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# MALAYSIA AS THE PRINCIPAL COLUMN OF IRAN'S "LOOK EAST POLICY"

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## Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of Iran-Malaysia relations during the recent decades. Historically, Malaysia has always employed the policy of neutrality in conflicts involving two or more Muslim countries. The country's geographic location has resulted in close commercial and military ties to the West— especially during Mahathir Mohamad's tenure, which contributed to advancing mutual interests. The study analyzes the dynamics of the various interests Tehran is pursuing in Malaysia, and the ways in which it enhances its goals, taking into consideration the limits and constraints hindering the development of its relationship with Malaysia through discussing five main topics: the factors impacting Iran's relations with Malaysia; Iran's soft power in Malaysia; dimensions and levels of Iran-Malaysia relations; Mahathir Mohamad's approach, and the challenges facing Iran-Malaysia relations.

**Keywords:** *Malaysia, Iran, Mahathir Mohamad, soft power, sanctions, Saudi Arabia, diplomacy.*

## **Introduction**

The geopolitics in the Middle East region and Malaysia's domestic political situation have mainly influenced Malaysia and Iran's bilateral relationship. The two countries have consistently shown mutual interest in further strengthening their economic partnership in trade, investment, and cooperation in the energy sector. Malaysia has constantly made attempts to enhance its partnership with Iran in the oil and gas sector which Putrajaya<sup>(1)</sup> views as a massive untapped market. However, such initiatives have faced hurdles as a result of the United States led economic sanctions on Iran due to concerns about Iran's nuclear program. This is in addition to Malaysia's concerns regarding Iran's religious policies and illegitimate practices in Malaysian territory, as well as Malaysia's view of its relations with Saudi Arabia.

### **1. Factors Impacting Iran's Relationship With Malaysia**

#### **1.1 Strategic Location**

Malaysia enjoys an influential geostrategic location in Southeast Asia, including the most significant trade route in the present and the past connecting the East and the West; and the Strait of Malacca; one of the most significant maritime routes across the world. It runs between the Indonesian island of Sumatra, Peninsular Malaysia, and Singapore. It links the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Pacific Ocean; thus, it shortens the route between the Middle East and the mega Asian markets (China, Japan, South Korea). The volume of oil transported through this strait is approximately 16 million barrels per day (bpd) and 85 percent to 90 percent of total annual oil flows transported through this strait is crude oil while other oil products constitute 10 percent to 15 percent. It is the second busiest route in the world, and it is an area of conflict between international powers: China and the United States as well as regional competitive powers. Iran's trade with Southeast Asia, particularly with its major trade partners, China, Japan, South Korea — is mostly oil exports to these countries.

#### **1.2 Independent Development Experience**

Malaysia has its own independent economic experience in Southeast Asia, which has not been influenced by international powers or the policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Thus, its economic experience is quite interesting for Islamic countries, and its model attracts Iran's attention — since independence and self-sufficiency have been the main principles of Iran's foreign policy since the 1979 revolution. Through this experience, Malaysia transformed its economy from being dependent on agriculture to industry, especially with advancements in computer hardware and electronic products.

It established mega projects, succeeded to be among Asia's top rising powers, and advanced its international stature.

### 1.3 Common Islamic Orientations

The ideological influence of the Iranian revolution: The Iranian revolution of 1979, which saw the religious clergy led by Ayatollah Khomeini come into power in Iran, triggered a geopolitical realignment in the Middle East that remains to this day.<sup>(2)</sup> Soon after the revolution in Iran, the new Islamic Republic made a constitutional commitment of spreading the ideology of the revolution beyond its borders and called for a revolution throughout the Islamic world, Khomeini in his speech instructed the people of Iran to "endure hardships and pressures" to allow the country's officials to "carry out their main obligation, which is to spread Islam across the world."<sup>(3)</sup>

According to Sundaram & Cheek (1988), the 1970s witnessed a new wave of political Islam in Malaysia where groups such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) and the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, PAS) that took inspiration from the Iranian revolution emerged as the leading Islamic political outfits in the country.<sup>(4)</sup>

The PAS began to identify themselves as the true representatives of the *mustadhafin* (the meek) as opposed to the *mustakbirin* (the arrogant), fighting for the *adil* (just) against the *sasaad* (wicked), which has ideological similarities with Ali Shariati Mazinani, who is often referred to as the "ideologue of the Iranian revolution."<sup>(5)</sup>

PAS leaders such as their current President and the Special Envoy of Malaysia to the Middle East Abdul Hadi Awang, who studied at the Islamic University in Madinah and Al-Azhar University in Cairo, saw himself being compared by his followers to the religious leaders that came into power in Iran.<sup>(6)</sup>

Other PAS leaders of that time, such as Mohammed Sabu, who very recently served as the Minister of Defense in Mahathir Mohamad's cabinet (after quitting PAS and joining The National Trust Party), used the revolutionary rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini in his public speeches, referring to the United States as the "Great Satan."<sup>(7)</sup>

The ABIM, on the other hand, from the outset, appeared to be a relatively reformist and modernist group and had ideological leanings to the Ikhwan in the Arab world and the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan and was also greatly impressed by the Iranian revolution.

Anwar Ibrahim, who back then was the president of the ABIM and has served as the 12th and current leader of the opposition in Malaysia, visited Iran soon after the revolution and held a meeting with Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>(8)</sup>

### 1.4 The Iranian Diaspora in Malaysia

The Iranian diaspora in Malaysia plays a crucial role in Malaysia's relationship

with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The diaspora includes students in various Malaysian universities as well as white-collared workers such as academicians, engineers, IT professionals, business owners, and entrepreneurs. The current number of Iranians in Malaysia is estimated to be roughly around 200,000, which is the highest in any East Asian country.<sup>(9)</sup>

The 1990s witnessed a mass wave of Iranians migrating abroad mainly due to the worsening economic situation in the country; this occurred around the same time when Malaysia adopted a state policy of projecting the country as an international education hub, and hence, due to lower tuition fees and living expenses compared to other countries attracted students from around the world, particularly the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This policy resulted in many Iranian students arriving in Malaysia to pursue their education in various universities.<sup>(10)</sup>

This was also influenced by the fact that multiple countries in Europe and the United States imposed various visa restrictions on Iranian citizens and the Iranian passport's devaluing; therefore, traveling to Malaysia became the more affordable and more accessible option for Iranian citizens.

Other than students, the Iranians arriving in Malaysia also consisted of economic migrants that saw Malaysia as a gateway to other countries such as Australia due to the close geographical proximity between the two countries and Malaysia's liberal visa policy for Iranian citizens compared to other countries.<sup>(11)</sup>

The trend of Iranians migrating to Malaysia has also been influenced by the political climate and crackdown on dissidents against Iran's current government. The Green Movement in Iran, which came into being as a civil rights movement against the controversial reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, witnessed a massive crackdown within the country. Several of their activists fled to Malaysia. These activists who fled to Malaysia included several students who continued their education in Malaysian universities and individuals who set up businesses in Malaysia.<sup>(12)</sup> These Green Movement activists in Malaysia went on to form the *Anjuman e rahe sabz e Irani e malezi* (Green Track Society of Iranians in Malaysia), who remain in touch with the Green Movement activists in Iran.<sup>(13)</sup>

### **1.5 Malaysia's Relations With Iran's Regional Competitor: Saudi Arabia**

Over the years, Malaysia has shown keen interest in developing its ties with Iran while having retained historically strong and warm relations with Saudi Arabia.

The Malaysian relationship with Saudi Arabia developed soon after the country's independence in 1957. The first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rehman, paid a visit in 1958 and performed the pilgrimage to the holy city of Makkah.<sup>(14)</sup> Saudi Arabia also played a crucial role in mediating between

Malaysia and Indonesia during the Borneo confrontation period.<sup>(15)</sup>

Saudi Arabia has been a source of financial assistance to Malaysia for many years. Between 1975 to 1993, Saudi Arabia donated roughly \$85 million from the Saudi Economic Development Fund for socio-economic infrastructure in the Malaysian economic development plan.<sup>(16)</sup>

After the industrialization phase in Malaysia that begun in the 1990s, the number of Saudi tourists in Malaysia increased every year; this included a massive campaign launched by the Malaysian government where several high profile delegates traveled to Saudi Arabia to promote the tourism industry.<sup>(17)</sup>

### **1.6 Malaysia's Relations With the United States**

Malaysia and the United States have a longstanding relationship, dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The United States had supported Malaysia's independence from Indonesia, so it gained a special influence in the country later. Their relations had witnessed tensions on some issues in the Middle East. Mahathir Mohamad criticized the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, launching scathing criticism on US foreign policies back then. However, the United States remained a major trade partner to Malaysia. In 2002, the Malaysia-US Friendship Council was established to strengthen friendship between the two countries. The council played a role in reviving their mutual relations under the reign of former Prime Minister Najib Razak. Under President Obama's "Asia Pivot" policy to counter China, their relations were boosted further. In 2014, Obama made a landmark visit to Malaysia as the first US president to visit the country. An agreement of comprehensive cooperation was concluded. In 2013, the United States was the fourth largest trade partner to Malaysia, while Malaysia was the 22<sup>nd</sup> largest trade partner to the United States with a trade volume of approximately \$44 billion. In 2016, the United States was Malaysia's third largest export market in terms of value, while Malaysia was ranked 25<sup>th</sup> in US trade export destinations and recognized as a top trade partner to the United States.

However, Malaysia has great interest in its relations with US international rival China. Malaysia is located on the Silk Road and is amazed by the Chinese development experience. Mahathir Mohamad, in particular, has a special interest in strengthening Malaysia's ties with China under his orientation of independence and rebalancing relations with the United States; unlike Najib who had strong relations with the United States. The change of the government's orientations impact Malaysia's foreign policy towards the East, China, and towards the West, the United States.

## **2. Iran-Malaysia Relations: Dimensions and Tools**

The use of soft power by Iran is deep rooted in the Persian history of showcasing its culture to the world. This formed a crucial part of public diplomacy prior to the revolution during the time of the Shah of Iran and continues to influence

the way the Islamic Republic projects its influence on the world stage.<sup>(18)</sup>

According to Sadeghi & Hajimineh (2019), the three pillars of Iranian soft power are:

■ **History and culture:** this includes tourism and cultural events to promote Persian culture and language. The use of the Persian (Farsi) language is a primary source of attraction due to its synthesis with other languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Turkish, and many more. The Iranian diaspora abroad helps promote Persian culture through cuisine, music, products, and more.<sup>(19)</sup>

■ **Political values:** this includes promoting the political model that emanates from the Iranian revolution. The model is presented as a hybrid political system that employs the notion of a “religious democracy.” This model is considered very appealing to the audience that consists of religious Muslims.<sup>(20)</sup>

■ **Foreign policy:** this stems from the Iranian Constitution, which shapes its foreign policy based on Islamic values, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and safeguarding the oppressed worldwide.<sup>(21)</sup>

Iran uses hard power tools in regional countries, especially in Shiite-majority ones. However, in Malaysia Iran has employed soft diplomacy tools, which focus on the promotion of Persian culture and language and political and religious models that form the basis of the Iranian revolution.<sup>(22)</sup> The Iranian student diaspora in Malaysia has often been viewed as a driving force behind the people-to-people relationship and interactions between the two countries. The High Council of Iranian Affairs Abroad (HCIAA) has gone on record to state that the Iranian diaspora in Malaysia should be considered as an opportunity to promote Iran’s economic, social, and cultural goals and objectives.

Malaysia-Iran relations cover various fields such as the following:

### **2.1 Economic Cooperation**

Although Malaysia has been cautious about keeping in check any religious and ideological spillover of the Iranian revolution into their territory, this has not significantly impacted the economic relationship between the two countries, which has remained stable and uninterrupted even after the revolution.

According to Shahrman Lockman: “Although doing business with Iran has met with problems due to the sanctions, in Malaysia, Iran is still viewed as a country that is potentially offering a huge market.”<sup>(23)</sup>

Formal diplomatic interactions between the two countries continued after the revolution, and the most significant meeting that took place between the two countries after the revolution was during the visit of President Mohammad Khatami, who in 2002 paid a four-day visit to Malaysia from July 21 to July 24.<sup>(24)</sup> During the visit, the two countries signed multiple MoUs on economic cooperation in tourism, trade agreements, and an agreement for the promotion and protection of investments.

Since then, Malaysia and Iran have engaged in joint industrial projects, eased travel restrictions for Iranian citizens to Malaysia (Iranian citizens are entitled to a visa-free 14-day stay in Malaysia)<sup>(25)</sup> and have signed bilateral agreements in various areas.

The Malaysian government has also shown significant interest in cooperating with Iran in the energy sector. In 2007, the countries signed a multi-billion-dollar agreement to develop two offshore gas fields in Iran, which was billed by Iranian Oil Minister Gholam Hossein Nozari as the "biggest investment in the country."<sup>(26)</sup>

After the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council — China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States — plus Germany) together with the European Union, which lifted some of the international sanctions on Iran, in exchange for Iran limiting its nuclear program, bilateral economic relations between Iran and other Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia witnessed significant developments.

Soon after the lifting of the sanctions, the head of Middle East operations at the Malaysian state-owned oil and gas company Petronas was quoted as saying, "A new chapter is about to begin in relations between Petronas and the National Iranian Oil Company." Petronas also expressed willingness to import 50,000-60,000 barrels a day of Iranian crude.<sup>(27)</sup>

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, as part of his 2016 Southeast Asian tour, paid a bilateral visit to Malaysia where in a press conference with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, the two leaders both pledged to enhance their economic relations further, this included doing business within the banking systems of the two countries which was not possible during the sanctions.<sup>(28)</sup> A year later, Malaysia and Iran reached an agreement where the two sides decided to integrate their bank card systems and discussed the prospects of conducting business in local currencies.<sup>(29)</sup>

After Mahathir Mohamad's resignation and the subsequent appointment of Muhyiddin Yassin as prime minister, Hassan Rouhani spoke to the new prime minister. As per a statement issued by the Malaysian prime minister, the two leaders discussed ways to boost cooperation in many areas such as trade, investment, tourism, and higher education and expand potential cooperation in the areas of trade and investment.<sup>(30)</sup>

Soon after the conversation, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and the new Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishamuddin Hussein held a virtual meeting where the two sides agreed to finalize the preferential tariff agreement and the holding of a joint economic commission.<sup>(31)</sup>

## 2.2 Education and Research Cooperation

Academic officials from Iran and Malaysia held a meeting in Tehran in 2019,



which saw the attendance of the Director-General of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education Datin Siti Hamisah; during the meeting, the Iranian side expressed its interest in developing relations with Malaysia in all-out scientific areas, particularly in student exchanges.<sup>(32)</sup>

The Malaysian delegation also expressed the keenness of the Malaysian Ministry of Science to enhance educational cooperation with Iran and called on Muslim countries to hold dialogues on different issues and make efforts to develop a common attitude through academic research.<sup>35</sup>

The meeting also saw the University of Tehran sign two separate agreements with University Putra Malaysia and University Utara Malaysia.<sup>35</sup>

There have been various conferences and seminars in Malaysian universities that have been held in collaboration with Iranian universities and academicians. Most of these conferences have focused on the geopolitics in the Middle East and the cultural and linguistic bonds between Iran and Malaysia. Many of these events have happened in collaboration with the Iranian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur and have seen the attendance of students and academics from Iranian universities.

An example of such conferences is one that was held at the oldest and highest-ranking university in Malaysia called the University of Malaya, which was titled “Civilizational and Cultural Heritage of Iran and the Malay World; A Cultural Discourse” which was organized as a collaboration between various universities in Malaysia and Singapore and the Embassy of Iran in Kuala Lumpur. The event was attended by various academicians from Malaysia, Iran, Indonesia, and Singapore and the Iranian Ambassador to Malaysia Marzieh Afkham, (who also happens to be the first female ambassador since the revolution). The event organizers stated that: “Iran has played a significant role in the spread of Islam in Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and East Asia from China to Malaysia and Indonesia while Arab and Iranian traders, Indian Sufis introduced Islam to Southeast Asia in the 13th century.”<sup>(33)</sup>

Another similar example is an event from 2018 titled “Globalization of War: US-NATO Threats Directed Against Russia, China, Iran and North Korea” that was hosted by the Malaysian NGO called The International Movement for a JUST World and was held at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS), the event saw the attendance of Canadian academician and conspiracy theorist Michel Chossudovsky, the Iranian ambassador to Malaysia as well as several Malaysian academicians and students.<sup>(34)</sup>

### **2.3 Cultural Influence and Media**

According to an Iranian professor based in Malaysia,<sup>(35)</sup> the earliest exposure that the Malaysian public had to Iranian culture in the media was a Persian television series from the early 2000s titled “Khaneh be Doosh,” which was centered around an Iranian family’s struggles that wants to move to Malaysia.

The professor also states that the diaspora in Malaysia had played a significant role in introducing Iranian culture among the local population, which was minuscule prior to the mass migration of Iranians in the 90s.

The Iranian Film Festival in Malaysia was first held in 2018 in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur; the festival was organized by the Cultural Centre of the Iranian Embassy in Malaysia in partnership with Golden Screen Cinema, the largest entertainment and film distribution company in Malaysia. During the event, the Iranian Embassy Cultural Counselor A.M. Sadeghi was quoted as saying, "We hope that this festival will strengthen long-standing ties between Iran and Malaysia, and promote Iranian cinematic art as a bridge for cultural understanding and friendship between both countries."<sup>(36)</sup>

To mark the occasion of the 41st anniversary of the Iranian revolution, Ali Salemi, the public diplomacy consular officer at the Iranian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, wrote an op-ed published by The New Straits Times titled "Iran-Malaysia Relations: Bridge to Stronger Ties." In the op-ed, he termed the anniversary of the revolution as the "decision of the Iranian people to determine their own progress, planning developmental frameworks by themselves without the influence of foreign powers" and also stated that "Malaysia is a friendly and brotherly country, as well as being a Muslim-majority nation, all these have been taken into consideration by Iran."<sup>(37)</sup>

#### **2.4 Recruiting the Iranian Diaspora to Support Iran's Foreign Policy Agenda**

To assert their presence, many Iranian dissidents who fled to Malaysia after the 2009 presidential elections organized protests outside diplomatic missions such as the Iranian embassy in Kuala Lumpur and the United Nations (UN) office.<sup>(38)</sup>

In some cases, they even attempted to hijack events organized by the Iranian embassy. One such protest took place in February 2011 during a concert organized by the Iranian embassy to celebrate the victory of the 1979 revolution. The protesters belonging to the Green Movement turned it into an anti-regime gathering, chanting anti-government slogans.<sup>(39)</sup> These incidents raised alarms within the Iranian government who saw the increasing number of dissidents moving to Malaysia and asserting their political positions publicly as a threat.

The HCIAA, which operates under the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sent a delegation to visit Malaysia in 2013. The head of the delegation Ali Shabani stated that the Iranian diaspora in Malaysia should be considered an opportunity to promote Iran's economic, social, and cultural goals and objectives. During his visit, he held meetings with various members of several Iranian organizations, which he claimed served the Iranian political system and its grand interests; he also suggested the formation of a cultural center to counter the anti-revolutionary dissidents that are attempting to infiltrate the community.<sup>(40)</sup>

## **2.5 Gaining Malaysia's Support to Address US Sanctions**

The Malaysian mission to the United Nations also expressed support for the JCPOA, with its first secretary of the mission to the UN having stated that: "To date, the ongoing implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 on Iran's nuclear program is an example of the successful implementation of safeguards and verification. The JCPOA highlights the importance of IAEA safeguards as a fundamental component to nuclear non-proliferation as well as its indispensable role in the implementation of the NPT. Malaysia believes that such mechanisms should be retained or further improved to ensure States remain in full compliance with their safeguards obligations, thus boosting confidence among the international community."<sup>(41)</sup>

Mahathir Mohamad, during his second tenure, expressed disappointment with the fact that due to the sanctions imposed on Iran by the Trump administration, Malaysia was unable to trade freely with Iran, and was quoted as saying that "There is no provision in the United Nations that a country which is dissatisfied with another country can impose sanctions on that country and other countries trading with that nation."<sup>(42)</sup>

## **3. Malaysia's Significance in Iran's Plans to Circumvent US Sanctions**

Malaysia was significant in Iran's plans to circumvent US sanctions due to its strategic location and the big number of Iranian diaspora. Iran's major policies in this regards are as follows:

### **3.1 Money Laundering and Illegal Exports**

Money laundering has emerged as one of the essential businesses among the Iranian diaspora in Malaysia. This started off as a low-key operation mainly catering to the Iranian students there and facilitating the transfer of money between the two countries. However, with time, against the backdrop of sanctions imposed during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, international bank transfers became very hard to carry out for Iranian banks, which led to the emergence of several bogus Iranian money changers in Malaysia, actively involved in money laundering.<sup>(43)</sup> In 2019, following a notification by the central bank of Malaysia calling on banks to take note of a statement by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) urging "enhanced due diligence" on Iranians by members of the global money-laundering watchdog, several banks in Malaysia terminated the accounts of Iranian individuals and companies.<sup>(44)</sup> Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad referred to the steps taken as a consequence of "extreme pressures from certain quarters."<sup>(45)</sup>

### **3.2 Importing Nuclear Material**

A report by the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) states that Malaysia serves as a key point of transshipment of American products heading to Iran, which is in direct violation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1540, which makes it mandatory for all member states to create and implement export controls and monitor companies' activities on their territory.<sup>(46)</sup> In 2008, a US-based businessman pleaded guilty to illegally exporting fighter jet parts from Malaysia through his corporation called Vash International. The illegal shipping of F-14 parts was crucial for Iranian buyers to maintain their decade-old fighter jet fleet.<sup>(47)</sup>

French police arrested an Iranian businessman by the name of Majid Kakavand on charges of exporting items made in the United States to Iran; upon further investigation, it was discovered that Kakavand and his associates ran a front company in Malaysia named Evertop Services Sdn Bhd., which illegally purchased items from the United States and Europe.<sup>(48)</sup> The owner of another Malaysian based company called Evertop Services was indicted in 2011 by the United States Services for illegally exporting American goods to clients in Iran, which included military entities in Iran involved in Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.<sup>(49)</sup>

The same year, Malaysian police seized equipment they suspected could be used to make nuclear weapons from a Malaysian-registered ship traveling from China to Tehran while it was docked at a central Malaysian harbor; this equipment was being shipped illegally and did not have a special permit required under Malaysia's anti-trafficking law.<sup>(50)</sup>

Similarly, another American based businessman named Hossein Ali Khoshnevisrad was arrested on charges of using front companies in Malaysia to purchase Rolls Royce engines worth \$4.27 million and aerial cameras used for surveillance to upgrade bombers and fighter jets such as the F-4E Phantom, which were later acquired by the Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industrial Company which is controlled by the Ministry of Defense.<sup>(51)</sup>

### **3.3 Smuggling Oil**

A report by Sweden based company Tanker Trackers notes that Iran, in a bid to increase its oil sales against the backdrop of US sanctions, uses Malaysia to sell oil illegally to China and seems to be getting critical assistance from Malaysia.<sup>(52)</sup>

Samir Madani, the co-founder of TankerTrackers.com, stated that: "Iranian oil typically arrives in the Strait of Malacca and is handed over using ship-to-ship oil transfer to Chinese very large crude carriers."

### **3.4 Drug Syndicates**

Malaysia has also emerged as a focal point for Iranian drug syndicates; over the years, several Iranian nationals have been arrested in drug raids throughout

the country. Reports from Malaysian state media confirm that Iranians and Nigerians are the two dominant nationalities when it comes to drug syndicate masterminds.<sup>(53)</sup>

The illegal trafficking of drugs and narcotics has been a matter of tension between Malaysia and Iran for many years. Despite an agreement on cooperation in antinarcotics measures between Malaysia's National Anti-Drugs Agency and Iran's Drug Control Headquarters in 2008, illicit drug syndicates with ties to Iranians are still rampant in Malaysia.<sup>(54)</sup>

#### **4. Mahathir Mohamad's Approach: Between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who is often referred to as "the father of modernization" due to the rapid industrialization and economic growth Malaysia experienced during his tenure, has served as prime minister twice, first from 1981 to 2003 and then briefly from 2018 to 2020.

During his first tenure, Prime Minister Mahathir forged close relations with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states to extend his "Look East" policy. Saudi Arabia provided crucial financial assistance to Malaysia used in key infrastructure projects during the modernization period under Mahathir.

During Mahathir's first visit in 1982, Malaysia managed to secure loans worth \$10 million from the Saudi Development Fund.<sup>(55)</sup> Later on, Saudi Arabia approved an additional \$58 million for the second phase of the East-West Highway<sup>10</sup> construction, and later on January 24, 1986, the Saudi Development Fund ratified roughly \$50 million for the second phase of two projects, the Port Project in Penang Island, and the East-West Highway. Up until 1984, the overall loan from the Saudi Development Fund was \$252.2 million.<sup>57</sup>

During the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries emerged as a new market for Malaysia's overseas exports and tourism.

However, 15 years later, during his second tenure as prime minister, Mahathir's policy towards the Middle East emphasized building stronger ties with Iran and Turkey. While he paid a much-hyped visit to Turkey, he did not pay a single visit to Saudi Arabia despite receiving a formal invitation.<sup>(56)</sup>

A major policy of his that was in contrast to his earlier tenure was to host the Kuala Lumpur summit, which saw the attendance of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Turkish President Recep Erdogan, and the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, which aimed to create a Muslim bloc that saw itself as a potential replacement to the Jeddah based Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Mahathir also, on numerous occasions, openly defended the Iranian government from international sanctions. In a meeting with Iranian

President Hassan Rouhani on the sidelines of the Kuala Lumpur summit, Mahathir pledged to promote trade relations with Iran and condemned the US sanctions on Iran as "illegal;" Rouhani, on his part, stressed the need for efforts to address the problems of Iranian expatriates in Malaysia and to hold a meeting of the Iran-Malaysia Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation.<sup>(57)</sup>

During a state visit to Qatar, Mahathir addressed the Doha forum where he termed the US sanctions on Iran as a violation of international law and stated that his country did not support the sanctions and was losing out on a "big market" as a result of this.<sup>(58)</sup>

Shahriman Lockman has explained this dissimilarity in Mahathir's approach to the Middle East as "naïve" on the part of the former prime minister who, after coming out of retirement, faced a different situation in the Middle East, not realizing the extent to which the geopolitics had changed and instead ought to play a role in uniting the Muslim world together and foster close relations with everyone making any tradeoffs.<sup>(59)</sup>

Shahriman also states that: "This behavior of Mahathir can also be explained by looking at the people he was surrounded by during the period from 2003 to 2018 when he was out of power. During this period, Mahathir exposed himself to many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society type groups that were very ideological in their approach and, although slightly left of center, were somehow sympathetic towards Iran. There is something to be said of how the Iranians have managed to win the hearts and minds of some of the NGO groups in Malaysia that work on these issues." The current bureaucracy in Malaysia perceives the Kuala Lumpur summit that took place during Mahathir's tenure as a "brief romance that shall not be repeated," says Lockman.

Over the years, Malaysia has faced a constant struggle in preserving its relations with Iran, and at the same time retaining its longstanding ties with Saudi Arabia. Economic cooperation and business interests, particularly in the energy sector, have been the cornerstone of Malaysia's relationship with both countries.

However, another significant aspect of Malaysian-Saudi Arabian relations is the people-to-people interaction through travel. On the one hand, many religious pilgrims from Malaysia travel to the Saudi Arabian holy cities of Makkah and Madinah for hajj and umrah. On the other hand, a significant number of Saudi tourists travel to Malaysia every year.

The immigration authorities of Malaysia and Saudi Arabia in 2019 launched a joint initiative to ease the movement of Malaysian hajj pilgrims, this included the use of automated identification and rapid data capture and relay technologies for immigration clearance at both ends to help pilgrims reach Makkah and Madinah by avoiding time delays at the airport upon arrival and administrative challenges faced previously.<sup>(60)</sup>

Based on the 0.01 percent quota of 2020, the number of Malaysian pilgrims soared to 31,600, an increase from 30,200 pilgrims who performed hajj the previous year, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Mujahid Yusof Rawa, credited this increase to the discussion between the governments of the two countries.<sup>(61)</sup>

Tourism has always been viewed as an essential driving force in the economy and is the third most significant contributor to the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country, which stood at 5.9 percent in 2018.<sup>(62)</sup> Moreover, after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, the Malaysian government launched a vigorous campaign to attract tourists from the Arabian Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia.

The number of Saudi tourist arrivals to Malaysia increased from 27,808 in the year 2000<sup>(63)</sup> to nearly 100,000 in the year 2017 and are considered to be one of the biggest spenders in Malaysia's tourism industry.<sup>(64)</sup>

In the year 2019, the number of Saudi tourists traveling to Malaysia dropped by 20.5 percent, which the Malaysian media attributed to "geopolitical tensions."<sup>(65)</sup>

## **5. Challenges Facing Malaysia-Iran Relations**

Though Malaysia and Iran preserve good relations to varying degrees, yet there are serious challenges that impede the development of their mutual relations. The most prominent ones are as follows:

### **5.1 Malaysia's Concerns Over the Impact of Iran's Revolution**

Malaysia is often described as a diverse and multi-ethnic country. Although 60 percent of its population are Muslim, it has various religious minorities such as Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus. Islam is the country's official religion as per the Constitution and is represented by the Shafi'i version of Sunni Islam, which is practiced by the majority of the Muslims in the country.<sup>(66)</sup>

Director of the Chief Executive's Office of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia, Shahrman Lockman, states that: "Although the commitment of the Malaysian state to Shafi'i Islam was initially not very strong, but later the "racial politics" in the country compelled them to avoid any divisions within the society since having divisions among Malays on sectarian lines can have severe political consequences."<sup>(67)</sup>

However, there happens to be a strong perception that the UMNO (United Malay National Organization), which ruled Malaysia as a part of the Barisan Nasional coalition uninterruptedly from 1957 to 2018, has always been very aware of resisting greater ideological and religious influence from the Iranian revolution and has separated its diplomatic relations with Iran from its internal policies.

According to Nair (1997), during a meeting with Iranian officials in Bangladesh, the then Malaysian Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie received

assurances from Iran that they would not train Malaysian nationals in any subversive activities. Later, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Musa Hitam expressed concern regarding a visiting delegation from Iran that the potential misapplication of "Iran's brand of revolutionary Islam" within Malaysia's multi-racial and multi-religious context would prove to be disastrous.<sup>(68)</sup>

In the past, Malaysia has expressed concerns about Iranian religious influence in their country, which they fear can have severe political and sectarian consequences,<sup>(69)</sup> and have detained Iranian citizens involved in religious preaching.<sup>(70)</sup> However, the presence of a vast number of Iranians in the country prompts the government in Iran to continue with their agenda of spreading ideologies and narratives that are beneficial to Iran.

Shahriman Lockman states that: "While the security services in Malaysia are very anxious about the 200,000 Iranians present here, it is not something that keeps them awake at night."<sup>(71)</sup>

## 5.2 Malaysia's Concerns About Iran's Illicit Practices

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran was involved in a diplomatic tiff with Malaysia after two of its female citizens were sentenced to death for drug trafficking. The Iranian Foreign Ministry warned that relations between the two countries will suffer and called on Malaysia to halt the executions "so that the friendship and brotherhood" between the two countries can continue.<sup>(72)</sup>

According to the country report on drug issues published by the Malaysian Ministry on Home Affairs, Iranian nationals have constituted the local drug syndicates operating in the country for several years.<sup>(73)</sup>

The Iranian drug syndicates in Malaysia have also been actively involved in supplying "roving chemists," i.e., experienced chemists from Iran who are hired to process drugs.<sup>(74)</sup> These Iranian chemists are active in the illegal production of methamphetamine, and their activities are not restricted to just Iranian syndicates but any drug syndicate that is willing to pay lucrative incentives.

The drug syndicates that operate within Iran and other countries like Malaysia constitute a significant source of foreign currency flow into Iran.<sup>(75)</sup> This illicit flow of foreign currency into Iran through the international drug trade has received IRGC and Hezbollah patronage.<sup>(76)</sup>

In response to the arrests of Iranian citizens in drug-related offenses, the press in Iran has mostly responded to such incidents by terming it as the religious prejudice of the Malaysian authorities towards Shiite Muslims and have termed it as an "anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite project."<sup>(77)</sup>

## 5.3 US Sanctions on Iran

However, sanctions have prevented the Malaysian government from exploring the full potential of their interest in Iran in the oil and gas sector. In 2010, the



Malaysian state-owned oil and gas company Petronas had to halt the supply of gasoline due to US sanctions on oil firms with supply ties to Iran.<sup>(78)</sup> Moreover, a couple of years later, Petronas had to stop imports of 50,000-60,000 bpd of Iranian crude oil due to a US embargo.<sup>(79)</sup>

After the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, the Iranian state-owned newspaper, *Tehran Times*, dubbed Malaysia as Iran's "new all-weather friend" and reported that the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail expressed support for the JCPOA in principle as an important development in efforts to promote peace, security, and stability in the world.<sup>(80)</sup>

Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yasin's statement after his telephone call with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani highlighted his government's willingness to continue cooperation with Iran for trade and investment.<sup>52</sup> This was followed by a virtual meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries where both sides agreed to negotiate a preferential trade agreement.<sup>53</sup>

With Joe Biden taking over as the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States and the soaring likelihood of the renegotiation of the JCPOA, the prospects of Malaysia rushing to do business with Iran are high. The past support extended by Malaysia to the JCPOA, and the subsequent meetings between the Muhyiddin administration in Malaysia and the Iranian government, where both sides expressed the desire to strengthen existing economic relations, indicate that any normalization in US-Iran ties to the extent of returning to the JCPOA would reignite Malaysian interest in exploring business opportunities in Iran, particularly in the oil and gas sector.

Malaysia has openly confirmed its interest in exploring the trade and investment opportunities in Iran's oil and gas sector, even before signing the JCPOA. An example of cooperation in oil and gas preceding the JCPOA includes the setting up of a joint company between the National Iranian Oil Engineering and Construction Company and Malaysian SKSD called SKSPARS to construct the Kadah Refinery in northern Malaysia.<sup>(81)</sup>

However, Malaysian foreign policy experts like Shahrman Lockman remain cautious of any immediate attempts by Malaysia to upgrade the current economic relations with Iran, suggesting that the return to trade ties "will not be at the same pace." Shahrman adds that "Malaysia had made a lot of investments in their relationship with Iran after the signing of the JCPOA. However, the subsequent withdrawal of the Trump administration made the continuation of business with Iran impossible. So, while there will be economic interests in Iran that Malaysia would like to tap on, there will not be the same rush due to the Trump experience."<sup>(82)</sup>

#### **5.4 Restructuring Malaysia's Relations With Saudi Arabia and the Gulf After Mahathir's Tenure**

After Mahathir Mohamad's resignation and the subsequent takeover of a new coalition under Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, the Malaysian government has begun to reassess its Middle East policy. In a press conference after taking over as foreign minister, Hishamuddin Hussein stated that his main focus would be to mend bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia.<sup>(83)</sup>

Foreign Minister Hishamuddin Hussein went on to announce the establishment of a high level strategic committee (HLSC) between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, which will be chaired jointly by both Hishammuddin and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan. Malaysian state media dubbed this move as a new milestone in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia's close ties.<sup>(84)</sup>

The negotiations on the HLSC were finalized during a state visit by Foreign Minister Hishamuddin Hussein to Riyadh, where he held bilateral talks with his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan.<sup>(85)</sup> Foreign Minister Hishamuddin stated that the key areas of consultation that would be held regularly in the HLSC included regional and international political security issues, post COVID-19 economic recovery, hajj and umrah matters, food security, and palm oil trade.<sup>81</sup>

Hishamuddin Hussein issued a statement on his Facebook account after concluding his visit to Saudi Arabia that: "Saudi Arabia is the country where the holy cities of Makkah and Medina are located. Maintaining a close brotherly relationship is very important for both countries. Not only in the context of diplomacy but more importantly for the sanctity of the religion of Islam itself – thank God it was a very beneficial work trip."<sup>(86)</sup>

The recent geopolitical tensions in the Middle East which include the killing of IRGC General Qassem Soleimani, which heightened tensions between the United States and Iran, and the increasing Iranian proxy warfare in countries such as Yemen, which is viewed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE as a threat to their sovereignty, has put Putrajaya<sup>(87)\*</sup> in a tight spot where its policy of managing their relations with both Iran and the GCC nations may no longer be a viable option.

The recent setting up of an HLSC strategic committee between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia serves as an indicator that both countries want to further enhance their economic cooperation, and Riyadh's willingness to create the perception that doing business with them has an added value.

#### **Conclusion**

Whether the United States returns to the JCPOA and sanctions are lifted or otherwise, Iran will press ahead in consolidating its lobby and soft-image in Malaysia by employing every tool available, from its active diaspora to the

rhetoric of the Muslim ummah. As long as Putrajaya continues to employ policies that are helpful to the Iranian government (such as the liberal visa policy), Iranians will keep thronging to the tropical paradise. This phenomenon brings the country into the global limelight owing to Iran's quest for dual-use technology and hard currency through shell companies. As much as Tehran works overtime to build on the existing gains in Malaysia, Putrajaya is likely engaged in a cost-benefit analysis of the relationship. As referenced in the paper, pro-government Iranians based in Malaysia have been detained for involvement in proscribed activities, hence bringing a bad name to the country.

In the post-Mahathir era, the Southeast Asian nation has already begun pursuing a more level-headed foreign policy as necessitated by *realpolitik*. The Gulf Arab nations, however, will pursue their interests in Asia beyond their immediate neighborhood. The recent visit of Malaysian dignitaries to Riyadh exhibits the mutual desire to strengthen multifaceted cooperation. The ties with Iran will remain eclipsed by its regional and international policies, ranging from propping up proxy militias in its neighborhood to defying multilateral agreements including its adherence to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

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