

PERSPECTIVE

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Rhetorical Sympathy for the Palestinian Struggle in Malaysia and the Poignant Misuse of ‘Zionism’

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Muslim activists gather to protest in the wake of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip outside the US embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 20 October 2023. Photo by Zahim Mohd/NurPhoto via AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Malaysia's online and offline support for Palestine in light of the 7 October 2023 attacks seems to indicate a dualism in solidarity— voluble support for the Palestinian cause juxtaposed with opposition to taking in Palestinian refugees and asylum seekers.
- Online sentiments show that netizens were against allowing Palestinian refugees into the country and according them basic rights, citing that Malaysia already had a huge number of refugees in the country—most of whom are Rohingya—and was struggling with its limited resources, which should be channelled to its own citizens first.
- Others contended that allowing the Palestinians into Malaysia would mean victory for Zionist imperialism and depriving the Palestinians of the right to their own homeland and the chance at so-called martyrdom.
- Interestingly, discourses on social media have also taken on an ethno-nationalist dimension, with some netizens equating the Rohingya to Zionists. The term “Zionist” has been expropriated by Malay supremacists to target individuals challenging Malaysia's established ethno-nationalist order.
- The Rohingya are deemed to be a threat to Malaysian society and responsible for a host of social problems. It is argued that the influx of Rohingyas in Malaysia will result in the community taking over the country and displacing locals in the future, similar to events taking place in Palestine (ignoring the drastically different circumstances). Ironically, these Malay supremacists espouse a similar divisive rhetoric as the Israeli Zionists they claim to despise.
- Conditional support for Palestinians, influenced by ethno-nationalist rhetoric, raises concerns about understanding and empathy of intricate geopolitical and humanitarian issues. It is imperative to confront and question these ideas to promote enlightened and empathetic discussions on the ground.

INTRODUCTION

Despite Malaysia being a staunch supporter of Palestine, a closer analysis of both online and offline support for Palestinians since the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel and Israel's subsequent retaliatory operations in Gaza suggest that Malaysia's support tends to be rhetorical or limited. It can be argued that Malaysians' conditional support for Palestine but not its refugees reflect a strong desire to preserve Malaysia's domestic stability in the face of its own challenges with refugees.

At the start of the conflict, there was a huge outpouring of support for Palestine across Malaysian online spaces. Most of the comments were statements of solidarity with Palestine, condemnation of Zionist forces, and support for the bravery of Palestinians in defending their land. However, it seemed that this support was contingent, as illustrated by the furore caused by a post advocating that Malaysia permits Palestinian refugees into the country and accord them certain rights. The post read:

“Kalau Malaysia serius pasal solidariti bersama Palestin, tandatangan Perjanjian Pelarian 1951 and terima masuk pelarian Palestin + bagi diorang hak bekerja dan belajar kat sini.”

(If Malaysia is serious about standing in solidarity with Palestine, sign the 1951 Refugee Convention to allow entry for Palestinian refugees and allow them the right to work and study here.)

- @Iqtodabal¹

This comment was viewed one million times and started a huge debate over refugee rights in Malaysia. The vast majority of X users who attacked this statement—mostly from the Malay-Muslim community—were vehement in denying any form of asylum and rights to Palestinian refugees. The core of their argument was that they supported the Palestinian fight to protect their homeland and, thus, accepting Palestinians as refugees would be counter to that goal, as illustrated in a sampling of tweets in Figure 1.²

TBH, ramai Palestinian yg dapat biasiswa belajar kt Malaysia dan dpt UN card di Malaysia ni.

Plus, kita juga ada salutkan berjuta juta ringgit setiap tahun ke Palestine terutamanya Gaza Strip.

We did as much as we can. tk smua org nk tingglkn tanah mereka

Istael tak wujud. Tak perlu pun open the flood gate. We have had enough with letting outsiders being here. What we need now, is Palestine to have their land back. Israel doesn't exist

Orang Palestin ada tanah sendiri kenapa nak kena tarik bawak sini?

Bawak semua rakyat palestini masuk sini supaya lepastu palestini dapat dikuasai sepenuhnya oleh israel kan? Mcm tu ke?

Maksudnya nenek moyang di tanah melayu dulu patutnya lari ke negara lain instead of berjuang melawan penjajah ke?

Fikir la, bukan semua orang pengecut macam kau

Habis tu tanah dia siapa nak pertahankan? Al-Aqsa yang menjadi tuntukan agama bagi seluruh umat islam tu macam mana kalau dah semua kita panggil dan beri kerja disini sedangkan mereka sepatutnya hidup aman di tanah sendiri?

Figure 1. Montage of tweets from netizens who were against allowing Palestinians to seek refuge in Malaysia, citing that they had their own land and should therefore not be deprived of the right to defend it.³

Today, there are at least 600 Palestinian refugees in Malaysia who are unable to work or send their children to school.⁴

Analysis of online narratives since the spate of violence began in early October 2023 showed that sentiments were highly ethno-nationalist in nature, which also saw a curious twist in how the term “Zionist” was weaponized to demonise Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this article were collected from three social media sites: X, as well as the Lowyat.net and cari.com.my forums between 7 October-6 December 2023. Keywords such as Israel, Palestine/*Palestin*, Rohingya, and Zionist/*Zionis* were inputted into a social media listening platform, with the location narrowed down to Malaysia, and limited to posts in English and Bahasa Melayu. Throughout the period, 718 posts were analysed.⁵

In general, X users are a balance of both genders and are multiracial. Whereas Lowyat.net is a traditional web forum which caters to a largely English-speaking male demographic and Cari.com.my is a Malay language-based (and also male dominated) forum. Discourse was mainly driven by the Malay-Muslims, as it is widely perceived that the Israel-Hamas conflict hinges on a religious dimension.

It was found that X was the most balanced space for digital public discourse; comments on Lowyat were widely jingoistic, especially when it came to the discussion of refugees, while Cari had the most heated and concentrated presence of ethno-nationalists. Overall, the majority were sympathetic and supportive of the Palestine resistance. However, others drew a line at Malaysia taking in refugees, arguing that the country’s resources were already stretched thin and that its citizens should come first. Interestingly, a strand of discourse also morphed into the misappropriation of the term “Zionist” to refer to the Rohingya in Malaysia.

SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIANS AT A DISTANCE BUT NOT AT HOME

Malaysia has always had a contentious history and relationship with refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of November 2023, there are an estimated 185,000 refugees in Malaysia, all of whom are not given any legal status and access to basic services such as healthcare, education, or the right to work, as Malaysia is not a party to the Refugee Convention. The vast majority of these refugees are from Myanmar, of which over 100,000 are Rohingya. The Rohingya community has generally been unwelcome in Malaysia due to their large numbers and lack of access to resources, which has caused the community to be associated with crime and other social ills.

Malaysian antipathy towards Rohingya refugees has been used to dissuade and deny Palestinian refugees from making their way to Malaysia. Some netizens argue that if Malaysia opens its doors to these refugees, then it was akin to letting the Zionists win. There is no irony in the way these comments are presented, even as reports of the high death toll among Palestinian civilians continue to stream in daily. Some Muslim commenters consider these deaths as martyrdom and therefore allowing them to leave would be seen as denying these civilians their right to “*mati syahid*”.⁶

Sebenarnya org2 Palestin tak sanggup tinggalkan negara mereka walau berlaku genosid serta penjajahan kezaliman Zionis lbh 70 tahun. Mereka lebih cinta syahid. Jadi tak perlulah compare dgn pelarian UNCHR yg berlambak dlm Malaysia ni. Sikap dan sifat mereka pun jauh beza.

Dari cara kau cakap , kau bukan orang islam , kau tak faham islam, orang Palestine bukan x mampu lari tapi diorg berjihad biar mati dalam perang & mati syahid , sebagai muslim kami percaya dengan allah , walaupun mati kami tetap menang , kalau tak menang di dunia kami menang di akhirat.

Figure 2. Examples of tweets which highlight the perceived glorification of martyrdom among the Palestinians who staunchly defended their homeland⁷

When the debate on refugees began, some netizens began comparing Palestinians and the Rohingya. They argued that if Palestinians were allowed to become refugees, they would be no better than the Rohingya. In contrast to the brave Palestinians who stayed in their country despite being under attack, the cowardly Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar were labelled as weak. The discourse started to turn incredibly toxic when the attention shifted towards the Rohingya community in Malaysia. The storming of the Balee Meuseuraya Aceh (BMA) which housed Rohingya asylum seekers by Indonesian university students on 27 December 2023 was lauded by Malaysian netizens, many of whom enjoined the same proactive measures to be taken in Malaysia in response to the presence of Rohingya in the country.⁸

WEAPONIZING ZIONISM

The narratives against the Rohingya have also taken on a curious twist with the misappropriation of the term “Zionism”. Originally used to denigrate Israel and its widening occupation of Palestine, there has been a misappropriation of the term by Malay ethno-nationalists seeking to attack anyone that threatens the status quo of the majority group in Malaysia

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Rohingya faced accusations of practising Zionist-like settler colonialism from Malay supremacist groups on social media. Allegations have been suggested that their settlement in Malaysia was aimed at integrating into society,

increasing the size of their population, and eventually displacing Malays as the dominant ethnic group. This narrative gained traction after a COVID-19 hotspot emerged in a migrant market in Selayang in mid-2020, leading to increased xenophobia, online racism, and discrimination against the community. Malaysian authorities and mainstream media portrayed the Rohingya as a threat to national security, accused them of committing crimes, and blamed them for taking over the jobs of locals. As a result, Rohingya asylum seekers were turned away from Malaysian shores over fears of exacerbating the spread of COVID-19.

Recently, boats carrying Rohingya refugees attempted to land in Aceh, Indonesia, and were turned away, even as the occupants ran out of food, water, and fuel.⁹ Many ethno-nationalist accounts on X latched on to this event and applauded the Indonesians for preventing their entry.¹⁰ This started a deeply racist-driven discussion about how the Rohingya were not wanted across Southeast Asia (especially amongst Muslim countries) and countries needed to be vigilant in not accepting them.¹¹ Both Indonesian and Malay commenters reused and reinforced many stereotypical and dehumanising terms to describe the Rohingya, including calling them Zionists.¹²

An infographic depicting the “Zionist strategy” of the Rohingya (as illustrated in Figure 3), which was first formulated in 2020, started making the rounds on Malaysian social media in light of the Aceh incursions. One Facebook post featuring this image drew up to 16,000 engagements, 4,000 comments and 4,000 shares.¹³ The post was written in a sarcastic tone, picturing a future where Rohingya had successfully embedded themselves in Malaysia (enabled by corrupt government officials), with the comments engaging in discussing stereotypes of Rohingya.



Source: @blackmerz101 X account.¹⁴

Figure 3. Infographic of Malaysia being taken over by the Rohingya in the future if the country continues to accept them as refugees and asylum seekers. Original source is unknown but first circulated in 2020

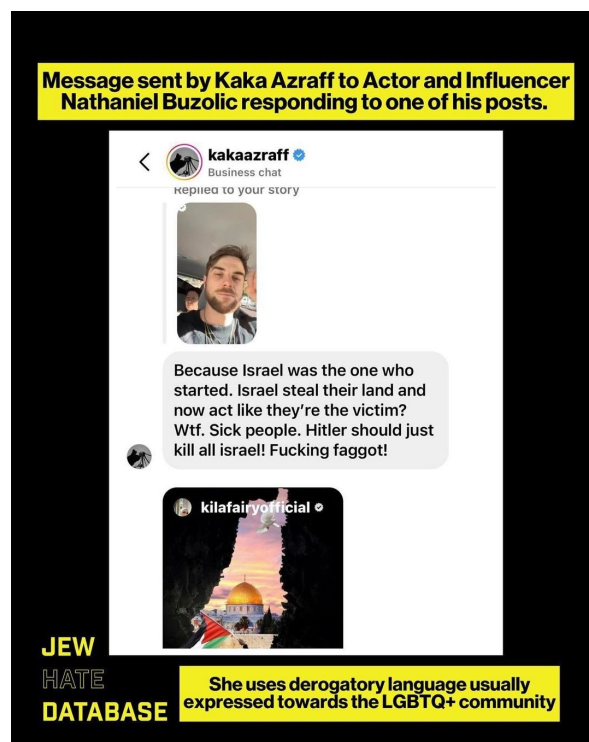
A CRITIQUE OF THE USAGE OF “ZIONISM” IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

The term “Zionism” has been used by Malay supremacists to refer to any attempt by migrants seeking to displace local populations. It completely disregards the different context in which Israeli Zionism exists and the different power dynamics between Israel and Palestine. In simple terms, Zionism constitutes a form of Jewish nationalism, an ideological and political movement which advocates the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Israel.¹⁵ Zionism essentially posits that Jews living outside of Israel are considered aliens in the countries they live in and therefore, must “settle” in the Jewish nation state, which effectively implies the secondary status of its non-Jewish citizens.¹⁶

Many Malaysians have a misconception regarding the concept of being Jewish and being pro-Zionist. Oftentimes, the two are considered to be one and the same, when in reality, one can profess the Jewish faith without being an advocate of Zionism. Hence, this misunderstanding manifests itself as an expression of anti-Semitism (a misnomer for referring to all peoples who speak Semitic languages), and as hostility and discrimination against Jews. An incident

involving Malaysian singer, Kaka Azraff, is a case in point.¹⁷ In her tirade against Australian actor, Nathaniel Buzolic over his pro-Israel stance, she was documented calling for the eradication of “all Israel” by Hitler and using a slur typically used against the queer community, resulting in her losing her contract with Warner Music Malaysia.

Ironically, ethno-nationalists labelling the Rohingya Zionists share more principles with Zionists than they realise. Many of them espouse Malaysia as being a “Malay country” and other ethnicities as being “*pendatang*” (migrants). The rhetoric from these groups has always been hostile toward non-Malay communities (including indigenous groups from the Borneo territories and the Orang Asli), based on a perception that Malaysia is a Malay state that had had the grace to let non-Malays live in the country but not to complain or to interfere in its politics.



Source: Jew Hate Database.

Figure 4. Screenshot of Kaka Azraff’s reply to Nathaniel Buzolic’s story on Instagram.

CONCLUSION

Rising intolerance has been detected in both mainstream and niche sections of Malaysia’s digital public sphere. If allowed to go unchecked, xenophobia and hostility towards migrants on the basis of different ethnicity, nationality, or cultural background could potentially give rise to further polarisation within Malaysian society, stemming from an us-versus-them mentality. Simmering tensions may come to a head by culminating in violence which targets foreigners, thus jeopardising the stability and harmony of the country.

The misappropriation of the term “Zionist” by Malay ethno-nationalists to refer to the Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers in the country reflects a concerning trend of using loaded language to perpetuate negative stereotypes and advance prejudiced narratives. This mislabelling not only inaccurately characterises the Rohingya’s plight, but at the same time also underscores broader issues within Malaysia’s response to international conflict, particularly the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. The conditional nature of support for the Palestinians, influenced by Malay supremacist rhetoric, raises troubling questions about the depth of understanding and empathy involved in addressing global humanitarian issues. It is crucial to challenge and correct these narratives, emphasising the importance of accurate terminology and fostering a more informed and compassionate dialogue surrounding such complex geopolitical events.

ENDNOTES

¹ @Iqtodabal. (2023, October 8). X. <https://twitter.com/Iqtodabal/status/1710845727226884214>

² @zee_yusoff. (2023, October 8). X. https://twitter.com/zee_yusoff/status/1710980737166705103; @princeariez95. (2023, October 8). X.

<https://twitter.com/princeariez95/status/1710866873154503159>; @denvil94. (2023, October 8). X.

<https://twitter.com/denvil94/status/1710970130405196205>; @rizmandesu. (2023, October 8). X.

<https://twitter.com/rizmandesu/status/1710905965116330291>; @krimubarak. (2023, October 8). X.

<https://twitter.com/krimubarak/status/1710896282670387505>

³ Translation: “*To be honest, there are many Palestinians who obtain scholarships and UN cards in Malaysia. Plus, we donate millions of ringgit to Palestine every year, especially the Gaza Strip. We [have done] as much as we can. Not everyone wants to leave their land.*”

“*Israel does not exist. There is no need to open the floodgates. We have had enough with letting outsiders being here (Malaysia). What we need now is Palestine to have their land back. Israel does not exist.*”

“*The Palestinians have their own land. Why do we need to bring them here (Malaysia)?*”

“*Bring all the Palestinians here (Malaysia) so that Israel can take over Palestine? Is that what we should do? That means our ancestors in Malaya should have sought refuge in other countries instead of rising up to the colonisers? Think, not everyone is a coward like you.*”

“*So who will defend their land? What will happen to Al-Aqsa, one of the holiest centres for the Muslims, if we allow them to work here (Malaysia) when they have the right to live peacefully in their own land?*”

⁴ Daim, N. (2023, December 6). *About 600 Palestinian refugees in Malaysia have received UNHCR cards*. New Straits Times. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/12/987208/about-600-palestinian-refugees-malaysia-have-received-unhcr-cards>

⁵ 619 posts were from X and 99 were from the Lowyat and Cari forums.

⁶ @IWANJELA. (2023, October 8). X.

<https://twitter.com/IWANJELA/status/1711025504219000982>; @egmdeqalbu. (2023, October 29). X.

<https://twitter.com/hidayahazdi/status/1718499794963005570>

⁷ Translation:

“*The Palestinians are unwilling to leave their country even though the genocide and Zionist occupation has been taking place for over 70 years. They prefer martyrdom (syahid). So, you do not need to compare them to the other UNHCR refugees in Malaysia. Their attitude and character are vastly different.*”

“*From the way you put it, you are not a Muslim, you do not understand Islam, it is not that the Palestinians are unable to leave, but they are fighting (jihad) to die in battle and achieve martyrdom (syahid), as Muslims, we believe in Allah, even though we die we still win, if we do not win on earth we win in the afterlife.*”

- ⁸ @mynewshub. (2023, December 30). X.
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- ⁹ Reuters. (2023, November 19). *Hundreds more Rohingya refugees arrive in Indonesia's Aceh*.
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- ¹⁰ @MALAYSIAVIRALLL. (2023, November 19). X.
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- ¹¹ @Sugiyanti15800. (2023, December 4). X.
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- ¹² @Sugiyanti15800. (2023b, December 31). X.
<https://twitter.com/HyunSo321765/status/1741423399321399425>; @rushashraf. (2023, November 19). X. <https://twitter.com/rushashraf/status/1726136810160750775>; @AbgFikLC. (2023, December 27). X. <https://twitter.com/AbgFikLC/status/1739834454124958131>
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<https://www.facebook.com/milotaburviral/posts/pfbid0XFkKGVmD1vY2VAsWbs6bZ7J51Xjp8421drN52NDNE4uADaG6PeropdrhZaRoRW1Sl>
- ¹⁴ @blackmerz101. (2023, November 21). X.
https://twitter.com/Nuraliya_husna/status/1728783640086143375
- ¹⁵ Halperin, L. (2015). *Origins and evolution of Zionism* (pp. 1–5). Foreign Policy Research Institute.
- ¹⁶ Machover, M. (2018). An immoral dilemma: The trap of Zionist propaganda. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 47(4), 69–78. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2018.47.4.69>
- ¹⁷ Screenshots of the incident was posted by @jewhatedb on 29 November 2023 at
https://www.instagram.com/p/C0NDaDRvb1l/?hl=en&img_index=2

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