



THE NEXUS OF SECURITY AND INTEREST: MALAYSIA'S APPROACH TO ARAB-ISRAELI NORMALIZATION

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Abstract:

The Arab-Israeli normalization, characterized by the Abraham Accords and subsequent diplomatic engagements, has sparked significant debate among regional actors especially among Muslim countries. In this context, Malaysia's response is analyzed by employing a combined theoretical framework of Regional Security Complex (RSC) theory and national interest theory. The study employs a qualitative method of analysis of official statements, policy documents, and diplomatic engagements. It also examines the historical context of Malaysia's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the shifts and nuances of its response in light of recent events. In addition, this study examines the domestic factors, such as public opinion, political dynamics, and the influence of religious and civil society actors, that influence Malaysia's foreign policy decisions. This study reveals that Malaysia has voiced its opposition to the process of normalisation, which has been influenced by regional security concerns rooted in Muslim solidarity and the support for Palestinian rights. Additionally, Malaysia's opposition is driven by its own national interests, encompassing domestic politics and economic relations with Arab nations.

Keywords:

Malaysia, Abraham Accords, Arab-Israeli Normalization, Regional Security Complex (RSC), National Interest

Introduction

The Arab-Israeli normalization agreements, which came into being during the Trump administration, emerged as a watershed moment in the intricate tapestry of Middle East

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diplomacy. These groundbreaking accords, meticulously brokered under the auspices of the United States, bore witness to a profound transformation. They witnessed several Arab nations, notably including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, formalizing official diplomatic relations with Israel. This intricate process, colloquially referred to as the Abraham Accords, was hailed as a historic breakthrough, representing a notable departure from the prevailing longstanding Arab consensus. This consensus had steadfastly withheld diplomatic recognition of Israel until the attainment of a comprehensive peace agreement with the Palestinians—a cornerstone of Middle East diplomacy for decades. At its core, the significance of these agreements lies in their capacity to alter the dynamics of the entire region. Participating Arab nations, by opting for diplomatic normalization, signified a collective aspiration to bolster economic and strategic ties with Israel. This new alignment was primarily driven by a confluence of mutual interests spanning technology, security, and trade. To proponents, these normalization accords epitomized a pragmatic approach toward advancing regional stability and propelling economic development. Yet, within this transformative narrative, a polarized discourse emerged, punctuated by concerns about the perceived abandonment of the Palestinian cause. The nuanced reactions to the Abraham Accords oscillated between applause and critique, ushering in a wave of international acclaim and criticism. These agreements became a crucible for impassioned debates, where stakeholders fervently examined their ramifications, not just for the immediate parties involved but for the entire Middle East peace process. Foremost among these deliberations was the question of whether the Abraham Accords signalled the demise of the cherished two-state solution—a blueprint that had long underpinned efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Abraham Accords' historical context is vital to understanding their profound impact. The Middle East had, for decades, been a crucible of political, ideological, and territorial disputes. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular, had been a protracted and intractable issue. It had defied resolution despite numerous attempts, with the two-state solution emerging as a broadly accepted framework for achieving a lasting and equitable peace. The prospect of Arab nations entering into diplomatic relations with Israel—without a comprehensive resolution to this core conflict—represented an unforeseen and, for some, a disconcerting paradigm shift.

As the Abraham Accords unfolded, they invoked varied responses from across the global spectrum. On one hand, proponents of the accords heralded them as a testament to the potential for diplomacy to transcend historical enmities. They contended that the normalization agreements could serve as a bridge to broader regional stability. By fostering collaboration in areas like technology, security, and trade, they argued that the accords held the promise of improving the lives of people throughout the region. On the other hand, critics voiced concerns about the seemingly conditional nature of the normalization. They pointed out that while the agreements could usher in immediate economic and strategic benefits, they might also undermine the collective Arab stance in support of Palestinian rights. Detractors argued that these accords risked diminishing the leverage available to Arab nations in advancing the Palestinian cause. Additionally, there were concerns about whether the normalization agreements would motivate Israel to pause or halt its settlements in the occupied territories, a key source of contention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the broader international arena, the Abraham Accords served as a catalyst for discussions and debates on the global stage. Nations around the world grappled with the implications of these normalization agreements for the Middle East and beyond. They contemplated the potential for these diplomatic shifts to recalibrate regional alliances and realign geopolitical

interests. In the wake of these transformative events, countries worldwide have been carefully observing the developments, evaluating their implications, and formulating their responses. One such country is Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim nation with a longstanding commitment to the Palestinian cause. The Malaysian response to Arab-Israeli normalization is a topic of significant interest and importance, as it reflects not only the country's foreign policy stance but also its position within the wider context of Muslim-majority nations and their approach to a rapidly changing regional landscape.

There are several topics from previous research that have discussed the normalization of foreign relations by a country. The first study by Rubenberg (1986) explained how the national interests of a superpower, the United States, would be pursued by any means necessary. For example, at that time, the United States approached Israel, which was in conflict with Palestine, and provided assistance to Israel for its national interests in the Middle East. This was done with the aim of having Israel assist the United States in acting as a barrier against the Soviet Union, which was then expanding (Rubenberg, 1986). The second study by Muhammad (2020) stated that the United States' national interests were considered to have a direct influence on the normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel. Muhammad (2020) further emphasized that the U.S.'s own interests were directly related to President Trump's plan, at that time, to win re-election in the United States and his Middle East policy that supported Israel (Muhammad, 2020). Another study by Michael and Dekel (2020) in their journal explained how the normalization agreement between the United Arab Emirates and Israel was a strategic achievement for Israel. They saw this normalization as having a positive impact and providing many benefits. However, Michael and Dekel (2020) also assessed that this normalization agreement was considered a significant loss for Palestine due to a perception of a zero-sum game, meaning that any gain received by Israel was a loss for Palestine (Michael & Dekel, 2020).

These studies are relevant to the topic discussed in this research. However, there is no research that is truly relevant or even similar to the topic of this study. In this research, the author employs the concepts of national interest and the Regional Security Complex (RSC) theory as analytical tools to examine Malaysia's approach to the phenomenon of normalization between Arab countries and Israel. National interests and regional security can be used as measures in the formulation of policies by a country.

Theoretical Framework

Regional Security Complex (RSC) Theory

Louis Fawcett, in his publication entitled "Global Politics of Regionalism," emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and adaptable concept to understand regions and regionalism. According to Fawcett (2005), the conventional notion of a region as a collection of physically proximate entities should be expanded to encompass shared characteristics, interconnections, and collaborative efforts within the area. Therefore, a region can be conceptualized as a dynamic collection of units or 'zones' with shared interests across various domains, including economics, military affairs, social dynamics, and politics.

This understanding of a particular geographic area leads to the concept of regionalism, where nations develop policies to promote collaboration and synchronize a strategic approach for the region, often facilitated by an organizational framework (Fawcett, 2005: 24).

After the end of the Cold War, regionalism experienced a resurgence due to the decolonization process, resulting in the emergence of several newly independent sovereign nations. Security became a focal point within the context of regionalism. According to Buzan and Waever (2003), a security complex arises when a group of nations faces interconnected security concerns so closely linked that their own national security cannot be disentangled from each other. This phenomenon can lead to the formation of a regional security complex (RSC), where the processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are intricately interconnected (Buzan & Waever, 2003: 44).

Buzan introduced the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as a framework for analyzing security dynamics within specific geographical areas. He argued that RSCT offers a more comprehensive perspective compared to basic frameworks like unipolarity or core-periphery connections (Buzan & Waever, 2003: 40). Local characteristics have a significant influence on security assessments. The formation of an RSC is often influenced by historical circumstances, such as enduring animosity (e.g., Arab-Persian competition) or cultural affinities within a certain civilizational area (Buzan & Waever, 2003: 45).

Buzan delineated the basic structure of an RSC, comprising four factors crucial for analyzing security regions. Geographical factors play a significant role in defining complexity across different areas. For example, Asia contains multiple regional security complexes, including Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia, each with its distinctive circumstances. Additionally, a regional security complex reflects the hierarchical structure of anarchy on a localized scale, where independent entities coexist, each pursuing its own objectives. Polarity, the distribution of power among entities, influences the policy decisions of nations within the region. Lastly, social construction relates to the delineation of amicable and adversarial relationships among nations in the geographic area, affecting alliances and oppositions within the region (Buzan & Waever, 2003: 53).

To understand the impact of a security domain on a nation, there are interconnected levels of examination within the RSCT framework. Understanding a state's internal vulnerabilities at the domestic level is crucial, as these factors shape the state's threat perception. Regionalization results from interactions among different states, and these interactions may involve a particular geographic area and its surrounding regions. The scope of RSCT primarily focuses on internal interactions, but it becomes important when there is an asymmetry between regions wielding global power, as seen in North America and South America. Considering the influence of global power on a specific region establishes a connection between global and regional security frameworks (Buzan & Waever, 2003: 51).

Within the RSCT framework, subcomplexes can also manifest as "sub-levels" within a region. Subcomplexes represent a single group within the wider context of the RSC, sharing similar security dynamics. For example, the Middle East region exhibits subcomplexes, such as the Gulf and the Levant, which have distinct but interconnected security patterns (Buzan & Waever, 2003: 52).

For instance, Malaysia, located in Southeast Asia, is an example of a nation connected to its regional security complex, where shared economic interests and cultural affinities play a role in shaping security dynamics. Similarly, the Middle East, characterized by historical rivalries and shared religious ties, exemplifies how regional security complexes influence the security

interdependence of nations in the region, impacting not only each other but also exhibiting significant overlap in their security dynamics.

National Interest Theory

The realm of international relations encompasses the interconnected concepts of actors, power dynamics, and interests, all of which contribute to shaping a nation's identity. Cultivating these three facets independently is crucial for establishing a distinct national identity. International relations are initiated by actors who play a pivotal role in shaping inter-state relationships. The concept of power holds significant sway in international affairs, enabling nations with substantial power to exert dominance across various spheres. This, in turn, motivates nations to take measures aimed at bolstering their own strength.

However, in practice, a nation's actions are primarily driven by the pursuit of its national interests. The pursuit of these interests serves as a guiding principle for state leaders when forging diplomatic ties with other nations and assessing the effectiveness of their foreign policy endeavors. According to the insights of prominent figures like Morgenthau (1978: 3), national interests are intertwined with the pursuit of power, as power enhances a nation's ability to control and influence others. National interests are thus linked to a nation's capacity to safeguard its political, cultural, and physical integrity in the face of potential challenges from other nations.

The concept of national interests is closely intertwined with the notion of power, as Morgenthau argues that a nation's pursuit of power is synonymous with its national interests (Clunan, 2009: 89). Power grants a nation the ability to exert influence over other nations, whether through coercion or cooperation, making national interests a pursuit of survival and prosperity on the international stage (Morgenthau, 1978: 4). Morgenthau further elaborates that national interests encompass two components: internal requirements, such as sovereignty and cultural identity preservation, and external strategic considerations, including perceptions of neighboring nations and cooperative efforts for mutual benefit.

Scholars like Clinton (1986: 495) and Oppenheim (1987: 369) offer additional perspectives, emphasizing that national interests encompass extending and safeguarding influence over other nations and pursuing objectives to ensure the well-being of a nation's populace, both domestically and internationally. This underscores the importance of national interests in preserving political autonomy and national cohesion, ultimately benefiting the population at the global level. Other researchers, like Kegley and Wittkopf (1996), align with Morgenthau's view, emphasizing that national interests encompass efforts to protect a country's population within its borders, promote economic development, and uphold core principles and beliefs, necessitating collaboration with foreign entities.

Rosenau (1990: 247-249) introduces a categorization of national interests into various levels, which includes primary/core interests, secondary interests, enduring interests, dynamic interests, broad interests, and particular interests. These categories serve as a valuable framework for scholars of international relations to analyze and evaluate a country's foreign policy feasibility and direction, offering a comprehensive perspective on a nation's objectives (Burchill, 2005:43).

In the pursuit of national interests, leaders must craft foreign policies that provide strategic guidance for their nation's engagement in international relations. This process entails careful evaluation of other countries' actions and policies for compatibility with national interests. Shaping foreign policy often involves collaborative efforts, be it through bilateral or multilateral interactions, aimed at securing mutual benefits.

Integrated Theory

The link between RSCT and the national interest theory is that they both deal with the security and interests of states, but from different perspectives. While RSCT focuses on the regional dynamics and interdependencies, national interest theory focuses on the strategic goals and interests of individual states. These theories can be linked by understanding that a state's national interests are shaped and influenced by the regional security dynamics in which it operates. For example, a state's national interest in maintaining its territorial integrity and sovereignty might be threatened by regional conflicts or rivalries. Similarly, a state's interest in economic prosperity might be influenced by the economic policies and conditions of its neighboring states within the same regional security complex.

The connection between the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and national interest theory becomes evident when examining Malaysia's cautious policy towards the Middle East, even though they are not part of the same regional security complex. Both theories highlight the critical interplay between regional dynamics and a state's interests. In Malaysia's case, while it is geographically situated in Southeast Asia, it has adopted a careful approach towards the Middle East, a region with which it shares common interests, particularly in the realms of Islamic culture, trade, and energy resources. This approach reflects the understanding that a state's national interests are not confined to its immediate region but can extend to other regions where shared interests exist. For instance, Malaysia, as a predominantly Muslim nation, shares cultural and religious ties with many Middle Eastern countries. These ties can influence its foreign policy decisions, as it seeks to foster cultural and diplomatic connections that align with its national identity and values. Additionally, Malaysia's economic interests are connected to the Middle East through trade, particularly in the export of palm oil and other goods. Furthermore, Malaysia's cautious foreign policy in the Middle East takes into account regional security dynamics, such as conflicts and instability in the region. By doing so, Malaysia aims to safeguard its own national security interests and avoid being drawn into regional conflicts that could threaten its stability.

In essence, the relationship between RSCT and national interest theory underscores that a state's interests are not solely determined by its geographic location but are also shaped by shared interests with other regions. Therefore, to effectively pursue its national interests, a state must not only consider its individual goals and strategies but also take into account the regional security dynamics and the interests of other states in its region. This approach highlights the importance of both national and regional strategies in achieving security and advancing national interests in the complex field of international relations. Malaysia's careful approach towards the Middle East exemplifies how states navigate complex international relations by considering both their national goals and the broader regional dynamics that impact their interests, even when those regions are not part of the same security complex.

Malaysia-Israel Relations: An Overview

The diplomatic relationship between Israel and Malaysia has traversed a tumultuous journey through the decades, marked by geopolitical considerations, regional dynamics, and domestic pressures. In the early years following its establishment, Israel found itself in a precarious position as a small nation surrounded by hostile neighbors. During this formative period, Israel's primary focus was on bolstering relations with the United States and Western European countries due to its overriding concern for security. However, even in these early stages, Israel recognized the strategic importance of cultivating ties with Asian nations. Several significant obstacles impeded the development of Israel's relations with Asian countries during this period. These included Israel's steadfast commitment to reciprocal diplomatic relations, its alignment with the Western bloc during the Cold War era, concerns among some Asian governments about potential repercussions from Muslim and Arab nations, and the substantial influence wielded by Arab oil-producing states.

The pivotal Bandung Conference of 1955 marked a turning point in Israel's efforts to establish itself on the Asian diplomatic stage (Abadi, 2004: xvii-xviii). Unfortunately, Israel found itself excluded from both the conference itself and the preparatory meetings leading up to it. In response, Israel's Foreign Ministry devised a strategy aimed at capitalizing on every available opportunity to station its representatives in Asian countries, recognizing the need to strengthen information campaigns through mutual visits and exchanges (Yegar, 2004: 92-93). While these diplomatic endeavors often encountered setbacks and disappointments, Israeli policymakers remained steadfast in their resolve to extend their diplomatic outreach beyond the confines of the turbulent Middle East. Simultaneously, in the early 1950s, Malaysia witnessed the rise of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, reflecting the growing Islamic consciousness among its Muslim population (Liow & Afif, 2015: 50). This phenomenon fueled the emergence of political Islam in Malaysia and heightened discussions surrounding Islamist ideals within the nation.

The first notable diplomatic encounter between Israel and Malaysia occurred in 1956 when Moshe Sharett, a former Israeli Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, embarked on a special envoy mission to South, Southeast, and East Asia (Podoler, 2017). During this mission, Sharett engaged with the Tunku, who was then serving as the Chief Minister and was on the verge of becoming the Prime Minister of the soon-to-be-independent Malaya. Initially, the Tunku responded positively to Sharett's proposal of establishing an Israeli council in Kuala Lumpur. However, as events unfolded, it became clear that diplomatic relations with Israel faced resistance from Malaya's Muslim populace, leading the Tunku to assure Arab states that his country would not establish such relations (Yegar, 2006: 83-84).

Despite these diplomatic challenges, interactions between the two nations continued throughout the 1960s. In August 1960, Moshe Yegar, the second secretary at the Israeli embassy in Rangoon, represented Israel at the AFC congress held in Kuala Lumpur. In March 1963, Malaya granted permission for the Israeli commercial company Astraco to open a branch in Kuala Lumpur, further facilitating interactions (Yegar, 1996). Noteworthy meetings also occurred on foreign soil during this period. The Tunku met the Israeli ambassador in London in November 1961, and in July 1964, the director-general of the Malaysian Foreign Ministry engaged with Israel's ambassador in Bangkok. In the latter part of May 1964, Lim Kee Siong, a close friend of the Tunku and a senior administrator in Malaysian football, visited Israel during the AFC Asian Cup, even meeting with Israel's Foreign Minister Golda Meir (Yegar,

2006: 84-85). These interactions revealed that while domestic Muslim pressure posed a significant obstacle to Malaysia formalizing diplomatic relations with Israel, the meetings were generally conducted in a cordial atmosphere.

In terms of trade, Israel continued to export its products to Malaysia through 1966, with Malaysia emerging as a prominent market for Israeli goods such as diamonds and potassium chloride (Deutsh, 1971: 367). By the early 1970s, Malaysia had even begun importing citrus from Israel. Concurrently, Malaysia adopted a policy of "Muslim solidarity" underlining its image as a devout Muslim nation to garner support and sympathy from the Arab world (Yegar, 2006: 83). This approach gained traction, particularly after racial riots erupted in Singapore in July 1964. The United Malays National Organisation, led by the Tunku, accused Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of turning Singapore into "an Israel where Muslims are pressed down and suppressed (Cheah, 2002: 100)." This growing antagonism towards Israel culminated in Malaysia's increasingly confrontational stance, which included avoiding Israeli counterparts, refusing entry permits to Israelis, and actively pursuing anti-Israeli initiatives at international forums.

Despite occasional disappointments, the early to mid-1960s witnessed ongoing interactions between Malaysia and Israel. In August 1968, Abd al-Rahman, a businessman and the Tunku's son, visited Israel at the invitation of Shaul Eisenberg, a prominent Israeli businessman heavily engaged in East Asia. Additionally, in November 1969, Malaysian representatives from the Asian Sports Federation sought support from their Israeli counterparts for Malaysia's bid to host the Asia Games in 1974 (Yegar, 2006: 86-87). The political landscape in Malaysia shifted significantly in 1974 when the country implemented a comprehensive ban on both trade with Israel and the issuance of entry permits to Israelis. This policy change occurred as Malaysia's leaders increasingly emphasized Muslim solidarity and distanced themselves from Israel.

Another significant shift occurred in 1981 when Mahathir Muhammad became Prime Minister. Mahathir was known for his outspoken anti-Israel views, and his tenure witnessed a considerable escalation in anti-Israel rhetoric, with criticism of Israeli policies, especially in relation to the Palestinian issue (Mahathir, 1970: 84). During Mahathir's leadership, Malaysia even banned the movie "Schindler's List," dismissing it as Jewish propaganda. Malaysia has provided significant support to the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, surpassing all other Southeast Asian nations in its level of assistance (Yegar, 2016). Notably, in June 1994, Tenku Abdullah Abdul Rahman, the brother of the Malaysian King, reportedly met with Israeli leaders Rabin and Peres in Israel. This marked the first high-level visit by a Malaysian official to Israel, raising hopes of a potential diplomatic breakthrough. However, the visit faced strong opposition domestically and internationally, leading the Malaysian government to downplay it to avoid backlash (Yegar, 1996: 212-213). In the late 1990s, there were signs that Malaysia was gradually shifting its stance on Israel. High-level officials visited Israel, and Malaysian citizens were allowed to travel to Jerusalem for religious purposes under Israeli law. Nonetheless, the pace of normalization remained contingent on developments in the Middle East and Malaysia's evolving diplomatic priorities.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Malaysia took on the responsibility of chairing the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). As the most prominent coalition of Muslim nations, Badawi effectively used Malaysia's global standing to express his perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The speaker emphasized the need for granting

peace to both parties involved in the dispute in an equitable and impartial fashion. During the APEC summit held in South Korea in 2005, Abdullah Badawi, in his capacity as Chair of the ASEAN Standing Committee, engaged in a discussion with the former President of the United States, George W. Bush. The focus of their conversation revolved around the need for the United States to assume a more prominent role in the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Sodhy, 2012: 27). It was acknowledged that there was a prevailing perception of inequitable treatment by the United States towards these two nations.

While exhibiting a less confrontational approach towards Israel compared to Mahathir, the former Prime Minister Najib Razak expressed his firm stance on the matter. From his perspective, there existed no room for negotiation in relation to the Arab-Israeli issue, save for the cessation of Israeli oppression against the Palestinians. In 2013, Najib paid a visit to Gaza upon receiving an invitation from Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist organization ("Malaysian PM in solidarity visit to Gaza," 2013, par. 4). During Najib's tenure, UMNO maintained a strong affiliation with Hamas, characterized by regular invitations sent to Hamas officials to attend UMNO's annual party conference. In December 2017, he expressed his strongest criticism of Israel by openly questioning the decision made by U.S. President Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. In January 2019, Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah issued a press statement in which he condemned Israel for persistently neglecting the inherent rights of the Palestinian population and engaging in inhumane policies and actions that blatantly contravene international laws (Abdullah, 2019).

Malaysia does not conceal its aversion towards Israel. In 2019, the Malaysian government declared its intention to establish an embassy accredited to Palestine in Jordan, primarily aimed at providing financial assistance to Palestinians. Furthermore, in the preceding year, Kuala Lumpur steadfastly declined participation to Israeli athletes in the World Para Swimming Championships. This stance remained unchanged even after Malaysia forfeited the hosting rights for the tournament. Malaysia's Youth and Sports Minister, Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, exhibited resolute adherence to this position, asserting, "Malaysia remains unwavering in its decision, grounded in principles of humanity and empathy towards the Palestinian predicament. Our stance remains non-negotiable (Jamal, 2020)."

In conclusion, the Israel-Malaysia relationship has been marked by a complex interplay of geopolitical factors, domestic pressures, and leadership attitudes. From the early diplomatic endeavors to the confrontational stance of the 1970s and the outspoken leadership of figures like Mahathir, Badawi, and Najib, the relationship has seen significant fluctuations. While hints of normalization have emerged over the years, the overall trajectory remains one of diplomatic tension and anti-Israel sentiment, making it a multifaceted issue within Malaysia's foreign policy landscape.

Malaysia's Approach Towards Abraham Accords

The Trump era saw a significant shift in Arab-Israeli relations with the introduction of the Abraham Accords, a series of normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab nations, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco (Hamdi, 2023). The agreements were celebrated by some as a groundbreaking achievement that promised to reshape the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Others, however, expressed concerns about the implications for the Palestinian cause, viewing these agreements as a deviation from established Arab principles (Lazin, 2023). For those in favor of normalization,

the agreements held great promise. The signatory nations cited mutual interests in various areas, including technology, security, trade, and economic cooperation (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023). These agreements were seen as a pragmatic approach to advancing regional stability and development, with an emphasis on leveraging Israel's technological and economic prowess. The economic and technological benefits of these agreements were expected to trickle down to the broader Arab world, potentially fostering economic growth and prosperity. In addition to the bilateral agreements, the Abraham Accords were lauded for their potential to pave the way for a broader regional reconciliation, thereby contributing to the resolution of longstanding conflicts in the Middle East. The normalization deals were considered a catalyst for a shift in regional dynamics, potentially creating a more conducive environment for future peace negotiations. However, it is essential to note that critics argued that the Abraham Accords did not address the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as the status of Jerusalem, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and the establishment of a Palestinian state (Zafar et al., 2023).

The international community's response to the Abraham Accords was mixed. While many countries welcomed the normalization agreements as a positive step towards regional stability, others expressed reservations about the potential consequences for the Middle East peace process (Hamdi, 2023). The agreements ignited debates about the fate of the two-state solution, which had long been considered the preferred framework for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this evolving landscape, Malaysia's response to the Arab-Israeli normalization agreements assumes great significance. On the 15th of August 2020, Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein issued a statement acknowledging the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) "sovereign right" to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, all the while reaffirming Malaysia's enduring support for the Palestinian cause (Anon, 2020). It is noteworthy that Malaysia did not express endorsement for the "Abraham Accords," firmly maintaining its distinct status as a nation devoid of official diplomatic ties with Israel. This declaration followed criticism from former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who asserted that the Accords will lead to a fragmentation of the Muslim world, exacerbating conflicts among Muslim nations and hindering peace efforts and "strengthen Israel's claim that Palestine belongs to Israel (Umair, 2020)." He further contended that such developments could elicit responses from both Palestinians and those sympathetic to their cause, potentially leading to a protracted conflict in the Middle East.

As a predominantly Muslim country, Malaysia has a significant national interest in the affairs of the Islamic world, including the Middle East. The country's national interest is also shaped by its domestic politics, where support for the Palestinian cause is strong, contributing to its traditionally pro-Palestinian stance. Hence, Malaysia's national interest, deeply influenced by domestic politics and its identity as a Muslim-majority country with a history of advocating for the Palestinian cause, favored maintaining its support for Palestine. Malaysia has consistently supported the rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people and has been vocal about its stance on the Israel-Palestine issue. It has maintained a pro-Palestinian stance due to a combination of religious solidarity with the Muslim world, decolonization principles, and non-aligned movement affiliations (Mohamed et al., 2017).

This position has been a consistent aspect of its foreign policy since its independence. Any perceived departure from this position could potentially stir domestic unrest and undermine the government's legitimacy. In navigating these complex dynamics, Malaysia displayed a cautious

approach towards the Arab-Israeli normalization. Malaysia's response to the normalization agreements took into account the sentiments of its citizens, a majority of whom expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people. Public demonstrations and rallies were organized across the country to voice opposition to the normalization agreements and express support for the Palestinian cause. The Malaysian government, sensitive to these sentiments, sought to align its foreign policy with the will of the people. The Malaysian government, echoing the sentiments of many Malaysians, expressed deep concern that the normalization agreements could undermine the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and statehood. While it did not outrightly condemn the Abraham Accords, it reaffirmed its commitment to a two-state solution and emphasized the rights of the Palestinians. Malaysia's longstanding position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has consistently called for peace negotiations and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Malaysia has maintained that diplomatic relations with Israel would only be established upon the realization of these conditions (Zainury, 2021). This policy stance allowed Malaysia to maintain its regional relationships, particularly with those Arab nations that endorsed the Accords, while staying true to its national interest in advocating for the Palestinian cause.

In addition to its diplomatic and public responses, Malaysia also considered the broader implications of the normalization agreements for regional stability. It evaluated the potential consequences of these developments on the delicate balance of power in the Middle East. Malaysia's position as a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) further amplified its role in articulating the concerns of the Muslim world regarding the normalization agreements. Within the OIC, Malaysia collaborated with other member states to articulate a unified position on the normalization agreements and their implications for the Muslim world. The OIC, as a collective voice of Islamic nations, played a vital role in shaping the international discourse on the issue. The Deputy Foreign Minister of Malaysia, Kamarudin Jaffar, has faced the task of reiterating Malaysia's stance on Israel in the face of inquiries from parliamentarians in November and December 2020. The parliamentarians sought clarification on how the Malaysian government planned to cooperate with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to oppose the normalization agreements, known as the Accords, and urged Malaysia to withdraw from the 2021 Dubai Expo where Israel would be participating (Idris, 2020).

Malaysia also utilized its diplomatic channels to engage with the signatory nations of the Abraham Accords. While expressing its concerns and reservations, Malaysia sought to maintain open lines of communication to facilitate dialogue and understanding. This diplomatic approach reflected Malaysia's commitment to peaceful conflict resolution and dialogue as essential tools in addressing complex international issues. Nonetheless, opposition Member of Parliament, Salahuddin Ayub, emphasized the need for Malaysia to display its rejection of Israel based on humanitarian considerations and Islamic solidarity, which he believed should take precedence over economic interests (Harun & Yunus, 2020). He asserted that the Perikatan Nasional government, claiming to be a Malay-Muslim government, must demonstrate its commitment to defending the struggles of oppressed Muslims. These statements reflect a growing expectation for Malaysia to adopt a more assertive stance against the normalization agreements, while the government has been carefully navigating the delicate balance between domestic and international political imperatives and strategic interests.

However, recent geopolitical developments have introduced new factors into Malaysia's calculus. The Accords, backed by powerful players like the United States (US), the United

Arab Emirates (UAE), and reportedly Saudi Arabia, aim to expand normalization between Israel and Muslim-majority nations, extending beyond the Middle East (Yossef, 2021). Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan have already normalized relations with Israel. Pressure tactics, such as economic incentives and potential investment from the US, have been applied to encourage more nations to establish ties with Israel. Malaysia, Indonesia, and Pakistan have all been cited as potential targets for such efforts. Despite economic inducements, these countries, all with democratically elected governments, face the challenge of reconciling their foreign policy decisions with public sentiments that strongly oppose normalizing relations with Israel. In regard to this, Malaysia firmly rejects recent claims by an Israeli official that it may consider joining the Abraham Accords and establishing relations with Israel (Benari, 2021). Malaysia reaffirms its unwavering commitment to supporting the Palestinian cause and their ongoing struggle against Israel's illegal occupation and systematic oppression. Malaysia believes that Israel's actions, including discriminatory policies, denial of basic human rights, harsh living conditions, and land confiscation, amount to apartheid and hinder the pursuit of peace in the region. Malaysia will continue actively advocating for the Palestinian agenda in bilateral, regional, and international forums, aiming to achieve Palestinian aspirations for freedom and an independent state. Additionally, Malaysia will provide political, moral, and humanitarian support to the Palestinian people through international organizations like UNRWA and support the efforts of Malaysian civil society organizations in this regard (Abdullah, 2021).

Malaysia's foreign policy stance in the Middle East reflects a desire for a non-aligned position that maximizes economic, political, and security interests. Malaysia has cultivated relationships with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey. Additionally, it hosts a significant Iranian diaspora. The Gulf states are crucial trading partners, sources of state investment, and tourism, providing significant economic benefits to Malaysia. Saudi Arabia's role as the guardian of Islam's two holiest grand mosques holds religious and diplomatic significance, particularly for Malaysian Malays. During the Najib administration, Malaysia leaned towards Riyadh by deploying troops to support Saudi operations in Yemen. The subsequent Pakatan Harapan government balanced relations by withdrawing troops and closing the King Salman Centre for International Peace, seen as an overcorrection that strained relations with Saudi Arabia (Bakar, 2018). Under the current Foreign Minister Hishammuddin, Malaysia has returned to closer ties with Saudi Arabia. While Malaysia values its relationships with Gulf states, no single country has overwhelming leverage over Malaysia regarding the sensitive issue of Palestine.

Domestic constraints also shape Malaysia's stance. Its pro-Palestine position has historical roots, established to build support among Arab nations and the global South, particularly to counter regional rival Indonesia during *Konfrontasi* (Tan, 2021). Since then, Palestine has become a symbol of national and Muslim identity, presented as a religious obligation. Anti-Israel sentiment is prevalent among the majority Malay-Muslim population and the establishment, reinforced by politicians, media, civil society, and religious leaders. Malaysia has actively engaged with Palestinian leadership, hosted the *de facto* representative office of Hamas, and supported Palestinian cultural organizations. Establishing diplomatic relations with Israel would carry significant political costs for Malaysia's current government, which faces internal factional conflicts and contested legitimacy. Malaysia's unwavering support for Palestine aligns with its strategic goals of engaging the Muslim world as a mainstream middle power with leadership aspirations. However, external conditions could prompt Malaysia to review its position, including other Muslim-majority nations like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and

Indonesia establishing relations with Israel. Changes in ground conditions for Palestinians, peace talks, and a less controversial Israeli Prime Minister could also influence Malaysia's stance over time. Any adjustments are likely to be cautious, initially focusing on economic and unofficial exchanges with Israel while continuing to support Palestinian statehood and provide humanitarian and development assistance.

Overall, Malaysia's response to the Arab-Israeli normalization, particularly the Abraham Accords, reflects a delicate balance between its national interests and regional security concerns. It was characterized by a principled commitment to the Palestinian cause, adherence to international law, diplomatic engagement, and humanitarian assistance. As a predominantly Muslim country with a longstanding commitment to the Palestinian cause, Malaysia has expressed reservations about these diplomatic developments. It has consistently voiced its support for the rights of the Palestinian people and their quest for statehood. However, Malaysia also recognizes the importance of maintaining positive relations with countries in the Middle East, given the region's significance in global geopolitics and its role in energy resources. Hence, Malaysia's response has been characterized by cautious diplomacy, emphasizing the need for a just and comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while engaging constructively with its Middle Eastern counterparts.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, the integrated RSCT and national interest theory provides a comprehensive lens to analyze and predict state behavior in international relations. Consequently, the normalization agreements presented a complex and sensitive diplomatic challenge for Malaysia. By taking into account both the regional security dynamics and national interests, it offers a more holistic understanding of how states formulate their foreign policies, as exemplified by Malaysia's sensible response to the Arab-Israeli normalization during the Trump era. As the Middle East continues to experience shifts in its geopolitical dynamics, Malaysia's stance remains rooted in its values and principles, reflecting its role as a conscientious and engaged member of the international community. This pragmatic foreign policy approach underscores Malaysia's commitment to safeguarding its national interests and regional security dynamics while advocating for a peaceful resolution to a complex and longstanding conflict. This stance has taken some observers by surprise. On the one hand, the change in the regional security complex, brought about by the Abraham Accords, demanded a re-evaluation of Malaysia's stance. The normalization agreements signalled a shift in the Middle East's political landscape, with several influential Arab nations warming to Israel. This could potentially isolate Malaysia within the Islamic world if it continued to hold a rigidly pro-Palestinian stance.

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