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The Abraham Accords: Malaysia's Cautious Response

By Ariel Tan

SYNOPSIS

Malaysia's lowkey response to the Abraham Accords has surprised some, although it is in keeping with its pragmatic foreign policy. Will Malaysia review its position should there be further strategic shifts in the Arab and Muslim world?

COMMENTARY

MALAYSIAN FOREIGN Minister Hishammuddin Hussein issued a statement on 15 August 2020 which recognised the “[sovereign right](#)” of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to establish relations with Israel, while reiterating Malaysia's longstanding support for the Palestinians. Malaysia has not expressed support for the “Abraham Accords” and continues to distinguish itself as a country with no diplomatic relations with Israel.

This followed former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's [criticism](#) that it “bolsters the stand taken by Israel that Palestine belongs to Israel. Of course there will be a reaction from the Palestinians and those who are sympathetic towards the Palestinians. This will mean prolonging the war in the Middle East”.

No Softening of Stance towards Israel

Deputy Foreign Minister Kamarudin Jaffar has had to reiterate Malaysia's position and deny that it has softened its stance on Israel in parliament in [November](#) and December 2020.

Parliamentarians have asked how the government would work with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to oppose the Accords and demanded that Malaysia withdraw from the 2021 Dubai Expo. Opposition MP Salahuddin Ayub noted that Israel

would be attending and Malaysia should show its rejection of Israel because humanitarian considerations and Islamic solidarity should trump economic interests.

He reportedly said "the Perikatan Nasional government who claims to be [a Malay-Muslim government](#) must prove their commitment in defending the struggles of oppressed Muslims".

These statements reflect an expectation for Malaysia to take a harder line on the Accords, while the government's response has been a fine balancing of domestic political imperatives and strategic interests.

Longstanding Position

Malaysia has consistently called for peace negotiations and the creation of an independent state of Palestine based on the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, without which, it would not establish diplomatic relations with Israel.

Yet, recent events have thrown up new considerations. The Accords' powerful backers – the United States (US), UAE and reportedly Saudi Arabia – are seeking to “normalise normalisation” of relations with Israel in the Muslim world by incentivising more countries to establish relations with Israel, including those beyond the Middle East. Apart from Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan have done so.

Pakistan is reportedly facing strong economic pressures from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, while Indonesia has been told that the [US](#) International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) could more than double its current portfolio of US\$1 billion (S\$1.3 billion) in Indonesia if it established ties with Israel. Malaysia could be courted too. However, all three have democratically-elected governments that cannot easily ignore public sentiments against Israel.

Regional Dynamics

The Palestinian Authority and Hamas have criticised the Accords as undermining Palestinian interests, as have Iran, Turkey and Qatar. Riyadh has indicated that it would [only establish relations](#) within the context of a peace plan and a Palestinian state.

This initiative appears to be less about promoting Palestinian interests than about consolidating the interests of Saudi Arabia, the US, UAE and Israel, against their common adversary, Iran.

While Turkey, Qatar and Iran are often grouped together as opposing Saudi Arabia, and all three support the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, they each have their own set of complex interests vis-à-vis the other Gulf states, Israel, and the US. Turkey has diplomatic ties with Israel while Qatar has a working relationship with Israel.

Significantly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have stood down their blockade and campaign against Qatar. Turkey just sounded a conciliatory note towards Israel.

The region is in flux and no one side has overwhelming dominance. Although the

Saudis and Emiratis appear to have the momentum, the US Biden administration will support normalisation but also seek to re-engage Iran on resuming the 2015 nuclear deal.

Malaysia's Middle East Policy

Malaysia's foreign policy establishment prefers a non-aligned position that maximises its economic, political and security interests. It has rich ties with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey, and hosts a large Iranian diaspora of up to [200,000](#) (2015 estimate).

The Gulf states are important sources of trade, state investment and tourism, totalling billions each year. Saudi Arabia, as the custodian of the two holiest grand mosques of Islam, is also a source of official Islamic cache and the haj quota – a matter of utmost importance for Malaysian Malays.

Malaysia tilted towards Riyadh during the Najib administration, sending troops to Saudi Arabia in support of its operations in Yemen. The Pakatan Harapan government (2018-2020) rebalanced by withdrawing the troops and closing the anti-terrorism King Salman Centre for International Peace.

It arguably over-corrected and further angered Saudi Arabia by hosting the Kuala Lumpur Summit in 2019 with leaders of Iran, Turkey and Qatar, which was seen as a rebuke of the OIC and Riyadh for their failure to solve the challenges facing Muslim communities globally. Malaysia has, however, returned to closer ties with the Saudis under current Foreign Minister Hishammuddin.

While Malaysia cannot afford to offend the Saudis, no one country has an overwhelming leverage over Malaysia on the politically sensitive issue of Palestine.

Domestic Constraints

Malaysia's position on Palestine was established during its early years to cultivate a constituency among the Arab world and global South, and avoid being outmanoeuvred by its then regional adversary, Indonesia, during *Konfrontasi*. The government has since adopted Palestine as a project for Muslim and national identity. Commitment to the Palestinians is portrayed as a *religious* obligation.

Anti-Israel public opinion is constantly reinforced by politicians, local media, civil society and Islamic preachers. Apart from the Palestinian Authority, then PM Najib and PM Mahathir also engaged the Hamas leadership. Malaysia hosts Hamas' de facto representative office, Palestinian Culture Organisation Malaysia (PCOM).

There is broad support for the Palestinians and anti-Israel sentiments among the majority Malay-Muslim public and establishment.

Establishing diplomatic relations with Israel would exact too high a political cost for the present government, which is struggling with fierce factional fights and contested legitimacy.

Cautious Way Forward

Malaysia is pro-Palestine not because of any intrinsic national interest in supporting the Palestinians and in opposing Israel, but because it is a source of domestic regime legitimation and serves Malaysia's strategic objectives of engaging the Muslim world as a mainstream middle power with leadership aspirations.

Although not imminent, external conditions that could encourage Malaysia to review its position include Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Indonesia establishing relations with Israel.

Other factors include improvement of ground conditions for the Palestinians; resumption of peace talks and a less controversial Israeli PM than Benjamin Netanyahu; and a shifting public opinion across the Muslim world over time, although this appears unlikely with the current Israeli position. Domestically, the government would have to be a secure one with strong Malay-Muslim support.

Any adjustment by Malaysia will be made cautiously first through more economic and unofficial exchanges with Israel, while it continues to support Palestinian statehood and provide humanitarian and development assistance.

Ariel Tan is Coordinator of the Malaysia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg