

Selective in their outrage  
by [shahanaaz habib](#)



Khoo: Peer pressure is playing an important role in the boycott of McDonald's.

A GIRL calling herself Al Edrus Fadz was so upset with the attacks on McDonald's here that she wrote on popular actor-comedian Afdlin Shauki's Facebook: "These people want to boycott but sorry to say their mentality and behaviour is just like the Zionist."

She said, going by how this violent group was behaving, it would not be surprising if a few tried to burn down some McDonald's outlet.

"Don't get carried away. I have not eaten at McD for years and I've stopped buying Nestle products since 2011 but you don't see me going to the Nestle factory to scold and abuse people."

On Aug 2, Viva Palestina Malaysia and Aqsa Shariff organised a rally to show solidarity and support with Gaza where it called for a boycott of McDonald's, L'Oreal, Coke and Nestle.

This is part of the larger international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement to pressure corporations deemed to be supportive of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the building of settlements on the occupied territories, which is depriving Palestinians of their land and rights.

Afdlin was one of those at the Aug 2 rally who made the call for the boycott.

But he too was taken aback by how some went overboard by attacking McDonald's premises, harassing and abusing the staff, even breaking windows of cars with McDonald's drive-in stickers.

"It is not Islamic to do that. This is a peaceful boycott. We don't want to buy products from companies that are blatantly and unabashedly supporting Israel.

“But there is no hatred towards the product or the staff. There shouldn’t be violence. Don’t boycott if you don’t know how to!” he says.

Both Viva Palestina Malaysia (VPM) and Aqsa Shariff too have distanced themselves from the violence, saying this is not the way to fight for the Gaza cause.

For weeks, Israel has pounded Gaza, leaving almost 2,000 dead and 65,000 homeless. The photos of so many dead children have been particularly haunting and heartbreaking.

VPM deputy chairman Siti Jamilah Sheikh Abdullah believes a boycott is an effective tool because corporations change when they “really feel the pinch” economically. But she stresses it must be done “sensibly, responsibly and in a very civilised manner”.

Resorting to violence and vandalism, she says, is not only wrong but also “gives Muslims and all those NGOs who support BDS a very bad name”.

Last Saturday, Khoo Ying Hooi, who specialises in social movement and is a fellow at UM’s International and Strategic Studies department, made a few rounds at the McDonald’s outlets in Shah Alam where she lives to see if the boycott was having an impact.

Sure enough in Shah Alam, which is a predominantly Muslim-Malay area, people were staying away from the fast-food outlets – one only had three tables occupied during its normal lunch rush hour.

Khoo believes peer pressure is playing an important role in the boycott because Muslims here do not want to be seen “not supporting Gaza” or worse, “backing Israel”.

“There is this ‘if-you don’t-support-this- then-you-are-with-them (Israel)’ kind of thinking,” she says.

Khoo says Malaysian Muslims are very passionate in their support for Palestine .

And this is further endorsed with the Government’s policy of not having ties with Israel and providing resource and material support for Palestine.

She points out that her students normally steer clear of demonstrations and protests in fear of getting into trouble with the authorities. But they seem to have no qualms going for the Gaza rally and posting pictures of themselves there on Facebook because they feel safe as it is a government-sanctioned position.

For UKM political scientist Dr Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, Malaysian Muslims’ seeming obsession with Palestine can be traced back to the era of former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who believes Malaysia should express its views on the plight of the Palestinians “without fear or favour”. He himself was very supportive of the former PLO leader Yasser Arafat and his idea of a Palestinian state.

While internationally, the calls of support and action against Israel’s oppression of Gaza cut across race and religion, in Malaysia it is notably confined to Muslims.

Just take the recent Aug 2 rally for Gaza – only 10% of the protesters were non-Muslims.

There is a need to highlight Gaza as a humanitarian issue instead of a religious one, VPM’s Jamilah concedes, but it is tough when the Malays themselves treat it as a Muslim issue while ultra Malays hijack it for their own purposes.

“It doesn’t’ help either that rallies for Palestinian against Israel are always held at the mosque after Friday prayers,” she says.

This is precisely the reason why VPM held the rally for Gaza at Dataran Merdeka, a neutral ground, “which

is not identified with any race or religion”.

“Not many came but at least the doors are opening,” she says.

For Khoo, the media plays an important role in creating awareness. While the Malay media has been front-paging news on Gaza, she notes that the Chinese newspapers only give it small coverage.

“As the older Chinese generation are not on the social media much, they don’t feel that the issue is close to their heart.”

In Syria, 160,000 have died since the Arab Spring uprising. In Egypt last year, almost 2,000 protesters were killed after President Morsi was toppled and in Iraq, there have been deadly clashes between the Shiahs and Sunnis for more than 10 years. But why do they not cause as much outrage here?

Khoo, who has been puzzling over this, says, “A friend told me that ‘When you see an Arab killing an Arab it’s okay, when it is Muslims killing Muslims it’s okay but if it’s Israel killing Muslims then it is not okay!’ For me that’s not rational.”

Jamilah believes it is because Muslims here are confused about who they should support when it comes to Syria and Iraq.

“It is Muslims against Muslims. We are also Muslim and we don’t know who the bad guy is. People are not educated and informed as to who IS (Islamic State, previously known as ISIS and ISIL) is, so they play it safe by staying away. They don’t want to get involved.”

(IS is an Al-Qaeda-like armed militant group intent on setting up an “Islamic caliphate”. It has been carrying out brutal killings and beheadings, including that of minorities in Syria and Iraq. It has also been destroying historical sites, blowing up churches and threatening Christians to convert .)

Dr Takiyuddin says Muslims in Malaysia are generally conservative in their causes, and “sometimes it simply depends on the lenses of religion”.

He is quick to point out that in today’s political scenario, the relations between Muslims and Christians in the country seem to be at its lowest ebb. He also notes that there has been no strong statement from the government on the IS atrocities so far, nor has there been any large gatherings organised to protest against it.

Muslims here must know that IS atrocities are against the teachings of Islam, he says, but it is “kind of difficult for them to show open support for Christians”.

“Some of them will argue ‘See, many non-Muslims were reluctant to show their support in the Palestinian issue. So, why should we care about what happens to Christians in Iraq and Syria!’

“This may also explain why the large part of conservative Muslims and Islamic NGOs and maybe Malay leaders would rather stay silent on IS atrocities.”

Dr Takiyuddin stresses too that for some Muslim leaders, religion is a very sensitive issue. “They just don’t want to be seen as ‘too open’ when championing the cause of other religions and denouncing their own Muslim brothers. If he is a leader in a Malay rural area, it can create anxiety among his supporters.”

Ideally, he says, leaders should take a firm stand regardless of religion and country when any issue of oppression arises.

“Only when leaders are able to frame certain issues without religious consideration will it produce a chain reaction to the people. But this is idealistic because Malaysians (right now) tend to manufacture issues

through ethnic and religious lenses.”

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