

## The Pro-Palestinian Transnational Advocacy Network in Malaysia: Cooperation and Underlying Motives of Hamas and UMNO

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MAREN KOSS

## The Pro-Palestinian Transnational Advocacy Network in Malaysia

*Cooperation and Underlying Motives of Hamas and UMNO*

### ABSTRACT

A powerful pro-Palestinian transnational advocacy network has emerged in Malaysia since the Gaza war of 2008–09. Taking the cooperation between the Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia, the Islamist Hamas, and the United Malays National Organisation as an example, I analyze the network and argue that the three actors are engaging there to promote the Palestinian struggle for an independent state but at the same time, each actor is using the network to pursue its own interests.

**KEYWORDS:** PCOM, Hamas, UMNO, pro-Palestinian TAN, pro-Palestinian NGOs

### INTRODUCTION

On December 7, 2017, the day after US President Donald Trump announced his decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital (Trump 2017), mass demonstrations erupted in Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur. Led by Khairy Jamaluddin, then minister of youth and sports, more than a thousand Malaysians protested in front of the US embassy and demanded that Trump rescind his decision (Ziinine 2017). Similar demonstrations were organized by Malaysia's political opposition and the government the following two Fridays. On December 22, Malaysia's then-prime minister, Najib Razak, even led a demonstration (Leon 2017). As Muslims constitute 69.1% of the population in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2018) and the Palestinian cause has a special meaning to all Muslims in the world (Pew

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Research Center 2007, 55–56; Rane 2010, 191–93), the demonstrations were not surprising. More striking is that the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), at that time the strongest political party in Malaysia's then-ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN),<sup>1</sup> and pro-Palestinian NGOs demonstrated alongside each other. Some of the NGOs not only followed the call of then-Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi to join the protests (Yunus and Shahar 2017) but also helped organize them (Muslim Imran 2017a) and joined Prime Minister Najib on stage (Hamidi 2017).

This close cooperation between the ruling UMNO and pro-Palestinian NGOs was not new. Rather, their joint protest of Trump's Jerusalem decision demonstrates the existence of a pro-Palestinian transnational advocacy network (TAN) in Malaysia, which consists of pro-Palestinian NGOs, the Palestinian Islamist Hamas, and Malaysian politicians. Taking the cooperation between the Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia (PCOM, an officially registered NGO), Hamas, and UMNO as an example, I analyze the overall cooperation of the actors involved in the pro-Palestinian TAN in Malaysia as well as their underlying political motives and interests. I argue that the three different actors engage in the TAN to jointly promote the Palestinian struggle for their own state; at the same time, however, each makes use of the TAN to pursue its own interests.

This research is interesting first because the pro-Palestinian TAN in Malaysia has not been comprehensively analyzed; and second, because it brings new insights into TANs in regions beyond the West. This has not been a primary concern of scholars of International Relations Theory yet.

PCOM was chosen as a case to understand the political motives and interests of the NGOs involved in the network because it is among the most important pro-Palestinian NGOs in Malaysia and at the same time among those with the clearest political orientation. Other NGOs, including MyCare, Viva Palestina Malaysia, and the Malaysian Relief Agency, concentrate more on humanitarian assistance.<sup>2</sup> To look at UMNO as the Malaysian

1. A UMNO-led alliance (since 1974, the BN) had governed Malaysia since the country's independence in 1957. It lost power for the first time in Malaysia's post-independence history in May 2018, when Mahathir Mohamad's Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) became the strongest party in the Malaysian general elections.

2. Interviews in Kuala Lumpur: Representative of Malaysian Relief Agency, February 2, 2018; representative of Viva Palestina Malaysia, February 2, 2018; representative of PCOM, February 5, 2018, representative of MyCare, February 6, 2018.

party involved in the network makes sense given the organization's dominant political role since the country's independence from Britain in 1957.

To conduct the analysis I use qualitative content analysis and draw on primary data consisting of interviews with representatives from pro-Palestinian NGOs, which I conducted in Malaysia in early 2018.<sup>3</sup> I also draw on primary sources—written material and photos—from the social media accounts and online appearances of the actors analyzed in the article. The material and the analysis both end in April 2018, because the impact of the groundbreaking results of the May 2018 Malaysian general election on the pro-Palestinian TAN is hard to evaluate, even today.<sup>4</sup>

## THE PRO-PALESTINIAN TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY NETWORK IN MALAYSIA

### Transnational Advocacy Networks and Civil Society in Malaysia

#### *Transnational Advocacy Networks*

The place in which actors meet and transnationally engage for a common cause was defined as a “transnational advocacy network” by International Relations researchers in the late 1990s. Drawing on constructivism and social movement theory, Keck and Sikkink (1998) developed the concept of a TAN in their pioneering work, which many international relations researchers take as a starting point even today. Keck and Sikkink argue that in a TAN all those actors come together that work “internationally on an issue [and] are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services” (2). They underline that such a network spans national and transnational realms, and that “advocacy captures what is unique about these transnational networks: they are organized to promote causes, principled ideas, and norms” (8). The authors define topics such as

3. I translated all direct quotations from Arabic original documents into English. To guarantee the personal security of my interview partners, I refer to them anonymously, by affiliation only. The interviews were conducted in English and anonymized based on a numeric scheme.

4. In the May 2018 general election, Mahathir Mohamad's Pakatan Harapan became the strongest party in Malaysia. This ended the reign of the BN coalition and the UMNO, with Mahathir Mohamad, then 92 years old, the new prime minister. Mahathir had already been prime minister from 1981 to 2003, at that time as a member of the UMNO. In early 2018 he had announced that he would run for PM again, but this time as an opposition candidate. Mahathir had criticized then-PM Najib Razak (of the UMNO) for being involved in far-reaching corruption scandals. For more information see BBC (2018), Encyclopaedia Britannica (2018), and Milner (2017, 173–74).

human rights, the environment, and women's rights as issue areas in which TANs engage (9) and try to change the behavior of states or international organizations, or promote norm implementation (2–3).

#### *Civil Society in Malaysia*

Malaysia's political system has been characterized as semi-democratic (Case 1993) or an illiberal democracy (Weiss 2006, 5); political liberties and civil rights are restricted in the country (Ufen 2013, 6; Weiss and Hassan 2003, 6). Nevertheless, civil society activists have some room to maneuver (Weiss and Hassan 2003, 5–12), and a vibrant civil society scene has emerged since the 1990s (Uhlin 2016, 52). However, the space for NGOs has been limited, especially since the ruling coalition BN lost its two-thirds majority in the 2008 elections, for the first time in Malaysia's post-independence history (Khoo 2018, 149). The NGO Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) had accused the government of manipulating the electoral process in favor of the UMNO and had organized large demonstrations, which contributed to the electoral loss of the BN (Khoo 2018, 149; Ufen 2013, 7). However, the relationship between the state and NGOs in Malaysia is not characterized by repression only. The government collaborates with NGOs, especially those in development politics, which often complement state programs. But it limits political NGOs, which it accuses of linking up with opposition parties or being controlled by foreign agents (Weiss and Hassan 2003, 11; Hooi 2013, 82; Ismail and Abadi 2017, 548–52). And yet, pro-Palestinian NGOs are treated differently. Regardless of whether they engage in politics or in development affairs, the Malaysian government collaborates with them, and they are able to work in an open civil space.

#### **Pro-Palestinian NGOs in Malaysia**

Ever since it achieved independence in 1957, Malaysia has traditionally been an important supporter of the Palestinian cause, but it was especially the 1967 Israeli–Arab war that raised awareness of the Palestinian cause in the Malaysian population (Robani 2007, 48). In 1981 Malaysia was the second country to grant full diplomatic status to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and in 1989 it recognized the PLO's office as the official Embassy of Palestine in Malaysia (Nair 1997, 206; Robani 2007, 68). In recent years, the Malaysian government, which does not have diplomatic relations with

Israel (Harun 2009, 31), has strengthened its relationship with Palestinian political actors beyond the secular Fatah and PLO and in particular has built strong relations with the Islamist Hamas. High-ranking Hamas politicians have regularly visited the annual general assembly of the UMNO (*Middle East Monitor* 2017; PCOM 2015a). During his term in office, former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak also visited the Gaza Strip, which is under control of Hamas. In Gaza he was welcomed by Ismael Haniyeh, at that time prime minister of the Hamas government (Zeiger and AP 2013).

Besides the political support the Palestinians have from Malaysia and the close contacts the government in Kuala Lumpur has with various Palestinian political actors, a very large and vibrant scene of pro-Palestinian NGOs has emerged in Malaysia since 2008.<sup>5</sup> Salleh et al. (2017, 133) say that Malaysian NGOs “are well-known as being among the most active non-state actor groups in the world that support Palestine.” The pro-Palestinian NGO Viva Palestina Malaysia (2016) explains that the 2008–09 war between Israel and Gaza was the turning point for Malaysian civil society activists to engage for the Palestinian cause: “In the aftermath of the Gaza massacre on 27 December 2008, 50 Malaysian NGOs united to champion the Palestinian cause. The Coalition of Malaysian NGOs against Persecution of Palestinians (COM-LETE) formed on 5 Jan 2009, cuts across religious, racial and political barriers.” Most of the other pro-Palestinian NGOs were also founded around that time, including PCOM in 2011,<sup>6</sup> Aqsa Syarif Berhad (one of MyCare’s six agencies) in 2010, the Malaysian Relief Agency in 2009–10, and the Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia in 2012 (Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia 2018).

Most of them stress that they are apolitical and cross-sectarian and have good relationships with diverse politicians in Malaysia and the Palestinian territories. They argue that this enables them to gain the support of the whole Malaysian population, beyond ethnic affiliations.<sup>7</sup> In reality, however, some of the NGOs have a clear political orientation, as well as close relations to

5. In summer 2017, after Israel had limited access by Muslims to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem following a terrorist attack by a Palestinian on two Israeli policemen, 22 pro-Palestinian Malaysian NGOs initiated the Save Al-Quds campaign in Kuala Lumpur. In December 2017, 47 NGOs wrote an open letter to US President Trump which condemned his decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. In both cases, some of the NGOs have a clear Palestinian orientation, and others have a more Islamic or humanitarian focus. For more, see Citizens International (2017) and Palestinian Information Center (2017).

6. Interview: Representative of PCOM, February 5, 2018, Kuala Lumpur.

7. Interviews: Representative of PCOM, representative of MyCare.

Malaysian politicians. This is clear from the composition of their boards of trustees. Next to the civil society activists, on the boards of trustees of some of the pro-Palestinian NGOs, Malaysian politicians hold important positions, sometimes even the chair. And the politicians on these boards are affiliated with various political parties, which even oppose each other, such as the UMNO, the Islamist Parti Islam se Malaysia (PAS), and its splinter party Amanah (Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia 2018; PCOM 2013a, 11–12).<sup>8</sup> Even though some of the NGOs are in fact co-opted by Malaysian politicians, all of them clearly understand themselves as independent NGOs and as advocacy groups (MyCare 2018; PCOM 2018a; Viva Palestina Malaysia 2016, 2–3).

The pro-Palestinian NGOs in Malaysia are also well connected to political and civil society actors in the Palestinian territories. Although they say that they are only interested in providing humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians, most of them have a very close relationship to the Islamist Hamas, which has ruled the politically and economically isolated Gaza Strip since 2007 (Viva Palestina Malaysia 2018a; Zeiger and AP 2013).<sup>9</sup>

#### **THE PRO-PALESTINIAN TAN IN MALAYSIA: A COMMON CAUSE BUT INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS?**

##### **Advocacy and Politics: The Palestinian Cultural Organization Malaysia**

PCOM is among the most important and the most political pro-Palestinian NGOs in Malaysia. It describes itself as an independent NGO (PCOM 2018a) and says its main official interest is advocacy of the Palestinian cause in Malaysia and the Palestinian struggle for an independent state. The organization understands itself as a platform for the Palestinians and Malaysians to engage in a mutual relationship.<sup>10</sup> PCOM underlines that it has neither a political orientation nor a religious affiliation, because it does not want to

8. Interview: Representative of PCOM.

9. After Hamas won the 2006 legislative elections in the Palestinian territories, disputes emerged between the Islamist Hamas and the secular Fatah. Although the two organizations had built a national unity government in 2007, new disputes between them erupted again in the same year and led to a bloody brother war, followed by the violent takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas. All attempts at reconciliation since then have failed. The Palestinian territories are now divided between the West Bank, led by the Palestinian National Authority (which is controlled by Fatah), and the politically and economically isolated Gaza Strip, where Hamas maintains an increasingly authoritarian political order. For more, see Asseburg (2007).

10. Interview: Representative of PCOM.

get caught between different political camps, but aims to be open to the whole Malaysian population, independent of religious and ethnic affiliations.<sup>11</sup>

It is PCOM's mission to "present the true picture of the Palestinian Cause to the Malaysian government, society and media so that we become a recognized reference on the developments of the Cause and the suffering and hopes of the Palestinian people" (PCOM 2018a, 2). It "aims at developing new links with the Malaysian people and government in order to serve the Palestinian Cause" (4). PCOM underlines its strong focus on advocacy in the introduction posted on its website. This document lists PCOM's main goals, including raising awareness of the Palestinian question in Malaysia; improving interactions between Malaysians and Palestinians; communicating the Palestinian issue to Malaysian officials, the media and the public; and mobilizing support for the Palestinian question among the Malaysians (3). To promote advocacy, PCOM organizes various activities in Malaysia, such as Palestinian Advocacy Week in August 2017 (PCOM 2017a, 2017b).

PCOM is well connected within both Malaysia and the Palestinian territories. In Malaysia, PCOM has close links to politicians of various political parties. Its board of trustees includes politicians from different, even opposed, parties. Seri Shahidan Kassim of the UMNO, who served as a minister in the Prime Minister's Department from 2013 until 2018, has been the head of the board of trustees at least since 2013 (PCOM 2013a, 11).<sup>12</sup> Thanks to his dual role, PCOM had direct access to the center of the Malaysian government. At the same time, politicians from the Islamist PAS and its splinter party Amanah, both opposition parties at the time of my interviews, were also members of PCOM's board of trustees.<sup>13</sup> However, the other members besides those I mention in this study (Seri Shahidan Kassim, Abdul Latiff Mirasa, and since 2018 Saifuddin Nasution Ismail) remain anonymous. Their

11. Interview: Representative of PCOM.

12. It was not possible to ascertain whether PCOM elected a new head for its board after the BN and UMNO were ousted from power in the 2018 elections. What is clear, however, is that Saifuddin Nasution Ismail, of the People's Justice Party and minister of domestic trade and consumer affairs in the new Mahathir government, was elected to the board in July 2018. At the same time, former Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Hamidi, from the UMNO, who had been PCOM's patron since its founding, was replaced by Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (see conclusion of the article). As these changes took place, it is possible that Seri Shahidan Kassim also was replaced as the head of the board. For more, see PCOM (2018b).

13. Interview: Representative of PCOM.

names did not appear on PCOM's website, in its publications and social media, or in speeches, traditional media, or academic articles. The PCOM representative I interviewed refused to mention their names. He only said that the board of trustees includes members from various political parties. He referred to the People's Justice Party, PAS, UMNO, and Amanah, and also to "public figures" in Malaysia. This secrecy contrasts with other pro-Palestinian NGOs in Malaysia, including the Al-Quds Foundation Malaysia (2018) and Viva Palestina Malaysia (2018b), which openly publish the names and affiliations of their board of trustees members.

On the Palestinian side, PCOM is closely linked to Hamas. This becomes clear in comparing the logos of the two organizations (Hamas 2017a, 1; PCOM 2018a, 1). At the top of each logo is a shape representing historical Palestine (today's Israel and the Palestinian territories), in green. Green is known as the color of Islam and very often used by Muslim or Islamist political actors, including Hamas and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At the center of each logo is the al-Aqsa mosque of Jerusalem. The Hamas logo is bounded by two Palestinian flags crossed by swords; PCOM's logo has a Malaysian flag on the left and a Palestinian flag on the right, which are linked at the bottom by two hands clasping each other. At the bottom of each logo is some text placed along a curve. The Hamas logo has the words *Palestine* and *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya* (Islamic Resistance Movement, for which Hamas is the acronym). The PCOM logo has its name, *Palestinian Cultural Organization—Malaysia*. The logos are clearly very similar, just adapted to two specific contexts.

The connection between the two organizations becomes more apparent in PCOM's use of social media. PCOM's chairman, Muslim Imran Abu Umar (Muslim Imran), is of Palestinian nationality and openly shows his affiliation with Hamas on his Twitter page. He frequently tweets pictures of himself with high-ranking Hamas officials, such as Ismael Haniyeh, current head of Hamas' Political Bureau (Muslim Imran 2018a); Izzat al-Rishaq and Usama Hamdan, both members of the Political Bureau; and Maher Salah, the head of the Hamas movement overseas (Muslim Imran 2017b). He tweeted about his happiness on the visit of "the brothers Maher Salah and Izzat al-Rishaq in Kuala Lumpur" (Muslim Imran 2017c). When asked about PCOM's relation to Hamas in a personal interview, the PCOM representative said that the NGO has no political orientation. He did not deny, however, that PCOM has close contacts with Hamas.

In the content of its official website, one can distinguish two different threads. First, there is content originating with PCOM. Here, PCOM emphasizes its advocacy work and encourages support for the Palestinian cause in Malaysia (Muslim Imran 2015; PCOM 2018a).<sup>14</sup> The material criticizes Israel as a Zionist project, for being an apartheid regime, and for its brutal wars on Gaza (PCOM 2014), but it does not question Israel's right of existence. The second kind of content is external material, which comes directly from Hamas's English website. PCOM does not say that this material comes from Hamas, but it is clear when the two websites are compared (Hamas 2018a, 2018b; PCOM 2018c, 2018d). And this material is much more critical of Israel. Indeed, it takes Hamas's stance of Palestinian (armed) resistance to Israel (Koss 2018, 101–02; PCOM 2018e). PCOM's website also offers key Hamas political documents, including "A Document of General Principles & Policies," published by Hamas in May 2017 as the first political program since the release of its 1988 charter.

PCOM's close connection to Hamas has repercussions for the intra-Palestinian power struggle between Hamas and the secular Fatah. It is remarkable that PCOM has no links at all to Fatah. Its publications and social media never mention Fatah. Diplomats with the Palestinian embassy in Kuala Lumpur, which is run by the Palestinian National Authority and thus Fatah-affiliated, confirm PCOM's strong Hamas affiliation. One diplomat (interviewed in February 2018) said that PCOM was the unofficial embassy of Hamas in Kuala Lumpur. He blamed the Malaysian government, especially former Deputy Prime Minister Hamidi, for its close cooperation with PCOM and thus implicitly with Hamas.

### **The Islamist Hamas: Improving Reputation**

Hamas cooperates in the pro-Palestinian TAN with Malaysian politicians and PCOM. Its main interest is to improve its political reputation in Malaysia, which has international repercussions, as well as impacts at the domestic level in the Palestinian territories.

Within the TAN, Hamas openly touts its good relationship with the Malaysian government, while it keeps its connection to PCOM hidden. On its website (Hamas 2017b) and on media pages like the Palestinian

14. Interview: Representative of PCOM.

Information Center (2016) and the Gaza-based newspaper *Al-Risala* (2017), both known to be linked to Hamas, Hamas showcases its close relationship to the Malaysian government, especially the UMNO. But these sources never refer to PCOM, and very rarely to pro-Palestinian NGOs in Malaysia in general. The same applies to Hamas's senior member Mousa Abu Marzouq (2015) and Political Bureau member Izzat al-Rishaq (2017). Both are active on Twitter and mention Hamas's good relationship with the Malaysian government and Hamas's visits to Malaysia, but never PCOM or the other pro-Palestinian NGOs in Malaysia.

The relationship between Hamas and the UMNO has also strong impacts on the relationship of the Malaysian government with the Palestinian Fatah. Malaysia and Hamas have intensified official contacts since Malaysia's then-Prime Minister Najib Razak officially visited the Gaza Strip for the first time in 2013, where a Hamas delegation, headed by then-Hamas-Prime Minister Ismael Haniyeh, welcomed him. Razak's trip was sharply criticized by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's office in Ramallah, which said that the visit to the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip would worsen the political division between the West Bank and Gaza and harm the legitimate representation of the Palestinian people, that is, the Palestinian National Authority, headed by Fatah (Ma'an News Agency 2013). Hamas spokesperson Sami Abu Zahri rejected this criticism. He said that such visits would strengthen the steadfastness of the Palestinian people and break the siege of Gaza (*Al-Risala* 2013). But Najib's visit to Gaza did cause lasting damage to the relationship between Fatah and the Malaysian government, especially the UMNO, as a representative of the Palestinian embassy in Kuala Lumpur confirmed to me in a personal interview in February 2018. He said that a Fatah delegation went to Cairo in 2013 and tried to prevent Razak, who wanted to enter Gaza via the Egyptian crossing, from visiting the Strip, but Razak insisted. Since then, the relationship between the UMNO and the Palestinian National Authority has reached a nadir, and Mahmoud Abbas has not visited Malaysia in years.

Meanwhile, the relationship between Hamas and the UMNO has steadily strengthened. In the same year Razak visited Gaza, Hamas officially visited Malaysia for the first time. In December 2013, a Hamas delegation led by Khaled Meshal, then head of its Political Bureau, arrived in Kuala Lumpur. Hamas attended the UMNO's 67th annual general assembly and met with the Malaysian prime minister (PCOM 2013b, 4). Muslim Imran, chairman of PCOM, said that the official Hamas visit to Malaysia would further

strengthen their relationship. He added that the Malaysian government was happy to receive a delegation from a movement of resistance to the occupation (referring to Israel), and that Hamas's visit to Kuala Lumpur would aid Malaysia's role in supporting the Palestinian cause at the regional, Islamic, and international levels (al-Adam 2013). Since then, Hamas has visited Malaysia regularly and attended the UMNO's general assembly in 2015, 2016, and 2017 (Hamas 2015, 2017b). In mid-2016, a Hamas delegation also went to Malaysia to meet with the major opposition party, the Islamist PAS (Hamas 2016).

Hamas itself displays its close relationship to the UMNO on its website, and some members of the Political Bureau, like Izzat al-Rishaq, also refer to it. But Hamas never refers to the third partner in the TAN, PCOM. In the official Hamas documents not a single reference to PCOM can be found. Yet Hamas's documents and media reports show that Hamas and PCOM are directly linked, and that PCOM represents Hamas in Malaysia. A Hamas press release on its official visit to the Islamist PAS names Muslim Imran, PCOM's chairman, as a member of Hamas. But even this does not refer to PCOM, only to Muslim Imran, as a representative of the Hamas movement in Malaysia (Hamas 2016).

Two reasons could be suggested for why Hamas conceals its relationship to PCOM. First, it is easier for PCOM to establish ties to Malaysian politicians and Malaysian society as an officially registered NGO than as a Palestinian, that is foreign, political organization. Second, this might be an attempt by Hamas to prevent Israel from interfering with Hamas's presence in Malaysia. This seems to be even more likely considering the Palestinian electrical engineering scientist, Fadi al-Batsh, who was a lecturer at the University of Kuala Lumpur, and who was murdered in the Malaysian capital in April 2018. Some reports suggest that the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, was behind the assassination. According to a *New York Times* report, al-Batsh was part of Hamas's military wing, the Izz ad-din al-Qassam Brigades, and was accused of researching and acquiring weapons and drones for Hamas (Beech and Bergmann 2018). International media circulated photos of men in the Jabaliya refugee camp in Gaza, where al-Batsh was from, holding posters issued by Hamas and the al-Qassam Brigades, praising al-Batsh as their martyr (*Deutsche Welle* 2018; Zboun 2018). Hamas (2018c) also issued a press release eulogizing one of its sons, "the martyr Dr. Engineer Fadi Muhammad al-Batsh." The assassination is evidence of the permanent presence of Hamas members in

Malaysia and also shows the interlinkage between Hamas and PCOM. A photo in the *New York Times* report shows Fadi al-Batsh's funeral procession. Muslim Imran, PCOM's chairman, is among al-Batsh's pallbearers, and another high-ranking PCOM representative is walking closely behind him.

### **UMNO: Increasing Domestic Legitimacy by Supporting Hamas**

The UMNO's engagement in the pro-Palestinian TAN goes hand in hand with Malaysia's general support for the Palestinian cause, which has two overall motivations. First, it follows the country's tradition to strengthen the emergence of "a just and safe international order, and to promote the struggle against imperialism, racism and human misery" (Robani 2007, 42). For the same reason, Malaysia also supported the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and the Muslims in Bosnia during the war of 1992–95 (42). Second, and much more important, Malaysia's support of the Palestinians is in line with the domestic Islamization policies the UMNO has introduced and promoted since the 1970s. At that time, the government also launched the New Economic Policy, a comprehensive economic program, from which especially the Muslim-Malay population benefitted, who had been economically disadvantaged *vis-à-vis* the Chinese and Indian ethnic minorities since the founding of Malaysia in 1963.<sup>15</sup> In promoting this policy, the secular UMNO tried to increase its share of votes in the Muslim part of the society and to set itself apart from the Islamist opposition party, PAS.

The UMNO and PAS, which have both used Islam to boost their legitimacy in the population and competed over which represents the true orthodoxy of Islam (Ufen 2009, 324), share common roots. In November 1951, in pre-independence Malaysia, following a leadership struggle within the UMNO, Persatuan Islam Se-Malaya (Pan-Islamic Organization), a group of *ulama* (religious scholars), imams, and national conservatives, emerged as a splinter of the UMNO. This organization was later rebranded as PAS (Noor 2014, 36–41). Although the UMNO and PAS have been opponents since then, former Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein (Najib's father) brought PAS into the UMNO-led alliance, which became the BN in 1974 (82). The UMNO and PAS teamed up in the coalition for different reasons.

15. Under the name Federation of Malaya, Malaysia achieved independence from the United Kingdom in 1957. In 1963, the British annexed Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah to the Federation of Malaya and called the combination Malaysia. Then in 1965 Singapore left Malaysia.

The UMNO wanted to secure its “claim to be the sole representative and protector of the Malays” (Wong 2018, 760) after the May 1969 elections, in which the UMNO-led alliance had lost many votes and which had been followed by ethnic riots. PAS wanted to strengthen its power over the long term and to promote the Islamic cause (Noor 2014, 82–83). The alliance between the UMNO and PAS was short-lived. PAS left the BN in 1977, after its power base had eroded in Kelantan, the home state of PAS’s then leader, Asri Muda (92–95).

Since then, the UMNO and PAS have been archrivals, competing for votes. Given this rivalry, it was especially during Mohamad Mahathir’s first incumbency (1981–2003) that the UMNO introduced state-led Islamization policies to unify the Muslim Malay population *vis-à-vis* the minorities (Ufen 2009, 321; see also Kheng 2002; Yong 2008). Mahathir also increasingly used Islam as a foreign policy tool and aligned Malaysia along international Islamic issues (Robani 2007, 62–63). He also made sure that the Palestinian issue received more attention in politics and society (64–68). PAS also turned more to the realm of global political Islam, which was on the rise following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Witnessing the success of more radical groups like the Lebanese Hezbollah, PAS’s global orientation shifted toward a more radical Islamist stance (Noor 2014, 121–23), and PAS started to present itself as a radical alternative to the modernist Islamist approach of the UMNO (Wong 2018, 764).

After the 2008–09 Israel–Gaza war, UMNO politicians started to support the emerging pro-Palestinian NGOs in Malaysia. Deputy Prime Minister Hamidi played a special role in the relationship between the UMNO and the pro-Palestinian NGOs, especially PCOM. According to the PCOM representative I interviewed, PCOM opened its office in Malaysia at the direct request of Hamidi. Since then, Hamidi has served as an advocate and supporter of PCOM in Malaysia. He has attended almost all the larger events it organized, and also met high-ranking Hamas politicians, usually accompanied by PCOM chairman Muslim Imran.

Each year PCOM invites the Palestinian community in Malaysia to take part in the Grand Iftar, which PCOM has organized since its inception.<sup>16</sup>

16. Iftar is the breaking of the fast that takes place every evening after sunset during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar. During Ramadan, Muslim believers fast from dawn to dusk. It is the only month named in the Qur’an. For more, see Esposito (2003a, 2003b).

Leading Malaysian politicians from different parties, and also pro-Palestinian NGOs, take part. Since the early days of PCOM, Ahmad Hamidi has served as a kind of a patron during these celebrations, as the invitation to the 2012 event shows. In it, PCOM (2012) invites the Palestinian community in Malaysia to “its 2nd annual grand iftar . . . with the presence of representatives from the Malaysian government, political parties, NGOs and organizations.” PCOM clearly states that it organized the celebration “under the auspices of his Excellency Dato’ Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (Minister of Defence Malaysia, PCOM).” Hamidi’s special status in the relationship between PCOM and the UMNO is further demonstrated by his active roles in the Grand Iftar celebrations. At the fifth annual Grand Iftar, Hamidi participated in a roundtable on stage in front of the general audience. Muslim Imran, PCOM’s chairman, and Abdul Latiff Mirasa, member of PCOM’s board of trustees and chairman of the Restu Foundation in Malaysia, which works for the preservation and revival of Islamic art, were the other panelists (PCOM 2015b). Hamidi also gave a speech at this event (PCOM 2015c).

In the relationship between the UMNO and Hamas, PCOM serves as a link or a broker. At every occasion when members of the UMNO and politicians from Hamas have come together in Malaysia, PCOM, and especially its chairman, Muslim Imran, was present as well. Other political parties also have relationships with PCOM, but the UMNO has the closest, although the PCOM representative I interviewed for this study tried to put it differently. He said that PCOM has good contacts with various political parties. He said that the relationships are based on a common interest in the Palestinian cause and that this common interest helps PCOM neither take sides in Malaysian politics nor create tensions between Malaysian political parties. PCOM’s sole aim is to maintain a focus on the Palestinian issue.

Taking a closer look at PCOM’s interactions with political parties in Malaysia, a different picture emerges. PCOM has some contacts with PAS, which became apparent when PCOM’s chairman, Muslim Imran, met with PAS as a member of a Hamas delegation to Malaysia in 2016, as noted above. However, this is the only contact between PCOM and PAS that appeared in the media coverage on PCOM and on PCOM’s own website and its social media platforms before the 2018 general election. Moreover, the PCOM representative I interviewed remained quite vague when referring to PCOM’s contacts with different political parties and refused to mention any names.

## CONCLUSION

In Malaysia, a pro-Palestinian transnational advocacy network has emerged since the war between Israel and Gaza in 2008–09. Pro-Palestinian NGOs close to Hamas, the Malaysian UMNO, and Hamas itself are involved. The common transnational cause of the TAN is the liberation of Palestine and the struggle against Israel. All actors involved in it openly advocate for this cause. At the same time, each of the three actors uses the network to follow its own interests.

First, there is the pro-Palestinian NGO, PCOM. It is officially registered as an NGO in Malaysia but is co-opted by Malaysian politicians. Thus, it is not independent from politics. Officially, PCOM works for the Palestinian cause in Malaysia and focuses on advocacy. Unofficially, PCOM represents Hamas in Malaysia. It works to improve Hamas's links to Malaysian politicians and the Malaysian population and to strengthen the relationship between Hamas and Malaysia.

Second, there is Hamas. Hamas engages in the TAN to improve its international reputation and legitimacy. It uses PCOM to strengthen its relationship to Malaysian officials, especially those in the UMNO. Expanding its international relationships gives it leverage in its power struggle with the Palestinian Fatah. Hamas's relationship with Malaysia weakens Fatah's status as the internationally recognized representative of Palestinian territories. This has repercussions for the power struggle between Hamas and Fatah at the domestic Palestinian level.

Third, there is the Malaysian UMNO. It engages in the TAN, although the Malaysian government generally restricts political NGOs and especially fears the influence of foreign powers. The UMNO engages in the TAN because this network supports the UMNO's overall policies. The UMNO uses the Palestinian cause and the pro-Palestinian TAN to strengthen its own reputation in the Malaysian population. It tries to use the Palestinian cause as an Islamic issue to increase its popularity in the Muslim Malay population, its traditional support base.

The future of the pro-Palestinian TAN in Malaysia seems to be stable, barring path-breaking changes in the political landscape. Although PCOM (and thus implicitly Hamas) seemed to be very close to the UMNO via PCOM's patron, former Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Hamidi, after the 2018 general Malaysian elections and the UMNO's ouster from power, the

pro-Palestinian TAN still seemed to be stable. This became apparent during PCOM's 8th Grand Iftar, held on June 9, 2018, when the new government was already in power. At the Iftar, Ahmad Hamidi was replaced as PCOM's patron by the new deputy prime minister, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. Hamidi did not take part. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail gave a keynote speech (Ismail 2018) and exchanged views with high-ranking PCOM members (PCOM 2018f). That PCOM was able to replace its long-term partner Hamidi just a month after the elections and the subsequent unprecedented power shift, shows how well PCOM (and implicitly Hamas) are connected with politicians in Malaysia. How it was possible for PCOM to switch alliances so quickly is not clear. One can assume, however, that then-Prime Minister Mahathir provided the link for PCOM to the new government and also to Ismail, of the People's Justice Party. Mahathir, a former member of the UMNO, has always been an important patron of PCOM. In 2011, he was the one who gave a speech and honored PCOM at the organization's launching ceremony (PCOM 2011). His support for PCOM goes hand in hand with his support for the Palestinian cause and the Islamization policies he pursued in Malaysia during his first incumbency. Thus, it is likely that Mahathir provided the link between PCOM and the new administration.

The pro-Palestinian TAN in Malaysia offers new insights into TANs in a non-Western region. This research demonstrates that TANs can involve state actors and NGOs at the same time. It also shows that the actors in the pro-Palestinian TAN in Malaysia concentrate on the Palestinian cause as a global issue, but do so from a bottom-up perspective; that is, they are trying to strengthen advocacy and awareness for the Palestinian cause in Malaysian society and politics. Finally, it shows that the Palestinian cause, as the official shared issue of the pro-Palestinian TAN in Malaysia, provides a frame of reference in which the actors interact and cooperate to pursue their respective and individual political interests.

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