

Malaysia—A Surprising Statement in the Israeli Context

Giora Eliraz¹ | No. 1945 | February 13, 2025

Given the particularly harsh rhetoric of Malaysia's prime minister toward Israel since October 7, as well as his refusal to condemn Hamas's attack and even referring to its members as "freedom fighters," the responses given in a recent interview acknowledging Israel's right to exist and to self-defense were surprising. This article examines whether this was an isolated incident, a public relations maneuver in the global arena, a desire for involvement in the Middle East, or perhaps an early sign of a shifting trend.

Those familiar with Malaysia's hostile stance toward Israel and the especially harsh rhetoric from Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim since October 7 would have been astonished by his brief responses to questions posed during an interview by CNN's senior correspondent, Richard Quest. To the first question, would he accept Israel's right to exist, he replied, "Yes, yes." To the second implicit question—[would he accept Israel's right to defend itself](#)—he responded with "Yes." These statements were published in the Malaysian media.

It is important to recall that Malaysia did not condemn, not even in a single word, Hamas's brutal attack against Israel on October 7. Prime Minister Anwar even [called Ismail Haniyeh](#), then head of Hamas's political bureau, days later and expressed unwavering support for the Palestinian people. At the same time, he strongly condemned Israel's military activity in the Gaza Strip, referring to it, among other things, as "[the height of barbarism](#)" and "[genocide](#)," while he described Hamas members as "[freedom fighters](#)." He also rejected a US demand to sever ties with the organization. He dismissed attempts by the Western media to confront him over his lack of explicit and direct condemnation of Hamas's attack, while he accused the Western media of a biased discourse on the matter. This stance was particularly evident in his CNN interview; he simply stated that he opposed all forms of violence and emphasized that he was concerned [by the Western media discourse](#), which focused, according to his view, on recent events while erasing the decades before October 7. He highlighted the long-standing plight of Palestinians since the "Nakba" in 1948, arguing that the history of colonization and occupation was being overlooked.

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Ironically, when Anwar was elected prime minister in late 2022—[after a long political struggle](#) and personal dramas—while riding on a wave of expectations for significant democratic reforms, there was some room for fleeting yet cautious thought that he might soften Malaysia's traditionally tough policy toward Israel. Such thought could have stemmed from the impression that Anwar had not been closely associated with the [antisemitic and anti-Israel rhetoric](#) largely shaped in Malaysia's political and public discourse by Mahathir Mohamad, who served as Malaysia's prime minister cumulatively for over two decades. Furthermore, Anwar's past statements hinted at a more nuanced approach. In a 2012 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, while serving as a prominent opposition leader, Anwar stated, "[I support all efforts to protect the security of the State of Israel.](#)" At the same time, he reaffirmed Malaysia's strong commitment to the Palestinian cause, advocating for an independent Palestinian state based on a two-state solution. He clarified that establishing diplomatic relations with Israel would be conditional on Israel respecting Palestinian aspirations. Unsurprisingly, his statement drew sharp criticism from his political rivals, a backlash that seems [to have followed him](#) over the years.

Following his recent CNN interview, criticism resurfaced—particularly after his comments went viral on social media. However, this time, the backlash appeared more limited in scope and intensity. In response, Anwar accused critics of misleading the public by circulating an edited video clip [that took his words out of context](#). "Nothing has changed," he emphasized; "Malaysia remains committed to supporting Palestine." He reiterated his strong stance against Israel while clarifying that when asked if Israel exists, the factual answer is "Yes, it exists." He stressed that [Malaysia has never recognized Israel de jure but only acknowledges its existence de facto](#). As proof, he pointed to the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Anwar concluded that he viewed the matter as closed and it was best to move forward. And for now, that appears to be the case.

Meanwhile, an article published by a Malaysian journalist of Indian descent, titled "[Why I Support Anwar's Position on Israel's Right to Exist](#)," offers an interesting perspective. This piece sheds light on the attitudes seemingly prevalent among Malaysia's minority groups—who make up approximately 40% of the population—toward the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The largest of these groups is Malaysians of Chinese origin, followed by Malaysians of Indian descent. The author begins by saying that he believes that he speaks on behalf of all non-Muslims in Malaysia, arguing that, unlike the Muslim majority, non-Muslims do not hold strong negative views of Israel or highly positive views of Palestine. According to him, non-Muslims in Malaysia "see Israel and Palestine as two nations at war," similar to how they view the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

The author continues by stating that for the most part, non-Muslim Malaysians view the war in the Middle East as a foreign conflict in which they do not wish to take sides. He writes, "When we see the sincere conviction of Muslims that Palestine is right while Israel is evil, we think that Muslims in this country only take such a position because they identify very strongly with the Palestinians." He added that it is much like supporting a family member engaged in a struggle for survival against a non-family member. The question of who is truly right or

wrong, the author implies, is irrelevant. However, as the author states, understanding the Muslim perspective does not necessarily mean supporting it.

Furthermore, as the author writes, the non-Muslims in Malaysia understand the desire of Muslim Malaysians that their country should take a more active role in backing the Palestinians. However, in reality, the author claims, “Malaysia has already done too much for the war in the Middle East.” The author even argues that “we are not even sure who is right or wrong” in the war under discussion. The only position non-Muslim Malaysians can support, the author suggests, is one where Malaysia serves as “a peace broker in the war.” In this context, Anwar’s statement that Israel has a right to self-defense and to exist serves as a correct starting position for Malaysia.

Malaysia’s firm political and emotional alignment with the Palestinian cause seems to be deeply embedded among the Malay-Muslim majority—who make up over 50% of the population—and solidly rooted in a strong sense of pan-Islamic solidarity. However, dissatisfaction with the government’s stance may no longer be limited to non-Muslim Malaysians alone. According to a seasoned researcher on Malaysia, [growing public exposure to details of Hamas’s atrocities on October 7](#) has led Malaysian citizens, civil society organizations, and opposition figures to express discomfort with the government’s position on Hamas. Concerns have also been raised about how this stance might harm Malaysia’s interests, including potential repercussions from Western sanctions due to financial support for Hamas by Malaysian pro-Palestinian organizations.

Nevertheless, Anwar’s unusual remarks on Israel may have been primarily directed at an international audience. His goal could have been to rehabilitate his image in the West and ease tensions with the United States over his ties with Hamas’s leadership. Perhaps he sought to signal that, despite everything, Malaysia remains a potential partner in Middle Eastern peace efforts. This interpretation aligns with the perception that Anwar aims to play an active diplomatic role in the region as part of efforts to enhance Malaysia’s global standing.

However, a discrepancy in his rhetoric appears to be evident: complete silence on Hamas’s massive terrorist attack on October 7 versus vehement condemnation of Israel’s military actions in Gaza; recognition of Israel’s right to self-defense while simultaneously calling for [Israel’s expulsion from the UN](#) at an Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh. We will have to wait to see whether Anwar’s unexpected remarks on CNN were merely an episode, a PR foreign relations maneuver, an aspiration for diplomatic involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, or perhaps the beginning of a real policy shift.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg