

Malaysia and the War in Gaza

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SPECIAL REPORT

Malaysia and the War in Gaza

Dr. (Col. Res.) Shaul Shay

Abstract

The Hamas terror organization launched an unprecedented attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023, under the name "Al-Aqsa Flood". Hamas fired a rocket barrage of at least 3,000 rockets into Israel and Hamas terrorists crossed the border with Israel. Around 1,200 Israelis were killed and over 240 were taken hostage. Following the violent attack by Hamas, Israel launched operation "Swords of Iron" and declared a state of war. Israel told Palestinian civilians to evacuate the north of the Gaza Strip before it launched a ground offensive in a bid to eradicate Hamas and free hostages.

Malaysia, a Muslim-majority nation supports the Palestinian cause in general and Hamas in particular and does not recognize Israel diplomatically. Since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023, Malaysia is one of the most vocal supporters of the Hamas terrorist organization. On October 17, 2023, Malaysian Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, spoke to Ismail Haniyeh, the Political Bureau Chief of Hamas, and expressed Malaysia's "unwavering support for the Palestinian people".

Malaysia has proved a "paradise" for Hamas in the past decades. For the most part, it has provided humanitarian, political, financial and propaganda support. However, there have been instances where Malaysia has enabled or at least turned a blind eye to the military-terrorist activities carried out by Hamas on its soil, although Malaysian authorities have repeatedly denied it.

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 must 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.

Keywords: Malaysia; Hamas; Radical Islam; Al-Aqsa Flood; PCOM

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Background

The Hamas terror organization launched an unprecedented attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023, under the name "Al-Aqsa Flood". Hamas fired a rocket barrage of at least 3,000 rockets into Israel and Hamas terrorists crossed the border with Israel. Around 1,200 Israelis were killed and over 240 were taken hostage. Following the violent attack by Hamas, Israel launched operation "Swords of Iron" and declared a state of war. Israel told

civilians to evacuate the north of the Gaza Strip before it launched a ground offensive in a bid to eradicate Hamas and free hostages.¹

Since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023, Malaysia is one of the most vocal supporters of the Hamas terrorist organization. Malaysia has been sharply critical of Israel and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has called Israeli actions “the height of barbarism.”²

Malaysia, a Muslim-majority nation supports the Palestinian cause in general and Hamas in particular. Malaysia does not recognize Israel diplomatically and has maintained that no such recognition will be given until a two-state solution - one for the Israelis and one for the Palestinians - is achieved.³

Malaysia has proved a “paradise” for Hamas in the past decades. For the most part, it has provided humanitarian, political, financial and propaganda support. However, there have been instances where Malaysia has enabled or at least turned a blind eye to the military-terrorist activities carried out by Hamas on its soil, although Malaysian authorities have repeatedly denied it.

Kuala Lumpur often serves as a venue for conferences focusing on Palestinian matters, hosting both pro-Palestinian NGOs and representatives from Hamas.

The War in Gaza - Malaysian Foreign Policy

Malaysia’s Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has rejected Western pressure to condemn Hamas and said the U.S. had raised concerns with Malaysia regarding its stance on Palestine.⁴

Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said on October 9th, 2023 that Malaysia remains firm and steadfast in its stand that the Palestinians must be granted absolute freedom from Israel’s illegal occupation. He also mentioned that Malaysia’s strong and unwavering support for the Palestinian cause is evident in the frequent and forceful statements issued.⁵

1 How the Israel-Hamas war will test Egypt’s balancing, the new Arab, October 11, 2023. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-hamas-caught-israel-surprise-and-risked-its-future>

2 Amy Chew, Malaysia’s Anwar, Israel-Hamas war is both personal and political, Nikkei Asia, November 1, 2023. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Israel-Hamas-war/For-Malaysia-s-Anwar-Israel-Hamas-war-is-both-personal-and-political>

3 Israel-Gaza: Malaysia will maintain ties with Hamas says PM Anwar Ibrahim, BBC News, November 9, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67353188>

4 Malaysia says won’t recognize unilateral sanctions on supporters of Palestinian groups, Reuters, November 7, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysia-pm-will-not-recognise-unilateral-sanctions-response-us-bill-2023-11-07/>

5 Malaysia stands firm: Palestinians must be granted absolute freedom from Israel’s illegal occupation, the new straits time, October 9, 2023. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/10/964748/malaysia-stands-firm-palestinians-must-be-granted-absolute-freedom>

On October 17th, 2023, Malaysian Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, spoke to Ismail Haniyeh, the Political Bureau Chief of Hamas, and expressed Malaysia's "unwavering support for the Palestinian people".⁶

Former Malaysian leader, Mahathir Mohamad, posted a video of a conversation with Hamas's political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, in which he describes the war as a "genocide" designed to kill as many Palestinians as possible. Haniyeh, seeking to influence Western and Israeli perspectives, urged the 98-year-old Mahathir to draw comparisons between Hamas and ISIS.⁷

Malaysia's Ministry of Education has withdrawn from participating in this year's Frankfurt Book Fair, the world's largest trade fair for books, accusing the organizers of taking a pro-Israel stance.⁸

On November 1st, 2023, the Hamas International Financing Prevention Act, was approved by the U.S. House of Representatives, and imposes sanctions on foreign individuals, agencies and governments that assist Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or their associated entities. Malaysian Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, has said that U.S. efforts to restrict external parties from supporting Hamas are unilateral and Malaysia will not recognize it.⁹

The U.S. is Malaysia's third-largest trade partner. In the previous year, their bilateral trade reached approximately \$77 billion, yielding a trade surplus of \$31.3 billion for Malaysia, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. Any strain in relations could possibly affect trade terms.¹⁰

Prime Minister Anwar embarked on shuttle diplomacy for the cause, traveling to Saudi Arabia where he attended the ASEAN-Gulf Cooperation Council (ASEAN-GCC) Summit, followed by a visit to Turkey to meet with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and continued on to a visit to Egypt to meet with President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

On October 9th, 2023, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim held phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss the developments in the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas. On October 22nd, 2023, the Turkish President Recep

6 Malaysia Premier speaks to Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas, backs Palestinians, MEMO, October 17, 2023. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231017-malaysia-premier-speaks-to-ismail-haniyeh-of-hamas-backs-palestinians/>

7 Malaysia Renews Backing for Hamas as US Sanctions Threat Looms, Bloomberg BNN, November 9, 2023. <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/malaysia-renews-backing-for-hamas-as-us-sanctions-threat-looms-1.1994912>

8 Malaysia pulls out of Frankfurt Book Fair citing organizers' pro-Israel stance, The daily star, October 17, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/world/news/malaysia-pulls-out-frankfurt-book-fair-citing-organisers-pro-israel-stance-3445781>

9 Malaysia Renews Backing for Hamas as US Sanctions Threat Looms, Bloomberg BNN, November 9, 2023. <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/malaysia-renews-backing-for-hamas-as-us-sanctions-threat-looms-1.1994912>

10 Malaysia says won't recognize unilateral sanctions on supporters of Palestinian groups, Reuters, November 7, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysia-pm-will-not-recognise-unilateral-sanctions-reponse-us-bill-2023-11-07/>

Tayyip Erdogan hosted Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Istanbul for a closed-door meeting. No further information was provided.¹¹

In his first visit to Cairo since taking office, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim during a meeting with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, expressed his firm rejection of the forced displacement of the Palestinians from Gaza, and shared his concerns about the ongoing violence in the region. They both emphasized the importance of ensuring continuous, secure and timely access to humanitarian aid for the people of Gaza.¹²

The Thai hostages in Gaza

Following the October 7th massacre in southern Israel a total of 32 Thai nationals have been confirmed as having been killed during the attack and Thailand has 23 of its citizens among the 239 hostages being held in Gaza Strip.

Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin made a two-day working visit to Malaysia and raised the issue of the kidnapped Thais when he met with Prime Minister Anwar.

Thai government spokesperson, Chai Watcharong said Prime Minister Srettha "Sought help from Malaysia because of their good relations with the Palestinian side."¹³

The government of Thailand is working through neighboring Malaysia and Iranian mediators to secure the release of Thai nationality hostages held by Hamas. The Thai prime minister said that the Thai Army had received pictures of the captives and that they appeared in good condition.¹⁴

Hamas' military activities in Malaysia

Hamas - paragliding training in Malaysia

Hamas militants used powered paragliders to breach the Gaza-Israel border on 7 October, marking the first known use of the tactic. Hamas operatives flew both twin- and single-occupant powered paragliders to insert fighters and to attack the Israeli settlements and military positions as part of the group's wider attack along the border region.¹⁵

11 Turkish President Erdogan meets Malaysian premier for talks, A.A com, October 22, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkish-president-erdogan-meets-malaysian-premier-for-talks/3029223>

12 Egypt's Sisi, Malaysia's PM express concern about ongoing violence for the region, Ahram online, October 23, 2023. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/510822.aspx>

13 Thai PM seeks Malaysia's help to secure release of hostages, astro Awani, October 12, 2023. <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/thai-pm-seeks-malaysias-help-secure-release-hostages-441444>

14 Thailand negotiating hostage release with Iranian mediators - Israeli media, The Jerusalem Post, November 7, 2023. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-772026>

15 Gareth Jennings, Hamas uses paragliders to breach Israeli border, October 9, 2023. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/hamas-uses-paragliders-to-breach-israeli-border>

The twin-person paragliders were of a seated trike configuration, with the rear occupant flying the paraglider and the armed front passenger positioned to rapidly disembark and assault the landing zone. The single-person paragliders were of the type where the engine and propeller are mounted directly on to the pilot's back.¹⁶

On July 21, 2014, IDF forces captured a Hamas cell commander in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza. When questioned by the ISA (Israel Security Agency — also known as the Shin Bet Security Service), the cell commander revealed that he had been sent by Hamas leadership to Malaysia for paragliding training. The plan was to parachute into Israel to kidnap and murder civilians. Both Malaysia and Hamas denied this accusation.¹⁷

After being recruited into Hamas' military wing in 2007, the terrorist underwent regular combat training. Every five months he would attend refresher courses which involved training with Kalashnikov automatic rifles, Soviet-made PKC machine guns and locally manufactured hand grenades.

In 2010, the prisoner was enlisted into a special force sent to Malaysia for parachute training, in preparation for a cross-border kidnapping attack on Israel. He and ten other terrorists from across Gaza spent a week receiving training in Malaysia.

After returning to Gaza, the cell was given additional weapons training. They were warned to maintain secrecy, and not to reveal details of their Malaysian training to anyone.¹⁸

In 2014, four years after being sent to Malaysia, the Hamas commando squad was summoned for more parachute training. This time the training took place inside the Gaza Strip. According to the prisoner, the squad was not told about where the kidnapping attack would take place.

The prisoner told investigators about a Hamas training camp that took place in June of this year. Exercises involved training with handguns, Kalashnikovs, M-16s, RPGs, machine guns and demolitions training. Terrorists who attended the camp were trained in various methods for kidnapping soldiers and how to operate inside Hamas' extensive tunnel network. The prisoner was meant to attend such a course after Ramadan (late July). Ultimately, he was arrested by IDF soldiers operating in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge.

The Majdi Mafarja affair

In 2014, Israel conducted a sweeping raid in the West Bank, during which it captured Majdi Mafarja, who admitted to training in message encryption and computer hacking

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hamas Terror Cell Received Advanced Training in Malaysia, IDF website, July 31, 2014. <https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/the-hamas-terrorist-organization/hamas-terror-cell-received-advanced-training-in-malaysia/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

for Hamas in Malaysia. Israeli security services arrested him for having served as courier for encoded messages on behalf of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades—the so-called military wing of Hamas.

In 2015, the Israeli press reported that at least 2 senior Hamas officials were operating out of Malaysia: Ma'an Hatib and Radwan al-Atrash. Hatib was described as "responsible in Malaysia for the Hamas foreign desk," while Atrash was seen as "a senior figure in the Shura [consultative] council" for the organization.

The death of Fadi Mohammad al-Batsh (2018)

Fadi Mohammad al-Batsh, a Gaza-born scientist and a lecturer in Kuala Lumpur was killed by two gunmen on April 21, 2018, on way to prayers. Al - Batsh specialized in electrical and electronic engineering and worked at a Malaysian university. He had lived there with his family for eight years and was an imam at a local mosque. He received his Ph.D. degree from the University of Malaya in 2015 and was a senior lecturer at the British Malaysian Institute.

Fadi Mohammad Al-Batsh was also an expert on rocket and drone accuracy. He had reportedly published materials on drone development, and on transmitters for controlling drones. He was deeply involved in Hamas's efforts to improve the accuracy of its rockets and to develop drones.¹⁹

The Hamas terror group said Batsh was a "loyal" member and a "scientist of Palestine's youth scholars." It said he had made "important contributions" and participated in international forums in the field of energy. Later the armed wing of Hamas opened a mourning house in Gaza for Batsh. A main banner at the entrance of the tent described Al-Batsh as a member of the terror group's military wing and "a commander." Hamas blamed the Israeli Mossad for the death of Al-Batsh.²⁰

Ismail Haniyeh, who spoke at Al-Batash's family's mourner's tent at Jabalya, said the timing of the killing was not happenstance and added that he has sent a Hamas delegation to Malaysia to meet with Malaysian government and police officials to monitor the investigation from up close.²¹

19 Hamas rocket engineer killed in Malaysia; family blames Israel, the Times of Israel, April 21, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/islamic-jihad-blames-israel-for-assassination-of-hamas-affiliated-engineer>

20 Hamas rocket engineer killed in Malaysia; family blames Israel, the Times of Israel, April 21, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/islamic-jihad-blames-israel-for-assassination-of-hamas-affiliated-engineer>

21 Hamas Engineer Killed in Malaysia 'Was Not a Saint', Israeli Defense Chief Says, Haaretz, April 22, 2018. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2018-04-22/ty-article/lieberman-on-hamas-engineer-killing-the-man-was-not-a-saint/0000017f-f2ac-dc28-a17f-febfb760000>

Hamas – fund raising and propaganda in Malaysia

The Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM)²²

Kuala Lumpur-based Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM) was co-founded in 2011 by Mr. Ibrahim's rural and regional development minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and the Prime Minister's home affairs minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail.

PCOM described by Malaysians as an 'unofficial embassy' of HAMAS for public outreach and fund raising. The Malaysian governments allowed PCOM to operate alongside the Palestinian embassy in Kuala Lumpur to balance Malaysia's relations with Hamas and its archrival, Al Fatah, which dominates the officially recognized Palestine Authority and has an embassy in the Malaysian capital.

Hamas uses PCOM, to raise funds through a network of Malaysian civil society groups. PCOM also organizes well-attended public events joined by prominent intellectuals, journalists, and civil society figures but rarely by senior officials. PCOM denies being a political organization with Hamas links. Hamas also operated a cultural organization in Malaysia called Rabitat Bilad al Sham (Greater Syria Association).

NGOs

Malaysian NGOs like Viva Palestina Malaysia, Aman Palestine, Aqsa Syarif and Lifeline4Gaza were very active in advocating the Palestinian cause and have been conducting awareness campaigns intensively throughout the years, focusing on humanitarian aid.

Twenty-one pro-Palestinian Malaysian activists participated in the Mavi Marmara flotilla to the Gaza Strip in May 2010. Nine belonged to pro-Palestinian NGOs. Six others aboard the Rachel Corrie also participated in the flotilla. Despite the raid on the Mavi Marmara, which killed nine Turkish activists and injured 50 others, all Malaysians on board were arrested and later released by Israel on June 2, 2010, and safely transferred to Jordan.

Summary

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."

Turkey, Iran, Qatar and Malaysia, are the main supporters of Hamas in its war against Israel. Malaysia is a strategic ally of the US in the war against terrorism (like Turkey and

²² Dr. James M Dorsey, Hamas puts Malaysia in a bind, *Modern Diplomacy*, October 23, 2023. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/10/23/hamas-puts-malaysia-in-a-bind/>

Qatar) but it publicly supports Hamas, a designated terrorist organization.

The main terrorist threat to Malaysia is a new generation of terrorists returning home after fighting in the ranks of ISIS. The terrorists bring home 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.

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.