestine as well as strengthened Malaysia's stand on Palestine.

Keywords: Aqsa Syarif Berhad, Malaysia foreign policy, non-state actors, Palestine

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysian Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are well-known as being among the most active non-state actor groups in the world that support Palestine. These groups use their non-state platform

to provide humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians. They have planned and conducted substantial humanitarian aid activities that cover most of the important aspects of human security such as the social, education, health, economic and developmental dimensions, especially in Gaza. It is believed that over the years, Malaysia has been relying on the NGOs' initiative to enhance standing relations with Palestine. These NGOs subsequently played a momentous role in enhancing the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Palestine. The paper explores this claim by studying the role of Aqsa Syarif Berhad, a Malaysian Islamic faith-based NGO, by assessing its contributions as well as its role in shaping the future direction of Malaysian foreign policy towards Palestine.

The Role of NGOs in International Relations

For decades, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have played an important role in the international community. They were not only involved in and significantly contributed to restoration of emergencies areas or vulnerable conditions, but also actively participated together with many nation states and international agencies in doing so through global developmental programmes. The emergence of civil society organisations and NGOs as a manifestation of social movement organisations on the wider scene has changed dramatically the landscape of global politics and world economy (Teegen, Doh, & Vachani, 2004). According to Paul

(2000) in the Global Policy Forum, today some 2,500 NGOs have consultative status with the UN and many thousands more have official arrangements with other UN bodies and intergovernmental bodies. The UN runs a department dedicated to NGOs, the Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS), with offices in Geneva and New York. Its head reports to a committee only one step removed from the highest administrative committee of the UN administration chaired by the Secretary-General. At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, around 17,000 NGO representatives participated in the accompanying NGO forum. Some 1,400 were directly involved in intergovernmental negotiations.

A study by Steffek (2013) suggests that NGOs mostly played a third force, rivalling states and other actors in international relations. In general, the role of NGOs is to promote information to government delegations, bring to their notice fundamental issues and environmental problems (Sachdev, 2007), introduce new ideas and lobby for policy changes (Mingst & Snyder, 2004). Some NGO activities raise the cost of international action and others lower them. For example, when NGOs perform as service-delivery in the field by helping government delegations, they lower the cost of international action because they believe they can perform these services more effectively (Vibert, 2001). NGOs are embedded, comprising access to institutions through the presence of influential allies and changes in political alignments and conflicts (Joachim, 2003). In international

relations, NGOs mobilise resources and public opinion to influence policy at the national or international level (Ley, Schmitz, & Swedlund, 2012).

Pease (2008) described three roles of NGOs in world politics: to get information on the field; to negotiate and implement policies set by the state and to establish networking with other international NGOs. Therefore, it is well known that NGOs have gained popularity in the world today because of their positive negotiations, which have led to the successful creation of regimes, or participated in new set of legislations that have led to a solution in transnational problems. Today, NGOs are able to participate in discussions and to some extent, influence decisions that were formally taken by governments. The presence of NGOs is seen as a catalyst across borders for global issues because NGOs can operate like brands, building issues and capturing new ones just as corporations build consumer brands and leverage them to open new markets. Although the NGO as a non-state actor does not receive benefits from any party, there is profit to be donated to society, depending on the type of NGO operation. The attitude of independence that exists in NGOs is not a barrier for NGOs to move freely but makes them more famous as the largest force in international relations.

Palestine-Israel Conflict: Malaysia's Perspective

Nair (1997) explains the issue of war in Palestine after the state gained independence. War in Palestine has attracted the attention

of many, Malaysian policymakers included, as it concerns the issue of a state's national independence. The Yang Dipertuan Agong of Malaysia, in delivering his annual speech in Parliament had always stressed support for the Palestinians as a hallmark of Malaysia's foreign policy. The policy towards Palestine has existed for a long time, at least since the al-Aqsa mosque was set on fire by a Jew. This incident captured people's attention, including in Malaysia. With growing concern towards what was happening in Palestine, Malaysia was visible at the forefront of support for Palestine, together with other Muslim countries, by condemning the incident (Idris, Othman, & Ramli, 2011). To express its concerns on the matter, Malaysia hosted an international conference in 1969 that discussed the legitimacy of Baitul Maqdis; it did this in other conferences around the world. Throughout the 1970s, Malaysia's foreign policy gave more and more prominence to events and conditions in the Islamic world, evolving in its approach and attitude to this sector (Bakar, 1995).

In 1981, Malaysia announced its decision to grant full diplomatic status to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and in 1989, the status was upgraded, giving the PLO equal status with other resident diplomatic missions in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia also continued to be active in the campaign for international support for the Palestinians, including through the OIC Summit. Overall, though it was interpreted as a manifestation of Islamic unity in foreign policy, it is important to note that Malaysia's

foreign policy is based on the principles of self-determination, justice and human rights.

Malaysia's stand on Palestine has attracted world attention for its initiatives to support international efforts in witnessing that the rights of the Palestinian people are respected (Harun, 2009). This has shown that Malaysia's policy towards Palestine remains unchanged i.e. Malaysia supports Palestine as a whole and without any discrimination. On the other hand, the Government has rendered support requested by NGOs especially in logistics and coordination. This support has continued for other NGOs condemning the Israeli blockade against the Gazans. The grassroots' movement coupled with the official foreign policy of the Government of Malaysia is a way of showing its staunch support and solidarity for the Palestinians in achieving their aspirations.

DISCUSSION

Aqsa Syarif Berhad's Contributions to Palestine

Aqsa Syarif Berhad was established in February 2010. It was initiated and formed by a group of Malaysians who were impassioned about the struggle to liberate Palestine from Zionist occupation. It is a non-governmental organisation under the auspices of Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia. Aqsa Syarif Berhad's main objective is to lead all efforts for the struggle to free the Al Aqsa Mosque and Palestine. Further collaboration and strategic partnership were built with other leading

international humanitarian work and relief organisations sharing similar aspirations for the Palestinian people. Aqsa Syarif Berhad has a Board of Trustees who monitor its overall administration. The success of Aqsa Syarif Berhad is because of the support and involvement of the public in the Palestinian cause. Today, Aqsa Syarif Berhad remains a solid platform not only for raising funds but for creating awareness on the issue of Palestine among Malaysians.

Aqsa Syarif Berhad also plays an important role in harnessing the resources and expertise of the public through donations to the Palestinians. The impetus for Aqsa Syarif Berhad's establishment was to promote awareness among society of the Palestine issue. According to Khairudin, the CEO of Aqsa Syarif Berhad (personal communication, 2015, May 6), Aqsa Syarif Berhad was a bridge in delivering humanitarian aid from the public to Palestinians in terms of finances, materials and projects in Palestine or Malaysia. Aqsa Syarif Berhad is consistent in providing financial assistance to Palestine on an ongoing basis and is responsible for distributing donations collected from Malaysians to Palestinians. Furthermore, to optimise the assistance to the Palestinians, Aqsa Syarif Berhad created a network of cooperation with various organisations closely linked to the Palestinians in order to implement projects or to collaborate in humanitarian missions. This NGO has set up the opportunities in Malaysia to raise awareness among Malaysians about Palestine and its struggle for freedom.

Another significant struggle of Aqsa Syarif Berhad's is to establish projects to help Palestinians in their daily lives. Ultimately, most of the projects that have been developed are in Palestine in order to provide job opportunities to Palestinians. The latest project by Aqsa Syarif Berhad is House4Gaza (H4G). In 50 days of Israel military aggression in Gaza from 8 July to 26 August, 2014, around 17,132 houses were destroyed, causing 460,000 people in Gaza to be made homeless and to be forced to live in temporary shelters. Aqsa Syarif Berhad responded to an immediate call by The Arab and International Commission to Rebuild Gaza to launch a campaign to provide temporary shelters for Gaza in the form of port cabins. In cooperation with the Malaysian Society for Engineering and Technology (MySET), House4Gaza (H4G) launched a donation campaign and was able to collect RM2.5 million from Malaysians. The amount collected was to benefit more than 400 families in Gaza (Abang & Kadir, 2015). In addition, Aqsa Syarif Berhad has several on-going projects in Gaza. According to Khairudin (personal communication, 2015, May 6) among the on-going projects are:

A. Social Economic Sector

i. Sponsorship of orphans

In cooperation with two local organisations, Salam Palestinian Society and Development and Takaful for Child Welfare, Aqsa Syarif Berhad sponsored more than 2,700 orphans living in Palestine and in nearby refugee

camps. Individuals may sponsor one or more orphans through monthly contributions and this can be done either individually or in groups. Contribution is RM170.00 per month for each orphan. The minimum period of sponsorship is one-calendar year.

ii. Sponsorship of affected families

Aqsa Syarif Berhad in collaboration with the Family Welfare Association in Palestine and Lebanon (WAFRAH) set up a fund through sponsorship programmes for the families of war victims. Fundraising helps families live a normal life with provision of basic needs such as food, water, medicine, shelter and education. Aqsa Syarif Berhad has developed an affordable scheme for this sponsorship. The minimum monthly contribution is RM550.00 per month and the minimum period of sponsorship is one-calendar year. Sponsorship may be done either individually or in groups.

iii. Microcredit-Qardhul Hassan Project

In Gaza, various poverty alleviation programmes are conducted. Based on an Islamic welfare loan system, the Microcredit-Qardhul Hassan Project, which Aqsa Syarif Berhad participates in, provides opportunity to poor families to start small businesses. This is a self-sustaining project that is managed locally.

iv. Iftar Ramadan, Zakat, food parcels and Eid gifts

This project plays an important role in the reconstruction of the social structure by targetting poor families for aid. In 2013, Aqsa Syarif Berhad, with cooperation from Tajammu 'Al Muassasat, developed this project with a budget of USD505,500.00. It was the largest project for that year. Together with its partners, Aqsa Syarif Berhad has distributed aid among poor Palestinian families in Lebanon and the West Bank amounting to almost RM2.5 million.

v. Imams for Ramadan in Malaysia

Imams for Ramadan is one of Aqsa Syarif Berhad's initiatives to collect donations for Ramadan. This annual programme is led by the NGO. Imams are sent to mosques throughout Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak, during Ramadan to lead in *Tarawikh* prayers and to give lectures.

B. Education

i. Back to school

This was another project carried out with Aqsa Syarif Berhad's partners in Gaza. Tajammu' Al Muassasat coordinated the work in Gaza, while Aqsa Syarif Berhad collected and sent around RM250,000.00 in 2013 for basic necessities for school such as clothing, bags, shoes and stationery.

ii. Adopt a Hafiz

Aqsa Syarif Berhad, together with Muslims' Professional Forum (MPF), launched a programme named 'Adopt a Hafiz' in May 2013. This was an initiative to increase the number of Hafiz in Gaza. A total of RM394,000.00 was sent and 680 children were registered for this programme in Gaza.

iii. Higher education

Aqsa Syarif Berhad was also invited to join Malaysian delegates from the Ministry of Higher Education on a visit to Gaza in June 2013. During the visit, Aqsa Syarif Berhad signed several MoU with academic institutions in Gaza. In addition, the NGO contributed USD\$227,480.00 to Al Aqsa University, mainly to rebuild the university mosque within the campus and also to build four lecture halls. During the same visit, Aqsa Syarif Berhad presented the University College of Gaza with USD \$184,080.00 to purchase a power generator and to build a science laboratory.

C. Agriculture

i. Cattle livestock

In Jabalia, with the Islamic Society of Jabalia as a partner, Aqsa Syarif Berhad helped to fund a cattle-farming project. The project has been able to produce bread, the local staple food, and dairy products

such as yoghurt and cheese to serve the people of Jabalia. In 2016, Aqsa Syarif Berhad owned more than 110 head of cattle.

ii. Agricultural land rehabilitation

This project was intended to rehabilitate the land with greenhouses and to plant vegetables like cucumber, tomato, capsicum, pepper and eggplant. With a population of 1.7 million in the Gaza Strip, there are a total of 70,000 farmers, including 30,000 farm workers in the state. The direct and indirect losses suffered by the agricultural sector in Gaza amount to USD1 million per day. Gaza's agricultural sector suffered wide-scale damage in every area and farming was no exception. The Palestinian Orphan's Home Association started the rehabilitation of agricultural land to alleviate unemployment among farmers. Aqsa Syarif Berhad supported them with USD50,000 in 2013.

D. Rose2Rose – From women to women

Among the objectives of the Rose2Rose project are the dissemination of accurate and correct information and the building of a network with other NGOs, corporate agencies, individuals and community centres. Rose2Rose hopes for regular contributions because women and children should be exposed to knowledge and skills so that they can generate

income to support their families. This is because many Palestinian women have lost their husbands or their husbands have been imprisoned and are not able to earn a living. Rose2Rose also organises partnerships with official government bodies, the private sector, banks and schools. They have also set up a community in the Gaza Strip in collaboration with other NGOs to restore the people's lives.

To promote awareness among the public on Palestinian issues, Khairudin (personal communication, 2015, May 6) asserted that Aqsa Syarif Berhad organises a few annual programmes:

i. Malaysia Global March to Jerusalem (MyGMJ)

MyGMJ is a global movement that was founded in 2012 and aims to protect Jerusalem against Judaizing by the Zionist entity. It provides a platform for world citizens to express their support and solidarity with the Palestinians affected by Israel's apartheid policy in Jerusalem. MyGMJ is the Malaysian version of this campaign and Aqsa Syarif Berhad has been involved in organising the event since its inception in 2012.

ii. Walk for Humanity

Walk for Humanity, popularly known as Walk for Health, is a charity event in aid of the Palestinians, Syrians and Rohingya. It promotes a healthy lifestyle that includes giving to charity

through slogans like 'Be Healthy, and Do Charity'.

iii. International conferences

Due to Aqsa Syarif Berhad's global reputation, they have been entrusted twice by their international partners to host two international conferences beginning in 2014. The first was the 'Annual International Forum for Jerusalem and Palestine' from 2-4 May, 2014, an international conference attended by delegates from more than 20 Arab and Islamic countries. The conference was organised in collaboration with the Palestine Cultural Organisation Malaysia (PCOM) and the International Coalition for Jerusalem and Palestine (al-I'tilaf). The second was the 'International Conference on Reconstruction of Gaza' on 24 January, 2015 in collaboration with the Malaysian Society for Engineering and Technology (MySET) and the Arab and International Commission to Build Gaza (AICBG). This conference was part of a global campaign to raise USD1 billion to fund the reconstruction of Gaza after the 2014 Israel aggression on the state.

In 2014 Aqsa Syarif Berhad successfully implemented several important humanitarian projects. These included the Winter Emergency Relief Emergency Relief, Sponsorship of Hafiz in Gaza and the Qurban Udh-hiyeh Project 1435H, for which a contribution of RM400,000.00 to RM 500,000.00 was collected for each project. Aqsa Syarif Berhad also successfully

organised two humanitarian missions to give assistance to Palestinian refugees in Syria and to deliver aid to Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The total amount contributed was around RM1.5 million. However, according to Khairudin (personal communication, 2015, May 6) Aqsa Syarif Berhad's best achievement was its project, Operation Badar, for which it successfully raised over RM5.082 million in less than a month. The overall amount of contributions given by Aqsa Syarif Berhad to the Palestinians in the year 2014 was RM20.8 million. This amount represents almost 47% of the total contributions (RM44.52 million) collected by Aqsa Syarif Berhad since it was founded.

For its endeavours, Aqsa Syarif Berhad has received several awards. In November 2014, Aqsa Syarif Berhad received national recognition when it was selected by the Companies Commission of Malaysia (SSM) and Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) to represent the country in an international audit exercise, Mutual Evaluation Exercise (MEE) On-Site Assessment, which was controlled by an international organisation, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). FATF is an international organisation whose role is to set standards and ensure implementation of effective measures in terms of regulation, legislation and operation to combat money laundering and financing of terrorism and similar threats in an effort to preserve the integrity of the international financial system (MyCARE, 2015, "Local and international recognition", para. 4).

CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that the Palestinians have suffered for a prolonged period of time under Israeli occupation, and this has caught the attention of the world. Numerous NGOs have come forward to defend the Palestinians' right and together to convey humanitarian aid in various ways. For Malaysian NGOs, particularly Aqsa Syarif Berhad, their role has widened the scope of Malaysian assistance to Palestinians. Various projects have been initiated and organised by Aqsa Syarif Berhad, financed mainly by funds contributed by Malaysians.

Aqsa Syarif Berhad's objectives are not only to encourage socio-economic reconstruction in Palestine but also to provide them with opportunities to rebuild their lives. Aqsa Syarif Berhad also places importance on showing concern to the Palestinians and raising the level of awareness of the plight of the Palestinians among Malaysians as they believe that helping the Palestinians goes beyond raising funds for them. Ultimately, the programmes initiated by Aqsa Syarif Berhad are to educate the public as to what constitutes violation of human right and to appreciate the values of human right.

All the efforts done by NGOS are very much appreciated by the Malaysian government. The government must redouble their efforts to improve diplomatic relations with Palestine. The efforts of Malaysian NGOs have strengthened support to the Palestinians, and this has been recognised by the government of Palestine. This has improved bilateral relations between

Malaysia and Palestine. The Palestinian people too are extremely thankful for the help they have received from Malaysian NGOs. Doubtless, the work of NGOs to support the Palestinian cause will foster closer diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Palestine.

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