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The Mahathir Influence and the Changing Phases of Malaysia-Syria Diplomatic Relations

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine Malaysia's diplomatic relations with Syria through three periods: pre-Mahathir era, the first phase of Mahathir era (1981-2003) and the 'inter-Mahathir' years (2003-2018) - referring to the period prior to the return of Mahathir as Prime Minister for the second time in 2018. Ultimately, this study attempts to identify the key factors determining the nature of Malaysia's bilateral ties with Syria during the Mahathir era. The methodology adopted for this study is qualitative in nature, relying on primary and secondary sources, the former being personal interviews conducted with Tun Dr. Mahathir himself and also with scholars in the field. This paper argues that during the pre-Mahathir era (1958-1981), relations with Syria were very much based on political and diplomatic considerations. However, during the Mahathir era (1981-2003) the emphasis changed due to the significant economic development and Malaysia's foreign policy took a much more global approach. With this change, economic factors as a foreign policy determinant became more prominent as compared to the pre-Mahathir period. The inter-Mahathir years (2003-2018) did not witness any significant development except for the humanitarian support extended by the Malaysian government during the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

Keywords: *Malaysian Foreign Policy, Syria, Middle East, Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), Islamic State or Daesh.*

Introduction

Diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Syria was first established in 1958 and it has been maintained for the last 60 years until today. The objective of this study is to identify the key

factors determining Malaysia's bilateral ties with Syria. In particular, this paper investigates the dynamics of Malaysia-Syria relations and the factors which determined Malaysia's policy towards Syria during three specific eras: the pre-Mahathir years, the Mahathir era, and finally, during the inter-Mahathir period. Prior to Malaysia's independence, contacts had already been established between the Arabs and the inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula. It was the Muslim traders from the Middle East who contributed to the birth of Islam in Malaya (Ruhanas, 2009: 29). The growth of Islam also saw the Malays traveling to the Middle East for pilgrimage, as well as to pursue religious studies. Ever since independence, Malaysia has pursued a special interest towards the region, which was driven initially by religious variables, but soon as a result of political and economic reasons (Nair, 1997: 3). The purpose of this article is to analyze the Malaysia-Syria relations since independence especially during the Mahathir administration and the factors that influenced Malaysia's engagement with Syria.

Existing literature on Malaysia's foreign relations is usually studied by examining namely, defence and security, development and trade, international cooperation and diplomacy. The works referred to are Saravanamuttu (1983), Saravanamuttu (2010), Jeshurun (2008), Karim (1990), Ruhanas (2006), Baginda (2007), Mohd Azizuddin (2012), and Azhari Karim (2013). In addition, this study also refers to Kaminder's (2011) study which provides a comprehensive discussion on Malaysia's external policy during the Mahathir administration whereby he argues that Malaysia's foreign relations is not entirely determined by idiosyncrasies, but rather, domestic and external factors. Finally, works by scholars who have analysed Malaysia's relations with Islamic countries - Nair (1997), Ruhanas (2009), Redzuan (2006), Sidin (2000), Asmady (2013), Asmady (2012) and Muhammad (1999) and the role of Islam in fostering diplomatic ties with fellow Islamic countries, especially the Middle East, will also be considered for the investigation of Malaysia's relations with Syria during the three different phases. This article intends to fill the lacunae in the existing literature on Malaysia-Syria relations by previous scholars. It also highlights factors that have influenced Malaysia-Syria relations throughout the periods under study.

Brief Background of Syria

In order to better understand Malaysia's bilateral relations with Syria, it is necessary to provide a brief description of the political background of Syria. This will enable us to appreciate the achieved its independence in 1957, Syria had become a free nation one decade earlier, in 1946. However, Syria as an entity has been in existence for many centuries with Damascus being one of the oldest cities in the world with continuous inhabitants. It had undergone numerous political changes throughout its long history, from being part of earlier empires, including the Byzantine around the 4th century, and later becoming part of the Islamic world. Damascus became the centre of the Umayyad Caliphate beginning with Muawiyya, and Syria became an important state within the broader Islamic expansion, including during the rule of the subsequent Abbasid Empire. After the fall of the Abbasid Empire in 1258, Syria came under the control of the Ottoman Empire. The subsequent fall of the latter in 1918

saw Syria being under British control for a brief period. However, as a result of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1922, it then became part of the French mandate (Rogan, 2009:11). It was only in 1946, after the Second World War, that France agreed to transfer control of the military and security forces to the independent government of Syria.

Syria's foreign policy after its independence was driven by its pan-Arabism ideals which were soon translated into a political union with Egypt - with both countries having strong stance against Israel. Externally, Syria was committed to confront Israel as part of its regional role and position. Apart from sharing a common border with Israel, Damascus saw itself as being part of the wider Arab resistance against Zionism. However, it also realised that it needed other countries in the region in order to be part of a larger coalition against Israel. Hence, the idea of a political union was actually pushed by the Syrians (Drysdale, 1991: 61) which led to both countries declaring the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in February 1958.

The direct consequence of Malaysia's interest in Egypt was what brought Syria directly to Malaysia's interests. As the UAR was a union rather than a mere alliance treaty, it was inevitable that Malaysia had to establish direct relations with Syria even though it did not have any real interests to do so at that particular point in time. In other words, when the UAR was formed, Kuala Lumpur had to establish relations with Syria as that would be the path to take to make it in line with its foreign policy with Egypt. Thus, Malaysia's initial relations with Syria have to be examined within the context of Egypt and the formation of the UAR (Mohd. Ridzaun Devan Abdullah personal communication, October, 31, 2015). As Egypt was seen as the most significant Middle East country in the Arab-Israeli conflict, bilateral ties with Cairo affected much of Malaysia's policy towards the Middle East.

Malaysia-Syria Ties: The Pre-Mahathir Era (1958-1981)

It is noteworthy that even though Malaysia had established formal ties with Syria, it did not have any direct diplomatic representatives in Damascus initially. This was mainly due to the lack of financial and manpower resources. Being a country which only gained its independence in 1957, Malaysia had very limited resources to establish missions in every country it had official ties with. According to the memoirs of Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, a former Secretary General of Wisma Putra who served in the domestic service before being transferred to foreign service, in the early 1960s, "Compared to the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of External Affairs was a small world with not more than a dozen diplomatic officers attached to a few divisions – political and information, consular and immigration, administration and financial, and protocol" (Kamal, 2013). The main diplomatic priorities would be the countries with which Malaya had strong traditional ties namely, the United Kingdom and the United States, among others.

In addition, the unity of the UAR was short lived when Egypt and Syria parted ways in 1961. The departure of Syria from its political union with Egypt had influenced the degree of

importance that Kuala Lumpur placed on Syria thereafter. This was very much so especially, during the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (of 1963 to 1966), when Syria had sided with Jakarta, much to the disappointment of Kuala Lumpur (Ruhanas, 2009). According to a former senior Malaysian diplomat, “due to the influence of the Indonesian communists, the Parti Komunis Indonesia (PKI), on their Syrian counterparts, which were themselves strong within Syrian politics, Damascus was against Malaysia and supported the Indonesian case. This was in contrast with many other Middle Eastern countries that supported Malaysia instead” (Khatib, personal communication, April, 5, 2016).

Trade and economic ties between Malaysia and Syria during this era were basic and remained small. This was due mainly to the lack of any real interests by both parties to develop any meaningful economic relationship. This lack of interest also stemmed from the limited number of products or goods that could be traded, either for import or export purposes. (Please refer to Tables 1 and 1.1).

Table 1

Main Imports from the UAR

Egypt (\$ Million)		
Commodity	1958	1959
Potatoes (except sweet potatoes)	0.02	0.49
Onions	0.04	0.04
Chick pea and gram	-	0.02
Garlic fresh	-	0.07
Fruits and nuts fresh	0.08	0.10
Miscellaneous	0.03	0.03
Total	0.17	1.11
Syria (\$ Million)		
Onions	-	2.843
Total	-	2.843

Source: Federation of Malaya, Statistics of Internal Trade SR (080) 206/3/1-1, 26 November 1960

Table 1.1

Main Exports to the UAR

Egypt (\$ Million)		
Commodity	1958	1959
Rubber	0.30	0.46
Coconut oil	0.72	0.04
Canned Pineapples	-	0.02
Miscellaneous	-	-
Total	1.02	0.52

Syria (\$ Million)		
Rubber	0.10	0.06
Tin	0.15	0.03
Timber	0.01	0.01
Total	0.26	0.10

Source: Federation of Malaya, Statistics of External Trade SR (080) 206/3/1-1

Nonetheless, in an effort to step up economic and trade relations between Malaysia and Syria, in May 1969, the Malaysian government proposed to concurrently accredit Mr Mustapha Haji Mohamad, who was its Trade Representative in Lebanon, to cover Syria as well. He was to reside in Beirut “from where he is expected to make frequent trips to Syria. Kuala Lumpur therefore, formally requested for this concurrent accreditation of Mustapha to Syria as Malaysia’s Trade Representative” (Embassy of Malaysia, May 17, 1969).

Table 1.2

Malaysia’s Exports & Imports to Syria, 1957-1970

USDS		
<i>Years</i>	<i>Import</i>	<i>Export</i>
1957	1,200	1,334,547
1958	-	1,041,784

(continued)

USDS		
<i>Years</i>	<i>Import</i>	<i>Export</i>
1959	14,052	1,125,385
1960	-	-
1961	-	-
1962	73,502	388,328
1963	166,740	293,786
1964	31,536	483,015
1965	38,825	566,464
1966	153,268	626,980
1967	23,844	385,660
1968	1,705	209,573
1969	378	334,063
1970	5,455	137,942

Source: Department of Statistics (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer) various reports.

Table 1.3

Malaysia's Exports & Imports to Syria, 1971-1980

USDS		
<i>Years</i>	<i>Import</i>	<i>Export</i>
1971	1,978	221,377
1972	141	11,017
1973	1,309	129,588
1974	133	584,743
1975	4,984	2,572,626
1976	123,266	3,365,263
1977	-	4,683,911

(continued)

USDS		
<i>Years</i>	<i>Import</i>	<i>Export</i>
1978	544,191	4,465,214
1979	118,529	12,701,393
1980	200,000	13,600,000

Source: Department of Statistics (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer) various reports.

It is interesting to note that Malaysian imports from Syria prior to the Mahathir administration was limited as shown in Table 1.2. For example, in 1957 the imports from Syria were merely USD1,200, and it never reached beyond USD1 million. Highest import value was USD544,191 in 1978 (Table 1.3). This was due to the lack of interests in Syrian products among Malaysians compared to goods such as dates, perfumes and Islamic religious materials produced by Saudi Arabia and Egypt which Malaysians were more familiar with compared to products from Syria.

Malaysian exports to Syria however (Table 1.2 and 1.3), had been consistently higher than its imports from Syria. This was due to the fact that Malaysia had been one of the major producers of rubber and tin which were crucial commodities for the Syrian economy. Initially, Malaysia's exports to Syria in 1957 was USD1,334,547, however it dropped in the mid-1960s due to political differences between the two countries especially when Syria demonstrated its support for Indonesia during the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation. However, by the 1970s, when Malaysia adopted a more neutral foreign policy, trade relations between Malaysia and Syria improved. Exports to Syria increased from USD584,743 in 1974, to USD2,572,626 in 1975. The export value from Malaysia to Syria continued to increase in the next five years, reaching USD13,600,000 in 1980. This demonstrated the ever increasing demand for commodities such as rubber and tin from Malaysia from the Syrian population.

Essentially, relations between Malaysia and Syria faced a number of challenges, namely, the lack of resources in terms of budget, as well as personnel. As stated earlier, it was the political variable that mainly shaped Kuala Lumpur's attitude towards Damascus. Malaysia viewed Syria primarily from the perspective of its ties with Egypt, in the context of the formation of the United Arab Republic in 1958. However, when Damascus left the union in 1961, Kuala Lumpur's ties with Syria did not see any significant development, except for maintaining existing limited economic relations, as well as cultural ties.

In spite of the limited relations, Malaysia has always been supportive of Syria within the context of the Middle East, namely, following the 1967 Israeli annexation of its territory in the Golan Heights. At any opportunity, the Malaysian government would express its

support for the return of this territory to Syria. For instance, the Acting Malaysian Permanent Representative at the UN, Abdul Halim Ali, stated that, “The legal status of the Golan Heights, under international law, therefore remains as an occupied territory and should be returned to Syria to whom it belongs” (Abdul Halim Ali, 1982).

However, at the same time, both countries pursued divergent views and positions on a number of international crisis, namely, during the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when Syria had supported the former, while Malaysia had condemned it; as well as during the Iran-Iraq War which broke out in 1980, over which Kuala Lumpur remained neutral, while Damascus, had supported Iran, mainly as a result of its leadership’s association with Tehran’s Shia identity.

Malaysia-Syria Ties: The Mahathir Era (1981-2003)

It is noteworthy that one of the key determinants of Malaysia’s foreign policy during the Mahathir administration, was economy and trade. Much of Mahathir’s policy was driven by the objective of enhancing Malaysia’s economic position – attracting foreign direct investments, as well as encouraging Malaysian corporations to venture abroad and seek opportunities and invest. Mahathir’s foreign policy could well be described as an economic diplomacy as Mahathir had placed the economic factor as a primacy (Nossal and Stubbs, 1997).

In addition, the change of leadership in Syria from Hafez Assad to his son Bashar al-Assad further enabled relations between Kuala Lumpur and Damascus to improve. According to Mahathir, earlier relations with Hafez Assad was formal and the leaders were distant from each other. This was partly due to the fact that Hafez was pro-Socialist and considered Mahathir as being close to the West. Hence, relations between the two leaders never really developed. However, this changed when Bashar al-Assad took over as the President of Syria in 2000. Mahathir stated that his relationship with Bashar had been very cordial and friendly, and Bashar also had great respect for Mahathir whom he considered as a senior statesman (Mahathir, personal communication, April, 5, 2016).

Table 2

Malaysia’s Imports & Exports to Syria, 1981- 2003

(MYR Million)		
<i>Years</i>	<i>Import</i>	<i>Export</i>
1981	*	22,000,000
1982	12,172	14,117,033

(continued)

(MYR Million)		
<i>Years</i>	<i>Import</i>	<i>Export</i>
1983	NA	NA
1984	NA	NA
1985	NA	NA
1986	236	15,567
1987	33,178	11,432,191
1988	290	11,484
1989	185	28,986
1990	405,976	21,666,705
1991	142,228	37,369,060
1992	1,860,275	49,943,501
1993	1,090,153	59,779,251
1994	2,268,543	63,111,054
1995	735,030	120,700,520
1996	6,042,246	97,765,455
1997	6,751,291	132,813,113
1998	3,305,970	165,788,130
1999	2,840,524	177,810,730
2000	11,026,404	245,656,714
2001	3,273,912	192,294,459
2002	3,604,225	252,711,098
2003	1,549,598	586,206,050

** Less than \$50,000*

Source: Department of Statistics (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer), various reports.

Table 2 demonstrates that trade between Malaysia and Syria increased when Mahathir became the Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981. In 1982 the total trade with Syria was MYR14.130 million, and within ten years it increased to MYR51.8 million in 1992. In

2003, the figures were at MYR587 million. It is noteworthy that trade relations significantly improved when Bashar became the President of Syria in 2000 with total trade with Syria registering at MYR256.7 million that year.

During the first phase of Mahathir administration, trade ties between Malaysia and Syria also reflected Malaysia's growing status as a manufacturing and industrial economy. For example, bilateral trade was at USD67.3 million (MYR225.74 million) in 2002, with Malaysia exporting USD66.3 million worth of goods to Syria, and importing only USD1 million in return. Malaysia's main exports to Syria were timber and palm oil, while its imports were mainly cotton and herbal medicines from the Republic (*New Straits Times*, August 17, 2003). However, in 2004, Malaysia exported textiles and apparels to Syria to the tune of MYR246 million (Malaysia International Trade and Industry, 2006).

From 1994 onwards, Malaysia started to export palm oil to Syria and this has seen a steady increase in volume over the years. For instance, in 2003, the exports of palm oil accounted for 21.2 per cent of total exports to the Middle East region, valued at MYR2 billion (2002: MYR1.4 billion), an increase of 40.9 percent, of which Syria (MYR304.1 million) was the fourth largest importer, preceded by UAE (MYR460.2 million), Saudi Arabia (MYR360.6 million) and Iran (MYR317.2 million) (Ministry of International Trade and Industry, 2004). It is interesting to note that Malaysia's oil conglomerate, Petronas, became part of an international consortium in March 1997, concluding an exploration and production agreement covering a 5-block exploration area totalling 4,201 sq. km in Northern Syria. Petronas held (30 percent), while France's Elf Aquitaine (40 percent) and Japan's Sumitomo Development Company (30 percent) held the remaining shares (*The Middle East and North Africa 1998*, 1998).

In addition, Mahathir also initiated the entry of Malaysia's national car Proton to Syria. Proton first entered the Syrian market in 2001 through a sole distributorship agreement with a local company, Modern Technology Trading Company (MTT). MTT is a subsidiary of the Habbal Group of Syria, and Mahathir officiated the opening of its showroom during his August 2003 visit to Syria. Proton's CEO, Tengku Mahaleel Tengku Arif stated that the prospect for increasing Proton car sales in Syria was very good, especially with MTT's plan to import the Arena Model (*The Star*, August 26, 2003).

It is also interesting to note that the Mahathir administration had also contributed to the improvement in areas of political and diplomatic ties. There were two significant developments that took place during Mahathir's administration, namely, the first ever visit by a Malaysian Prime Minister to Syria, and second, the opening of the Malaysian embassy in Damascus. On 7th August 2003, Mahathir landed at Damascus International Airport, making him the first Malaysian leader to have done so. He was accompanied by a 70-member delegation, made up of representatives from twenty-two corporations, including Proton, Airod, Petronas and various information technology (IT) companies.

This was indeed the most significant landmark in Malaysia's relations with Syria. The visit was to cover "diverse ground from business and regional concerns, to academic dialogues with ulamas and think-tanks" (*New Straits Times*, August 17, 2003). The Malaysian Foreign Minister then - Syed Hamid Albar, who accompanied the Prime Minister stated that, "Syria was interested in Malaysia's experience in building a progressive Islamic nation, and becoming a middle-income country.... Mahathir and Dr Bashar were also keen to discuss regional issues like Palestine and Iraq, which are central to peace in West Asia and the world" (ibid). Speaking at a press conference on his trip to Syria, Mahathir said that, "Malaysia is willing to 'open its books' to enable Syria to learn from its experiences in developing its economy and society" (*New Straits Times*, August 19, 2003).

On regional issues, Malaysia was firm in its stand that both Syria and Lebanon must be part of the Middle East peace process as this was necessary for permanent peace in the region. Mahathir expressed Malaysia's hope to see the inclusion of the Golan Heights and Sheba farm in the US-brokered road map for Middle East peace (*New Straits Times*, August 18, 2003). According to Mahathir, during his bilateral discussion with President Bashar, the subject of Golan Heights was discussed in which he reiterated Malaysia's strong support for this occupied territory to be given back to Syria. He also mentioned that Syrians could not accept the fact that Golan Heights was being occupied by Israel, but that they could not do anything as they (Israel) were supported by the West, (Mahathir, personal communication, April, 5, 2016).

On bilateral ties, Mahathir stated, "mutual efforts were being undertaken to enhance ties beyond trade to information and communication technology, culture, education, tourism, human resource development, youth, sports, oil and gas" (ibid). During the visit, Mahathir also visited the famous Ummayad Mosque, which housed a shrine dedicated to one of Muslims greatest leaders, Salahudeen Al-Ayubi. After the visit, during the dialogue with Syrian Islamic scholars, Mahathir remarked that his perception of Islam had broadened because it was clear that "it is the teaching of Islam that we must respect the religions of others" (*New Straits Times*, August 17 2003).

On a personal note, Mahathir had expressed his affection towards Damascus as a city, in particular the souk as well as it being the site of a number of historical places. He was particularly impressed by the existence of the Orthodox Church in Damascus, and the peaceful coexistence between Christianity and Islam there. Mahathir was impressed and mentioned that even Pope John Paul II had visited Syria in May, 2001 (Mahathir, personal communication, April, 5, 2016).

According to a Malaysian news report analysis of Mahathir's trip to Syria, Damascus had considered Malaysia as a role model in terms of her economic success and progressive brand of Islam. Syria also wanted to learn how Malaysia had built its economy and gained technological know-how. She also expressed interests in Malaysia's privatisation programmes and efforts to join the information age. The visit opened up new levels in

bilateral relations between Malaysia and Syria, and contributed hugely in enhancing the standing of Malaysia (*New Straits Times*, August 21, 2003).

It can be said that the Mahathir era saw a shift in diplomatic ties with Syria - from one that was purely for the sake of maintaining diplomacy, to one in which there was a concerted effort to strengthen ties with Syria for trade and economic purposes.

Malaysia-Syria Ties during the Inter-Mahathir Era (2003-2018)

(A) Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003 – 2009)

Diplomatic ties

Mahathir stepped down as Prime Minister on 31st October 2003 - two months after returning from Damascus, and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia replacing Mahathir. During the inter-Mahathir period, much of Mahathir's economic diplomacy with Syria continued to be upheld under the new leadership. An example of this economic diplomacy was reflected by the presence of the Malaysian made Proton cars. In January 2009, the fifth Proton model in Syria, the *Persona*, was launched by its Managing Director, Syed Zainal Abidin Syed Mohamed Tahir, and was witnessed by the Malaysian Ambassador to Lebanon, Mohammed Ab Halim Ab Rahman. According to Syed Zainal, this launch "is expected to boost the national car market's overall sales in Syria to over 5,000 units in the next three to five years" (<http://auto.bernama.com>, January 30, 2009). He proceeded to state that Proton had been selling cars in Syria since 2001 and "after *Gen-2*, we are optimistic on how the Syrian market will accept the *Persona*, which has won many customers for being cost-effective with better fuel economy" (ibid).

In May 2004, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong – the King of Malaysia, the Minister of Higher Education and the Deputy Minister of Tourism visited Syria. The visit by the Malaysian King was the first ever and His Majesty was given the full honour by the Syrian government. His Majesty was hosted by President Bashar Al-Assad, and was conferred Syrian's finest award - the Omayad Decoration. The King reciprocated by bestowing on Bashar, the Darjah Utama Seri Mahkota Negara (The Most Exalted Order of the Crown). The King also performed Friday prayers at the famous Omayad Mosque in Damascus. However, it must be noted that the visit by the King was more of a symbolic display of the close relations between the two countries, and not to establish new areas of economic diplomacy, as the King's role in Malaysia is that of a constitutional monarch.

In February 2007, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became the second Prime Minister of Malaysia to visit Syria. Emulating Mahathir, he brought with him a large entourage, including several cabinet ministers. Abdullah not only called on his counterpart and other senior officials, but he also met with President Bashar and had a private audience with the President followed by

a bilateral meeting, which included senior political and government officials, as well as the Vice President, Farouq Al-Shara. During the meeting, a number of issues were discussed, including problems of the Middle East (*New Straits Times*, February 27 2007).

During his official trip to Syria, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was driven to the Golan Heights, some 65 km away from Damascus. Consistent to Malaysia's official position, he stated, "Syria has the right to its claim and it must get the support from the international community. Those who hate invasion and respect human rights must support Syria", and he went further to state, "Syria's role in the Middle East is important and we would like to see peace return to the Golan Heights" (*New Straits Times*, February 28 2007). Like his predecessor, he was also critical towards the United States for practising double standards in dealing with the Palestinian conflict.

Economic ties

It is noteworthy that Abdullah Ahmad Badawi continued the economic diplomacy of Mahathir. This was especially evident during his official trip to Syria, where he spoke at a business seminar, in which he urged Kuala Lumpur and Damascus to explore opportunities, not only for bilateral trade, but in the wider Southeast Asian and West Asian markets which held vast potentials for ASEAN and the Arab world. He further stated that he "would like to urge both the Malaysian and Syrian business communities to increase their efforts to identify opportunities, especially in the context of taking advantage of our respective strengths" (*New Straits Times*, February 27, 2007). He also stressed and said, "I do believe that Malaysia and Syria have much to contribute to trade expansion, not only between our two countries but also among the Organisation of Islamic Conference member countries as a whole" (ibid). At the same seminar, he suggested that Malaysia could be used as a gateway to other Asian markets, and added that, "apart from being able to penetrate the ASEAN market, Syrian businesses and companies could enter China, Japan and Korea through Kuala Lumpur's strong trade links with the East Asian countries" (ibid).

As a follow-up to Mahathir's economic diplomacy and in efforts to enhance trade ties between the two countries, a Joint Trade Commission was also established. The first meeting of the Joint Trade Commission was held in Kuala Lumpur in July 2007. The two Trade Ministers - Rafidah Aziz for Malaysia and Amer Husni Lutfi for Syria, co-chaired the meeting. During this meeting, both countries also started to explore the possibility of a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Malaysia's Trade Minister, Rafidah Aziz, who had earlier accompanied the Prime Minister to Syria, said that such an agreement would be Syria's first with an Asian country. She stated that, "The Syrian side proposed that we should have FTA study. We agreed that we will have parallel studies and I'm sure a study will show the benefits of the FTA" (www.dawn.com, July 04, 2007). However, the FTA idea did not see any progress beyond this. A second Joint Trade Commission was held in April 2011 in Syria, and Malaysia's then Trade Minister, Mustapa Mohamed, was present with his counterpart, Syria's Minister of Economic and Trade, Lamia Assi. Both parties reviewed

trade and investment performances between the two countries. In addition, the Malaysia-Syria Business Council was established in February 2011 to encourage companies from both countries to actively participate in each other's trade and investment.

Table 3

Malaysia's Exports & Imports to Syria, 2003- 2011

MYR Million (Malaysian)

<i>Years</i>	<i>Imports</i>	<i>Exports</i>
2003	1,549,598	586,206,050
2004	1,745,029	566,653,748
2005	1,745,029	621,801,461
2006	6,092,082	571,864,131
2007	5,973,550	570,451,149
2008	3,552,505	578,513,410
2009	4,809,312	613,652,966
2010	3,809,347	568,400,132
2011	7,142,438	283,200,386

Source: Department of Statistics, (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer), various reports.

Table 3 demonstrates the impact of economic diplomacy between Malaysia and Syria initiated by Mahathir. Trade expanded from MYR588 million in 2003 to MYR618 million in 2009. However, in 2010 the trade volume started to decline from MYR618 million (2009) to MYR572 million in 2010, and it dropped to the lowest in 2011 to MYR290 million. The fall was due to the uprising in Syria beginning March 2011. Various initiatives undertaken by Mahathir and Abdullah to enhance bilateral ties could not be implemented or pursued due to Syria's political instability. The conflict in Syria was, and is, the most significant factor that had influenced the development of ties from 2011 onwards.

(B) Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak (2009 – 2018)

When Najib Abdul Razak took over as the sixth Prime Minister of Malaysia in 2009, his administration did not express much interest in enhancing relations with Syria. For Najib, the relations with developing world was through multilateral forums such as the United Nations, while on the Islamic world, he was more focused on trade ties, namely with the

richer Gulf states. He had also embarked upon establishing security ties with Saudi Arabia, namely to fight terrorism. His lack of an Islamic background, unlike Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, perhaps explained his lack of enthusiasm towards the Islamic world, except at the multilateral levels and those based on economic ties. Thus, the Malaysia-Syria relations did not experience any significant development during the Najib administration.

Humanitarian assistance

Nothing, however, had deterred Malaysia from expressing concerns over the outbreak of violence in Syria as demonstrated by her support for the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) decisions on Syria which called for the cessation of violence and lending of humanitarian assistance. In October 2016, the then Deputy Prime Minister, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi expressed Malaysia's outrage when the UN-backed humanitarian convoys near Aleppo were attacked during the ongoing 71st UN General Assembly session. According to Zahid, "We strongly condemn the killing of unarmed civilians and humanitarian workers in that incident as yet another flagrant violation of international law that reflects an absolute disrespect, disregard and contempt that the parties to the conflict have for the values of humanity" (<https://www.nst.com.my>, September, 22, 2016).

In addition, the Malaysian government also offered to accept at least 3,000 Syrian refugees as part of Malaysia's effort to express its solidarity to the people of Syria. The conflict in Syria has caused more than 200,000 people being killed. In August 2014, the United Nations declared that there were 6.5 million internally displaced persons in Syria, with 2.9 million registered refugees outside the country (Sherko Kirmanj, 2014). It should be noted that Malaysia was one of the first Muslim countries to accept Syrian refugees, with the first batch of refugees arriving in Kuala Lumpur on 11 December, 2015, followed by the second batch of 68 Syrian refugees in May 2016.

The conflict in Syria has also attracted attention from many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Malaysia which have expressed their readiness to provide assistance. Among them are the Muslim Volunteer Malaysia (MVM), Global Peace Malaysia, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) and Mercy Malaysia. It must be noted that a joint NGO - the Malaysia Life Line for Syria (MLLFS) was established primarily to provide humanitarian support to the people of Syria. Thus far, the MLLFS has organised fundraising events, and a humanitarian mission into Syria to supply food and medical supplies (Nurul Izzah, 2017). These are part of the people-to-people efforts which exemplify the concerns of Malaysians towards the Syrian plight.

Security

It is worth noting that besides diplomatic, economic and humanitarian factors, security is another reason why the government of Malaysia is extremely concerned over the conflict in Syria. There have been reports of Malaysians going to Syria to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or Daesh, as it is called in Arabic. "The amount of Malaysian suicide

bombers we have witnessed in both Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2017 can be described as noticeable and is intrinsically the result of the domestic ISIS propaganda campaign in Malaysia,” says Tomas Olivier, a counterterrorism and intelligence expert at the Netherlands-based consultancy firm Twickelerveld Intelligence and Investigations (Maza, 2017).

Recently, the Defence Minister Mohamad Sabu revealed that numerous Malaysian youths have been influenced by the Daesh propaganda and were recruited to fight in Syria as militants. However, the Minister did not divulge the actual number of Malaysians who were in this group. Based on the *New Straits Times*, hundreds of Malaysian youths were recruited by the Islamic State’s (IS) Daesh terror group to fight in Syria as militants, with 37 deaths reported (*New Straits Times*, February 22, 2019).

Conclusion

This article has analysed relations between Malaysia and Syria which was established more than 60 years ago (1958-2018). The discussion has revealed the factors that have influenced the bilateral relations and impact of Mahathir’s administration on its development. It is noteworthy to mention that initial ties were very much confined to diplomatic relations as Malaysia then was more interested in establishing relations with Egypt vis-à-vis UAR in which Syria was coincidentally part of. The friendship was more focused on Egypt rather than Syria at that particular time.

One of the challenges faced in the Malaysia-Syria ties was the question of priorities. In the pre-Mahathir era, given the lack of resources and as Syria was not perceived as a country of immense strategic importance to Kuala Lumpur, bilateral ties between the two countries did not really evolve beyond diplomatic relations as bilateral trade was also very limited. Even within the Middle East context, Malaysia had her priorities elsewhere and this had somewhat affected Malaysia-Syria ties. As far as Malaysia was concerned, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt were her higher priorities than Syria. In addition, Malaysia also had limited resources then - both in terms of manpower and funds, to expand its foreign relations. Another, major challenge faced by Malaysia in its bilateral relations with Syria was the latter’s political instability. The divergent stance of both countries in major international crisis had also affected their relations. Interestingly however, this did not sway Malaysia’s support for Syria following Israel’s annexation of the latter’s territory in Golan Heights in 1967.

During the Mahathir period, with primacy of economic development, the country’s foreign policy took a much more global approach. Malaysia began to open up to the rest of the world, driven mainly by economic diplomacy, trying to expand the country’s economic reach to different parts of the globe beyond its traditional trading partners. It is worth to mention that the change in the leadership in Syria in 2000, and the positive perception by Mahathir towards this new political development had also enhanced Malaysia’s bilateral ties with Syria. As revealed by Mahathir, personal ties played an important role in the bilateral relationship, as Hafez was quite impersonal, whereas his son and successor, Bashar, was very

warm and had the personal touch, which greatly influenced the Malaysian Prime Minister's perception of the country (Mahathir, personal communication, April, 5, 2016).

In the inter-Mahathir era, both Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Najib Abdul Razak had moved away from Mahathir's global foreign policy and instead concentrated on Malaysia's traditional external pillars of ASEAN, while engagement with the Islamic and developing worlds was very much multilateral in nature. Emphasis was also very much on ties with western powers, namely the United States.

In the case of bilateral ties with Syria, Abdullah showed much interests to pursue the initiatives laid down by his predecessor as illustrated by his visit to Damascus in 2007. Najib, on the other hand, appeared not to have any specific interests in enhancing further bilateral ties. In addition, the instability in Syria following the 2011 uprising, has prohibited Najib from pursuing any efforts or initiatives he may have towards Syria. It is clear from the above discussion that the enhancement of bilateral ties between Malaysia and Syria during the inter-Mahathir period was the direct result of Mahathir's earlier premiership, where he started to view the leadership in Syria much more positively.

The Malaysia-Syria relations have gone through ups and downs. This article has put together all the various factors that determine the bilateral relations. It hopes to contribute to better understanding of the Kuala Lumpur-Damascus diplomatic ties. It would be interesting to observe and monitor how the new government under the leadership of Mahathir post-14th General Election would manage its relations with Syria. Will Malaysia under Mahathir's second phase of premiership rejuvenate its economic diplomacy with Syria? Several factors have changed however, since Mahathir left office in 2003 after his first stint as the Prime Minister. Notably, political and security situations in Syria have deteriorated and it is no longer as safe as it used to be in the early 2000s. The way forward in Malaysia-Syria relations would, arguably and inevitably, be shaped by the development in Syria.

It is worth mentioning that during the Najib administration, the then government opposition, had, inter alia, expressed their urge for the government to "condemn Bashar Al-Assad's regime of terror in Syria" and to "set up a parliamentary caucus on (the) Syrian crisis" (Nurul Izzah, 2017). However, 17 months after winning the General Elections over Najib's Barisan Nasional government in May, 2018 – the "New Malaysia" government under Mahathir has yet to issue its official stance on the Bashar Al-Assad's regime. This, should it be realized, would undeniably shape the path and the form Malaysia-Syria relations would take in the coming years whatever the outcome of the Syrian crisis would be.

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