

FOREIGN POLICY EFFECTS ON MALAYSIAN MEDICAL VOLUNTEERS IN LEBANON IN THE 1980s

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Abstract

On 8 July 1987, the first team of Malaysian volunteers under the Malaysian Medical Volunteers left for war torn Beirut to volunteer in emergency medical service in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. It was the most intense and dangerous phase of the bloody 15-year long Lebanese civil war. The Malaysian Medical Volunteers (MMV) is the earliest known example of Malaysians being involved in international volunteering services especially in conflict zone in the Middle East. The example of the MMV has been a role model for other international groups such as the Medical Relief Society (MERCY). While it is known that altruism and religious affinity underpinned the motivations of Malaysians in their decision to volunteer, it is not known whether foreign policy effects their decision to volunteer their services abroad. This article seeks to shed light into this question by tracing the evolution of the MMV and the experience of the volunteers in Lebanon from 1987-1988.

Introduction

This article examines the role of the Malaysian Medical Volunteers (MMV) who served in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war from 1987 to 1988. The MMV is the earliest known evidence of a Malaysian non-governmental organisation involved in international voluntary service in a conflict zone in the Middle East. International voluntary service is defined as “an organised period of engagement and contribution to society, sponsored by public or private organisation and recognised and valued by society, with no or minimal monetary compensation to the participant”.¹ Examples of international voluntary service are the American Peace Corps, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI), MERCY Malaysia and MYCorps (a youth volunteering programme under the Malaysian Ministry of Youth and Sports). Studies have found that as in other societies, the spirit of volunteering among Malaysians is driven by altruism in response to human tragedies such as wars, political conflicts and disasters.² Nevertheless, it has to be underscored that international voluntary service is relatively less among Malaysians. Besides Lebanon, there were no other international volunteer missions run by Malaysians in the 1980s. This is probably due to the fact that such missions are expensive to organise and operate. Further, the absence of a formal structure or platform to support volunteerism is also lacking.³ MERCY Malaysia which was set up in 1999, is the most active. MERCY has been involved in disaster relief and other humanitarian missions in earthquake-stricken areas, tsunami and conflict areas as well.⁴ However, no link has been made to international voluntary service among Malaysians and Malaysian foreign policy. Therefore, this study examines the pioneering role of the MMV in Lebanon and whether it was encouraged by Malaysia’s foreign policy towards Lebanon.

In order to establish that the Malaysian foreign policy had an impact on the decision of the MMV volunteers to go to war torn Lebanon to render their services, it is necessary to examine whether Malaysians had extensive knowledge of Lebanon before the establishment of diplomatic relations. This will be dealt with in the first section. The second section looks at the influence of Malaysian foreign policy in encouraging the Malaysians to volunteer in helping the Palestinian refugees war victims Lebanon. The third section narrates the role of MMV in

Lebanon, their experiences and how the role of these volunteers in turn influenced foreign policy.

Malaysia and Lebanon Prior to the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations

Formal diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Lebanon were established in 1963. Prior to that period, there were very few contacts between the Malaya and Lebanon although Beirut must have been known among the Malay elites at least. The reason for this is because Beirut and Cairo were leading cities of the cultural revolution that began in the 18th century. As centres of the Al Nahda or Cultural Revolution, both cities were at the forefront in advancing Western ideas about modernity, power and prosperity through printed works in the Arabic language.⁵ The very notion of producing written works in Arabic was a major advancement because previously printing in the Arabic language was severely controlled by the Ottoman authorities out of concern that it could lead to the corruption of the al Quran.⁶ While the rest of the Arab world was consumed with intense debates on the implication of modernization on Islam, for the Christians it was not a problem at all. As such, Christian Arab intellectuals with the aid of American and European missionaries set up printing presses to print the bible and other liturgical works in Arabic. With arrival of printing, Beirut and Cairo also served as the beach head for western education.⁷

Hence, education was the first area where a link was conceived. Nevertheless, Beirut lagged Cairo as a popular destination for education. Cairo was still far more popular with Malays who went there mostly for religious education. Since the 1890s, significant numbers of Malays have started to go to Egypt for further education.⁸ The availability of printed works and the intellectual vibrance of the city as a centre of ideas of modernity and nationalism also appealed to Malay who studied there.⁹ In fact, by 1920 the numbers of Malay students in Cairo was significant enough to warrant the creation of a Malay students' association.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the availability of secular education in the English language made Beirut an attractive second option. The first western university to be set up in the Middle East was the Syrian Protestant College that was later renamed as the American University of Beirut. The British too considered Beirut as an alternative place to send selected Malays for the civil service for further education.¹¹ One of the earliest illustrious examples of a Malay student who studied in Beirut is Tan Sri Mohamad Noah Omar, former Speaker of the Parliament.¹² According to his grandson, Dato Seri Hishamuddin Hussein Onn, Tan Sri Noah left Johor for Beirut on 11 May 1914 with seven others.¹³ However, a search at the archives at the American university in Beirut only revealed the name of one other individual from Johor, by the name of Abdullah Taib. Tan Sri Noah initially enrolled to study Arabic at the *Kulliyah Al-Uthmaniyah Al-Islamiyah* (Ottoman School), Beirut.¹⁴ Later he continued his studies at the Syrian Protestant College from 1914-1918 which later became known as American University of Beirut. In 1918 he obtained a certificate from the College.¹⁵ Although several others followed in his footsteps, Beirut never became a popular destination for education. Consequently, Beirut never had a significant number of residents from Malaya. In fact, in 1965 there were only about 10 Malaysians in Lebanon.¹⁶

There was also little trade between the Malaya/Malaysia and Lebanon. Recorded statistics indicate some trade between Sarawak and Lebanon as shown in the table below.¹⁷ The main export items from Sarawak were spices, vegetable oil, vegetable plaiting material for making brooms and baskets, natural rubber. However, Malaysian tin-plated sheets were also imported in small quantities in the 1950s by small scale canning industries in Lebanon.¹⁸

Table 1: Trade between Asia and Lebanon

| | 1960 | 1961 | 1962 | 1963 | 1964 | 1965 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|

| EXPORTS TO LEBANON USD (millions) | | | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Indonesia | 0.04 | 0.84 | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.01 |
| China | na | na | na | 2.57 | 4.36 | 6.57 |
| Hong Kong | 0.62 | 0.91 | 1.23 | 1.10 | 1.20 | 2.00 |
| India | 0.79 | 2.26 | 1.26 | 1.74 | 1.66 | 1.92 |
| The Philippines | 0.27 | 0.06 | 0.46 | 0.26 | 1.25 | 0.79 |
| Japan | 6.93 | 7.33 | 8.56 | 8.88 | 10.55 | 17.55 |
| Sarawak | 0.07 | 0.20 | 0.02 | 0.00 | 0.02 | 0.05 |
| Thailand | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.09 | 0.07 | 0.08 | 0.02 |
| IMPORTS FROM LEBANON USD (millions) | | | | | | |
| Indonesia | neg | 0.63 | neg | 0.02 | 0 | neg |
| China | na | na | na | 0.15 | Na | 0.56 |
| Hong Kong | neg | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| India | 0.22 | 0.11 | 0.14 | 0.02 | 0.07 | 0.11 |
| The Philippines | 0 | neg | neg | 0 | neg | neg |
| Japan | 0.02 | 0.13 | 0.05 | 0.16 | 0.11 | 0.14 |
| Sarawak | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | neg |
| Thailand | 0 | neg | 0.15 | neg | 0.03 | 0.03 |

Source: Statistical Report of the Government of Lebanon, "Lebanese Foreign Trade Statistics 1960-1965," (Lebanese Higher Council of Statistics, Customs Directorate and Directorate of Central Statistics, 1965).

na – Data not available

neg – Trade volume less than USD 0.01 million.

From the preceding we can conclude that prior to the establishment of formal ties, there were little contacts between Malaysia and Lebanon. Nevertheless, Beirut at least was not completely unknown among Malaysians.

Impact of Media and Malaysian Foreign Policy

Lebanon and Beirut became better known among Malaysians during the *Konfrontasi*. Unbeknownst to Malaysia, Indonesia had mounted a campaign against Malaysia to isolate her from the Arab countries. It was part of her overall strategy to keep Malaysia out of the Afro-Asia grouping in order to deny international recognition of the newly formed federation of Malaysia.¹⁹ In order to mount an effective counter-strategy it was necessary for Malaysia to establish a strong diplomatic presence in Beirut. As a show of support to the Arab states, the government also began to reverse many of its policies on Israel. Therefore, the Israeli trade office in Kuala Lumpur was ordered closed amidst prominent media coverage.²⁰ Malaysians were also prohibited from visiting Israel and imports of Israeli products were banned.²¹ While all these initiatives appeared to be unilateral policy shifts, they were aimed at demonstrating solidarity with the Arab states. The government also launched fund collection in support of the Palestinians. In this regard an Al Aqsa fund campaign was launched to collect public funds.²² By the end of the 1960s, Malaysia managed to completely erase the negative image portrayed during the *Konfrontasi* and was accepted as a strong supporter of the Arab position and a staunchly anti-Israel.²³ In the meantime, Malaysia's relationship with Lebanon continued to attract public attention with the appointment of ambassadors to replace the earlier ones.²⁴

The Tunku's successors continued with a pro-Arab foreign policy but for different reasons. Under Razak it served as a means of securing external resources for socio-economic development.²⁵ In fact, as the NEP was still in its infancy, Malaysia was still in need of financial assistance as well as trade and investment from the Arab states. Razak's successor,

Hussein also maintained a pro-Arab foreign policy.²⁶ Given that Malaysia's modest diplomatic presence in the Middle East had been further diminished by the suspension of bilateral relations with Lebanon with the onset of the civil war, Hussein undertook high-level visits to the region to demonstrate Malaysia's presence and support for the Arab states.²⁷ As in Razak's administration, a pro-Arab foreign policy continued to serve as an external material resource for national development.²⁸

Foreign policy was also deployed to secure popular support for the government. In this regard, the Palestinian issue was something that both the Muslims and non-Muslims could identify with. In fact, the government did not articulate its support for Palestine from a religious angle. Malaysian foreign policy viewed it as an inter-state problem. From Malaysia's perspective it was an illegal occupation of a territory of one state by another. Hence, the government took the bold step of allowing the PLO to operate out of their own premises in Kuala Lumpur with financial support from the Malaysian government to show Malaysia's commitment to the Palestinian quest for statehood.²⁹ On the other hand, the government continued to demonstrate her support for the Arab states by removing all remaining links with Israel. The government therefore continued to enact policies to further restrict or cut off any indirect ties with Israel. By 1977 all trade whether direct or indirect with Israel were completely banned under the Customs Prohibition Act.³⁰

Hussein's successor, Mahathir also continued with a pro-Arab policy. In this regard, scholars have observed that Malaysian foreign policy underwent a dramatic shift under Mahathir.³¹ This change was very obvious in the way that Mahathir approached the Arab-Israeli conflict. Previously, Malaysia's policy on the Middle East echoed the position taken by the Arab states calling for the withdrawal of occupied territories based on the UN Resolutions 242 and 338. However, Mahathir took a different approach. Given the strong anti-Jewish sentiments among the Malays, Mahathir trained his sights on Israel knowing that his words would find support among the Malays.³² However, he needed a more creative way of articulating the Palestinian issue. The standard formulation based on the UN resolutions were restrictive in the sense that they were bound by the reference to the occupation of the Palestinian lands. Hence, there was little room for an "original" position on the subject. Therefore, Mahathir expanded the debate by framing the Palestinian refugee problem as an outcome of Israeli intransigence. In this way, he could also appeal to the feelings of the non-Muslims as well who sympathized with the suffering of the Palestinians. In describing the suffering of the victims, in this case, the Palestinians, he would use terms to convey the idea of premeditated, massive and repeated atrocities as shown in his first speech at the UNGA in 1982 after the brutal Sabra and Shatila massacre.³³

In West Asia, the situation has also taken a turn for the worse since the General Assembly last met. For the umpteenth time since the Palestinians were evicted from their homeland, they have been forced to move from one refuge to another. Their rights as a people are still being denied. They are not even treated as humans as the brutal massacres in the Lebanon amply demonstrate.

We remember vividly the horrors of Belsen, Dachau and other Nazi concentration camps of the second World War. We know of the sufferings of the Jewish people then and the pogroms of centuries past. We were appalled at the atrocities. Nevertheless, nobody, not even a people who had suffered as much as the Jews had, have the right to inflict

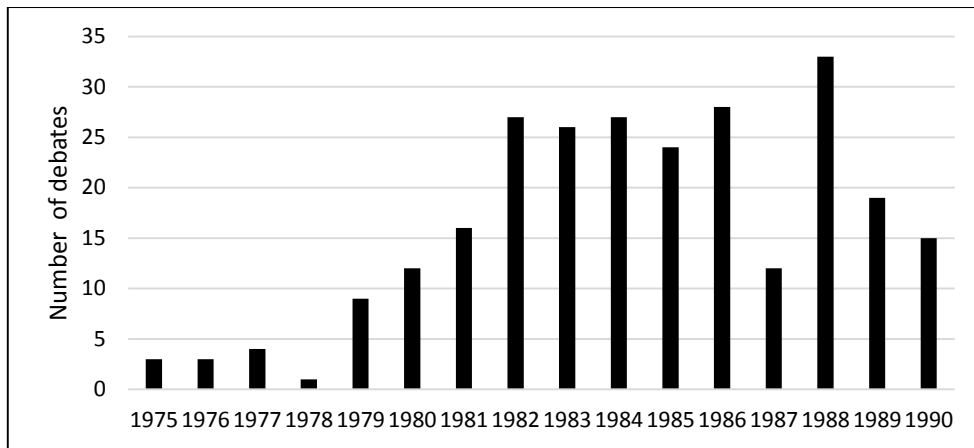
upon others the horrors of Sabra and Shatila. The Palestinians and the Lebanese were not responsible for Belsen or Dachau.

Through the dramatization of the Palestinian issue through the Lebanese civil war, Mahathir managed to solidify in the minds of Malaysians the suffering of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. However, it was not merely political support that Malaysia gave Palestine. Under Mahathir, Malaysia contributed generously to Palestine.³⁴ Malaysia also took the unprecedented step of according diplomatic status to the PLO office in Kuala Lumpur in a bid to hasten international recognition of the PLO as a *de facto* state, it would help the Palestinian cause in claiming their state.³⁵ Malaysia was the first non-Arab state to accord the PLO such a status.³⁶ In fact, since Tunku, Malaysia had begun to take a pro-Arab and anti-Israel foreign policy. The message was reinforced over the years under successive prime ministers. The positive response from the public to charity drives showed that it had become implanted in the minds of the Malaysians that the Palestinians were the victims in the Middle East conflict.

The Birth of Malaysian Volunteerism during the Lebanese Civil War

Malaysia's vocal foreign policy of support for the Palestinians and Lebanon served to shape and influence public notion of the Palestinians as the victim in the conflict. At a sub-conscious level, we can say that an image formed in the minds of Malaysians connecting the Palestinian struggle in their homeland in the Israeli occupied territories to the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Beirut. An analysis of the parliamentary records showed that the debates intensified following major events in the Middle East as shown in the figure below.

Figure 1: Number of debates on the Middle East in the Dewan Rakyat (Lower House of Representatives) from 1975-1990



Source: Parliamentary Hansard records

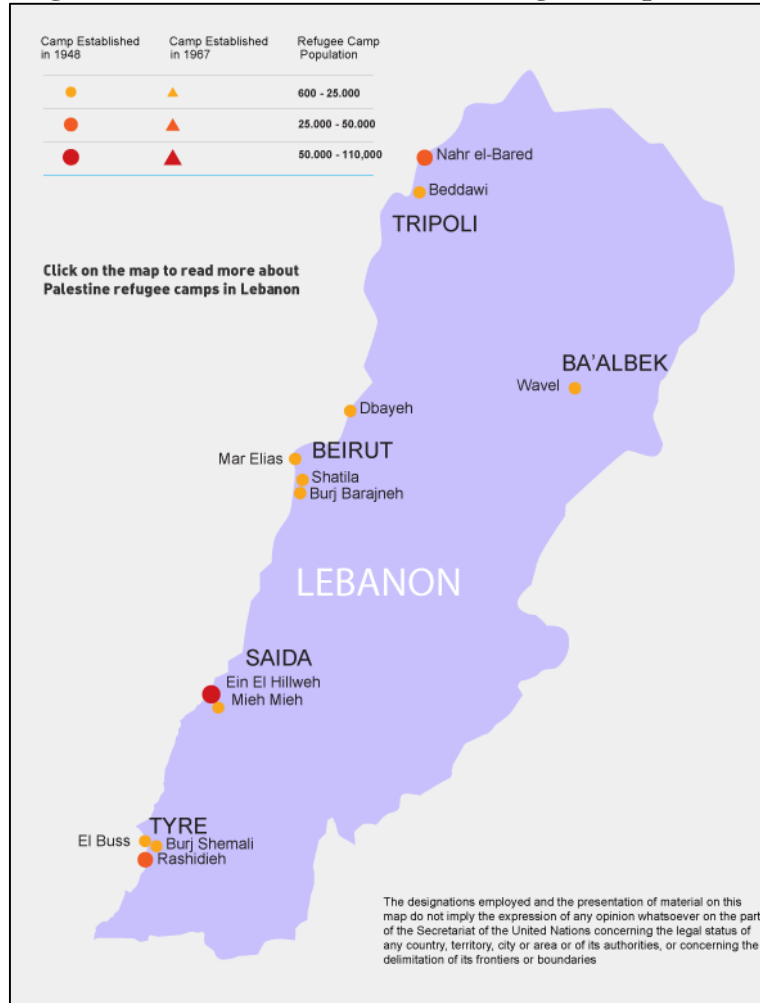
Between 1982 and 1985 the debates mostly focused on the invasion of Lebanon by Israel. The massacre of the Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatilla camp was the subject of many of the debates in 1982. In 1983, Malaysia hosted an international conference on Palestine by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was an attempt to internationalise the issue by taking advantage of the on-going conflict in Lebanon.³⁷ The issue of Palestine, the Lebanese civil war and the conflict in the Middle East continued to be hotly debated. The issue attracted many questions from the members of the parliament that the following year, Ghazali Shafie, the foreign minister was moved to provide another lengthy explanation to justify and explain Malaysia’s strong and unequivocal support for the Palestinians.³⁸ In the following years public interest continued to remain high on the issue of Palestine.

There was by and large, a consensus for Malaysia’s political support for the Palestinians against Israel. For ordinary Malaysians, Palestine, Lebanon and Beirut were the same. However, what was clear was the central message – Israel was the aggressor and the Palestinians were the victims. The Arabs on the other hand were divided and unable to help. Malaysia’s foreign policy to support the Palestinians reinforced the connection.³⁹ This aroused sympathy among Malaysians and encouraged them to find ways to help the Palestinians. For Muslims who perceived this from a narrow religious dimension were seized with the idea of personal jihad to fight alongside the Arabs. Following the shocking defeat of the Arab states in the Six Day war during which Jerusalem and the Al Aqsa mosque fell under Israeli control, Malay university students reportedly organised themselves to join the Arabs in their fight against Israel as a religious obligation.⁴⁰ The government also tacitly encouraged this mobilisation as it strengthened her foreign policy of politically supporting the Arabs.⁴¹ Popular interest for personal jihad was kept alive in the 1970s and 1980s thanks to the encouragement received in the *ceramahs*⁴² of the *dakwah* groups. One of the most influential groups associated with the resurgence of Islam is the Malaysia is Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM). ABIM also attempted to boost its image as a champion of Islamic issues by articulating on international issues of concern to the Muslims such as the Palestinian issue. In this regard, ABIM also attempted to satisfy the desire to help the Palestinians by setting up a fund-raising drive. ABIM also announced that it would help send volunteers to support Lebanon but failed to follow up on its promise.⁴³ Hence, the desire to do more for the Palestinians did not expand any further due to the absence of a formal structure to channel their interest. The absence of direct links prompted NGOs such the Malaysian Medical Volunteers (MMV) to come to the fore. As such Malaysians volunteered in 1987, when the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI) appealed for volunteers to serve in a medical mission in Lebanon because it offered a platform for them to direct their commitment.

Ms. Pok Looi was one of those who responded to MSRI's appeal. Her story is typical of the other volunteers in this groundbreaking volunteerism in a conflict area in the Middle East that it bears explaining in some detail. When Pok Looi finished high school, it was just after the May 13 incident in 1969. Although her dream was to be a nurse there were no opportunities for training. Since her entire education had been in Chinese it precluded her chances of getting accepted in government training schools. Therefore, she applied for nursing training in England. She was accepted and luckily also got a scholarship from the Lee Foundation. She left for England in 1973. It was in England where she became aware of the Middle East conflict. In fact, the only time she heard of Palestine was during a boycott by local residents in England in 1976 against the import of oranges from Jaffa as a retaliation against Israel. When she returned to Malaysia she found the Lebanese civil war being extensively covered in the Malaysian media. It was in this context, that she was attracted to an article quoting a Malaysian-born surgeon, who was serving in a Lebanese refugee camp in Beirut.⁴⁴ One article that struck her was about the desperate conditions in a refugee camp where the Palestinians, out of starvation, had been reduced to eating dead dogs and had nearly come to extent of eating their dead following a fatwa by a sheikh allowing the victims to eat the flesh of the deceased. That article pushed Pok Looi to volunteer to go to Lebanon to serve under the MMV.

The author of the article was Dr Ang Siew Chai, a Penang-born Malaysian who had migrated to England.⁴⁵ In England she was shaken to learn of the atrocities committed by Israel in Lebanon.⁴⁶ Dr Ang like many fundamentalist Christians had perceived the Israelis as the underdog in the Middle East conflict.⁴⁷ Therefore, the emerging evidence of the Israeli responsibility for the Sabra Shatila massacre disturbed her. That was a turning point for her. As such, in 1982, Dr Ang set off to Lebanon to volunteer her services to help the Palestinian refugees.⁴⁸ There, she worked through an NGO that she helped found, the Medical Assistance for Palestine (MAP). One of the trustees of MAP was Dr Shirley Gordon, Director of the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI). It was through this link that Dr Ang's work received widespread coverage in the press.⁴⁹ Responding to the appeal for medical volunteers and all types of medical supplies by MAP, Dr Gordon set up a charitable organisation to enable like-minded Malaysians who wanted to volunteer their services to help the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Hence, the Malaysian Medical Volunteers (MMV) was born. More than 300 applicants immediately registered their interest to join.⁵⁰ Due to financial constraints and security concerns only two teams were ever sent to Lebanon. The first team of 11 volunteers left for Beirut on 8 July 1987 while the second team of 8 persons that left a month later (Table 2).⁵¹ The Malaysian volunteers served in the Burj al Barajneh camp in Beirut and the Rashidie camp in South Lebanon (See Map).

Figure 2: Location of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon



Source: <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon>

Like Pok Looi, the other Malaysian volunteers were also affected by what they saw on the media. Their decision to undertake this dangerous volunteer mission was driven a feeling of sympathy and a desire to help in some way. For the Muslims, there was a religious angle as well.⁵² However, all of them felt that Malaysia’s foreign policy of supporting the Palestinians was right and just.⁵³

Table 2: Members of the Malaysian Medical Volunteers, Lebanon, 1987-1988

| Name | Gender | Function | Race/Religion |
|----------------------------------|--------|--------------------|------------------|
| Dr Shahrina bt Man Harun | Female | Doctor | Malay/Muslim |
| Dr Susheila Kumari Devan | Female | Doctor | Indian/Hindu |
| Dr Saw Win Maung | Male | Doctor | Chinese/Buddhist |
| Dr Mohd Yusop bin Amil | Male | Dentist | Malay/Muslim |
| Ahmad Bakri bin Abu Bakar | Male | Hospital Assistant | Malay/Muslim |
| Budit Busu | Male | Hospital Assistant | Malay/Muslim |
| D. R. Naidu | Male | Hospital Assistant | Indian/Hindu |
| Tengku Mustapha b. Tengku Mansur | Male | Hospital Assistant | Malay/Muslim |
| Hor Fah Thye | Male | Staff nurse | Chinese/Buddhist |

| | | | |
|--------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Dolly Fong Shook Fung | Female | Staff Nurse | Chinese/Christian |
| Hamidah Ghazai | Female | Staff Nurse | Malay/Muslim |
| Mathina Bee Gulam Mydin | Female | Staff Nurse | Indian/Muslim |
| Pok Looi | Female | Staff Nurse | Chinese/Buddhist |
| Ooi Bee Suan | Female | Staff Nurse | Chinese/Buddhist |
| Rosnah Nayan | Female | Nurse | Malay/Muslim |
| Rukshani Kaur | Female | Community Nurse/Midwife | Indian/Sikh |
| Leow Paik Kin | Male | Health Inspector | Chinese/Buddhist |
| Patrick Fong Whye Kheong | Male | Administrator MSRI/MAP Clinic | Chinese/Christian |

Source: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, "MSRI Charity Dinner Booklet," (2005)

The MMV volunteers had to face many obstacles to get to the refugee camps. Firstly, the trip to Lebanon was not easy as they had to fly through Moscow and Cyprus before getting to Beirut. At the airport, Pok Looi recalled the Maronite authorities would not let them through and insisted on checking them thoroughly.⁵⁴ As far as they were concerned, Malaysians were Sunni Muslims. Even after getting past the airport, they faced a hostile militia in control of the areas surrounding the camps.⁵⁵ Finally, after convincing the militia of their intention, they managed to get access into the Palestinian refugee camp. Initially, they also faced resistance from the Palestinians as they were unsure whether the Malaysians had ulterior motives.⁵⁶

By the time, the MMV arrived in Lebanon, the areas surrounding Burj al Barajneh and Shatila camps in west Beirut as well as the Rashidye camp in the south were dominated by Amal (Shiite Muslims) and Syrian soldiers. In other parts of Beirut especially at the entry points, the Lebanese Forces (Maronite Christians) were in control.⁵⁷ None of these groups were sympathetic to the Palestinian refugees. The Lebanese authorities and militias were worried that the Malaysians could be politically aligned to the Palestinians given Malaysia's vocal stance in their support. The Palestinian refugees for their part were fearful of the motives of these foreigners. The Lebanese Forces did not want to legitimise the presence of the Palestinians by acknowledging foreign voluntary missions such as the MMV. As far as Lebanon was concerned the "Palestinians were not refugees but only guests in Lebanon".⁵⁸ The Amal movement under the Shiites were opposed to the Palestinian refugees, because of the historical enmity between the Shiites and the Sunnis. The Syrian army, on the other hand, was aligned with the Maronite Christians and also did not favour a strong PLO presence. Further, all of them had their own vested interests to keep the Palestinian issue in the front burner. By claiming authority in parts of the city, these militias could extract financial and other resources from the public as well as from indiscriminate taxation on commercial flow and other forms of extortionist acts.⁵⁹ Therefore, foreign voluntary organisations such as the MMV were sources for extraction of funds through the imposition of various fees and other permits. In addition, these militias also benefitted by diverting some of the Arab aid to the PLO for the Palestinian refugees for their own. In short, the civil war was a means of enrichment for the warlords of the various militias.⁶⁰

Therefore, all the militias were content to allow some level of internationalisation of the Palestinian issue as long as it served to keep global attention on Lebanon. At the same time, foreign volunteer bodies were only allowed to work provided they were prepared to subsume their identity as part of the officially recognised bodies such as the Norwegian Aid Committee, the Palestinian Red Cross or other Palestinian bodies. Consequently, the MMV was only allowed to operate provided it worked under the umbrella of the Norwegian Aid Committee and the Palestinian Red Cross Society which were the only recognised bodies that were allowed

to render medical help to the Palestinians.⁶¹ Under this umbrella, the MMV was also able to work with local Palestinian NGOs such as the Beit Atfal al-Samoud.⁶²

The MMV volunteers worked under very difficult and dangerous conditions. There were never enough doctors to go around. Often the staff nurses had to handle the clinics by themselves. In addition, medical supplies and equipment were also in short supply because the Amal militia that guarded the camps severely rationed the amount of supplies that could be brought in every day. Pok Looi recalls that they even had to make their surgical bandages from old clothes.⁶³ Further by 1988, the Lebanese civil war had entered a particularly destructive phase called the “war of the camps”.⁶⁴ During this phase the Shiite Amal militias besieged the Palestinian refugee camps in a bid to decimate the PLO. Hence, the volunteers had to endure days of direct shelling by rocket fire and bombs. The MMV was forced to stop its medical assistance in Beirut in 1988 as the civil war reached its zenith. The last to remain were nurses, Dolly Fong Shook Fong and Pok Looi.⁶⁵ On 1 May 1988, the Haifa Hospital which was inside the Burj al Barajneh camp run by the Palestinian Red Cross Society was targeted by the militias. In the spate of rocket attacks, it became impossible to continue to work in the hospital. In the end, Dolly Fong also pulled out.⁶⁶ With that the MMV never went back to Beirut. Nevertheless, throughout the period when the MMV was operational and even after, many Malaysians supported their work through donations or sponsoring Palestinian orphans.⁶⁷ The Malaysian government, while not providing direct support, contributed in other ways. Since the work of the MMV was in line with the Malaysian foreign policy of support for Palestine, the government made a special dispensation to allow MSRI to raise funds from the public to support the humanitarian work.⁶⁸ The foreign ministry supported the MSRI by facilitating fund raising programmes such as charity dinner and Lebanese cultural programmes to raise funds.⁶⁹ The MMV missions were entirely funded from public charity. According to Dolly Fong, one of the MMV volunteers, it cost about \$196,000 just to fund one mission for a few months.⁷⁰ Over the years the MSRI has managed to raise several millions for the Lebanese refugee camps in Beirut. Through partnership with the Beit Atfal Al Samoud, the MSRI also has funded various programmes to provide all types of essential skills for the Palestinians refugees children. In Malaysia, the mainstream media such as the *New Straits Times*, *The Star* and *Utusan Melayu* actively participated in reporting about the fund-raising events and also raised funds on their own effort. Apart from that various foundations such as the Lee Foundation also contributed to the funds.⁷¹

Conclusion

In concluding it can be said that the Malaysian foreign policy had an impact on the members of the MMV in their decision to go to the war-torn Lebanon to render humanitarian medical service despite the dangers involved. The iteration of Malaysian foreign policy of demonstrating political solidarity with the Palestinian struggle and material support since the *Konfrontasi* had a major influence in shaping public opinion. The Malaysian society’s sympathy for the Palestinians was driven by religious affinity and humanitarian concerns. This was true of the Muslims during a period when the *dakwah* movement and NGOs such as ABIM were actively condemning the conflict in religious terms. The non-Muslims, however, associated themselves with the suffering of the Palestinian refugees from a humanitarian angle. Although the Middle East conflict was already an old issue by 1980, the Lebanese civil war was the single most influential event that propelled the plight of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon to the forefront of global attention. Malaysians, like others around the world, were also horrified by the terrible massacre perpetrated upon them such as the Sabra Shatila massacre in 1982. Mahathir’s leadership that began in 1981, served to further emphasise the issue of the Palestinian refugees and Lebanon through Malaysia’s strident foreign policy. This encouraged Malaysians to respond once a formal platform was available through the MSRI.

Hence the public responded positively to the appeal by MSRI. The study also showed that this response was motivated by a feeling of sympathy for human suffering as well as religious affinity that was captured by the media and amplified by Malaysia's foreign policy stance. In turn the work of the MMV further provided a tangible substance to Malaysia's foreign policy of strong political support for the Palestinian cause.

Notes

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² Z. Hussin and M. Arshad, "Altruism as Motivational Factors toward Volunteerism among Youth in Petaling Jaya Selangor", *International Proceedings of Economics Development & Research*, 2012.

³ Amanda Yeap, "Do Malaysians Prefer Donating over Doing Volunteer Work?", *The Star*, 26 October 2017.

⁴ MERCY Malaysia, "Mercy Malaysia," <http://mercy.org.my/>.

⁵ Samir Kassir, "A Cultural Revolution," in *Beirut*, Berkely, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2011, pp. 163-179.

⁶ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, New York: Perennial, 2003, pp. 142-146.

⁷ Kamal Salibi, "The Lebanese Awakening," in *The Modern History of Lebanon*, London: Ebenezer Baylis and Sons, The Trinity Press, 1965, p. 140

⁸ Abu Hanifah Haris and Mohammad Redzuan Othman, "Mesir Dan Hubungan Awal Dengan Masyarakat Melayu", *Selangor Humaniora Review (SHARE)* 1, No. 1, 2014.

⁹ Mohammad Redzuan Othman, "Egypt's Religious and Intellectual Influence on Malay Society", *KATHA* 1, No. 1, 2018.

¹⁰ Muhammad Hafiz Samsudin and Abu Hanifah Haris, "Penubuhan Dan Perkembangan Persekutuan Melayu Mesir (PMM), 1956-1964", *Sejarah* 24, No. 2, 2017.

¹¹ William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967.

¹² "Mohamed Noah Omar, Ex-Malaysia Speaker, 94," *The New York Times*, 6 September 1991.

¹³ Interview with Dato Seri Hishamuddin Tun Hussein Onn. 13 March 2014.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ A copy of Tan Sri Noah's educational script was obtained from the AUB archives on 14 May 2014.

¹⁶ Government of Lebanon, "Recueil De Statistiques Libanaises: Nombre D'etrangers Residants Au Liban 1965 a 1967", ed., Direction Centrale de la Statistique, Beyrouth, 1967.

¹⁷ Lebanese Higher Council of Statistics. The trade values recorded in Lebanese Pounds were converted to USD based on the average exchange rate of 1USD= 2.3 LL prior to the Civil War.

¹⁸ Interview with the Lebanese Chambers of Commerce, 26 May 2014.

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⁴¹ "Aid for those willing to help," *The Straits Times*, 28 May 1967.

⁴² Talks delivered in an informal gathering. These ceramahs usually took place in mosques and houses.

⁴³ "ABIM May Help War Victims in Lebanon," *The Straits Times*, 24 June 1982.

⁴⁴ *Palestinians Speak: I Painted the Snow Black...Because We're Afraid of the Days* (Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI) 2001).p.viii.

⁴⁵ After her studies in Singapore, Dr Ang Swee Chai practiced medicine in Singapore and took up citizenship an married Francis Khoo, a lawyer. Francis however became wanted by the Singapore government under the Internal Security Act for defending some workers and a student leader. To avoid detention and arrest, the couple fled to the UK.

⁴⁶ Recounted by Dr Ang Swee Chai, 15 September 2013.

⁴⁷ In her own words Dr Ang says "I recall how I first came to Sabra and Shatila a bigoted self-righteous fundamentalist Christian. I believed in the goodness of the Western "Christian" countries and the righteousness of Israel....On that morning in Sabra and Shatila God destroyed my self-righteousness". Swee Chai Ang, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* Second Edition (Reprint 2009) ed.(Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009). p.308.

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- ⁵² Pok Looi and Dolly Fong both converted to Islam. Pok Looi took the name Mariam Pok Looi while Dolly became Aliyah Fong Abdullah.
- ⁵³ Interview with Pok Looi. 9 December 2013.
- ⁵⁴ Interview with Pok Looi
- ⁵⁵ *Palestinians Speak: I Painted the Snow Black...Because We're Afraid of the Days*.
- ⁵⁶ Interview with Pok Looi.
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- ⁵⁸ Dalal Yassine, "Unwelcome Guests: Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon," *The Electronic Intifada* (2010), <https://electronicintifada.net/content/unwelcome-guests-palestinian-refugees-lebanon/8917>.
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- ⁶¹ See *Palestinians Speak: I Painted the Snow Black...Because We're Afraid of the Days*
- ⁶² Muharyani Othman, "Their Suffering Beckons Her," *New Straits Times*, 6 November 1989. *The New Straits Times*, 6 November 1989
- ⁶³ Interview with Pok Looi
- ⁶⁴ Joe Stork, "The War of the Camps, the War of the Hostages," *MERIP Reports*, no. 133 (1985).
- ⁶⁵ Nafizah Nadzim, "No Doctor to Man Beirut Mobile Clinics," *New Straits Times*, 11 April 1988.
- ⁶⁶ Muharyani Othman, "Their Suffering Beckons Her," *ibid.*, 6 November 1989.
- ⁶⁷ Among those who sponsored Palestinian orphans were Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Daim Zainuddin and Anwar Ibrahim. Mr Kassim Aina, General Director of one of the Palestinian NGOs involved in providing assistance to the Palestinian refugees in the vamps in Lebanon also corroborated this view. He indicated that several other Malaysian dignitaries also sponsored or even adopted Palestinian orphans. See *Palestinians Speak: I Painted the Snow Black...Because We're Afraid of the Days* and Interview with Kassim Aina,12 March, 2015; "Malaysia Sponsorship Lebanese Children", *Al Nahar*, 26 May 1988.
- ⁶⁸ Interview with Pok Looi.
- ⁶⁹ "Folklore Libnan Fi Maliziya (the Folklore of Lebanon in Malaysia)," *Al Nahar*, 11 June 1985.
- ⁷⁰ Muharyani Othman, "Their Suffering Beckons Her."
- ⁷¹ "Going Back to the City of Despair," *New Straits Times*, 26 September 1988. Among the major donors was Lee Foundation (\$5000), a Muslim leader (\$5000), a Buddhist organization (\$1000), the Selangor Chinese Chambers of Commerce (\$1000), Shahreen Kamaluddin (\$1000), Tan Kim Ngau (\$1000), Chan Ah Kok (\$1000), the Office of Human Development (\$1000), Utusan Melayu (\$500) and MCA Cheras Branch (\$500).