



**REPORT**

# **Navigating Complex Waters: Analyzing Malaysia-Iran Relations Amid Domestic and Regional Dynamics**

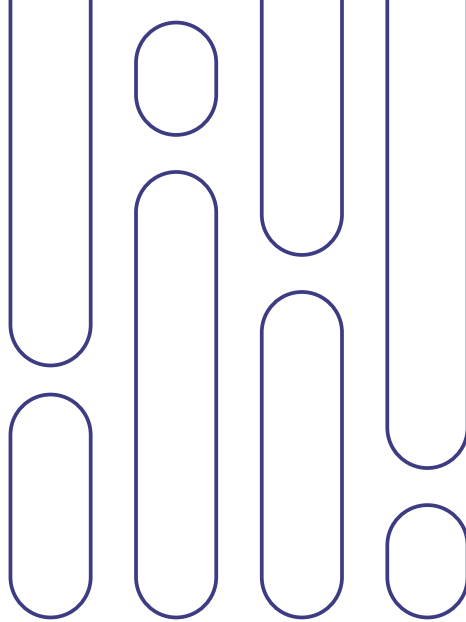
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# **CONTENTS**

<b>Remarks and Media Coverage .....</b>	<b>03</b>
<b>Contextualizing the Visit .....</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>Conclusion: Outcomes of the Visit and the Future of Malaysia-Iran Relations .....</b>	<b>09</b>

In the month of August, Malaysian Foreign Minister Zambry Abdul Kadir undertook a three-day diplomatic sojourn to the Iranian republic. This marked his official inaugural visit to Iran since his assumption of the office of foreign minister within the new coalition government led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and was the first visit by a Malaysian foreign minister to Iran in seven years. This diplomatic foray represented the initial leg of his bilateral diplomatic tour of Iran, with a subsequent visit to Iraq. During this visit, Zambry was accompanied by a cadre of business representatives and government officials.

Notwithstanding Malaysia's circumspection regarding the potential ideological or religious ramifications stemming from the 1979 Iranian revolution within its territory, the Malaysian stance vis-à-vis its post-revolution bilateral relations with Iran has been predominantly characterized by an emphasis on economic pragmatism. In the face of the coercive measures imposed by the United States-led sanctions targeting Iran, Malaysia has persistently regarded Iran as a vital yet underexplored economic frontier. Malaysia has proactively pursued the expansion of its economic ties with Iran, particularly in the realms of international commerce and economic collaboration, with a notable focus on the oil and gas sector.

## **Remarks and Media Coverage**

### **Malaysia**

Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a [press release](#) clarifying that the visit was conducted at the behest of the Iranian government and was a continuation of the substantive discus-

sions initiated during Zambry's prior meeting with his counterpart, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, on the sidelines of the Ministerial Meeting of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in July. Notably, the [press release](#) issued by the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs placed a particular emphasis on the subject of bilateral trade dynamics between the two nations, the identification of new areas of cooperation and the discussion of areas of mutual concerns. Strikingly, the Malaysian statement refrained from any direct reference to overarching "Muslim causes," or any other regional or global issues.

Conversely, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in its issued [press release](#), notably diverged from the Malaysian stance. This release posited that the two foreign ministers had engaged in discussions aimed at reinforcing a collective boycott of Danish and Swedish products, a measure ostensibly motivated by perceived offenses against the sanctity of the Holy Quran within the aforesaid countries. Furthermore, the Iranian statement alluded to a broader spectrum of global affairs, specifically referencing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and underscored the presence of religious and cultural commonalities binding Malaysia and Iran.

## **Iran**

The visit of the Malaysian foreign minister to Iran assumed a salient position and garnered extensive coverage within the Iranian media landscape. Foremost among the focal points that received prominent attention in the Iranian media was the bilateral agreements inked between Malaysia and Iran, partic-

ularly pertaining to the expeditious facilitation of a [prisoner exchange program](#) between the two nations. In addition, secondary topics of discussion encompassed various dimensions, including the promotion of Muslim unity in response to global developments, the [augmentation of bilateral trade](#), the fostering of collaborative initiatives in the realms of [academia and research](#) and cooperation in the [agriculture](#) and [ICT](#) sectors. The subject of a prisoner exchange agreement between the two countries assumed a prominent position within the Iranian media landscape and was further illuminated during a joint press conference convened by the respective foreign ministers. Notably, during this press conference, specific emphasis was placed on the prioritization of female prisoners within the framework of this exchange agreement. Over a period of a decade, [several Iranian nationals](#) have been incarcerated and subsequently placed on death row in Malaysian prisons on charges related to drug trafficking. This matter has drawn substantial attention within Iran, with various human rights advocacy groups asserting that a significant proportion of the Iranian citizens implicated in these cases had been deceived into unwittingly transporting illicit substances into Malaysia, often enticed by fraudulent promises of financial incentives and operating with a fundamental lack of awareness regarding the nature of the materials they were transporting.

Consequently, the Iranian government has faced escalating pressure to advocate for the resolution of these cases through diplomatic channels with the Malaysian authorities. It is worth noting that the prioritization of female prisoners, while not ex-

publicly articulated within media reports or in official press releases from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, can be traced back to a [public diplomatic dispute](#) between the two nations dating back to 2013. Two Iranian women were sentenced to death by a Malaysian court for their involvement in drug trafficking activities and at the time, the then Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hassan Ghashghavi publicly implored Malaysia to extend clemency to these women prisoners “so that the friendship and brotherhood between the two countries can continue.”

## **Contextualizing the Visit**

The visit took place against the backdrop of a newly formed coalition government in Malaysia, presided over by Anwar Ibrahim. His political journey commenced as the leader of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), a prominent student-led religious organization that drew inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Significantly, ABIM, under the leadership of Anwar, was profoundly influenced by the 1979 Iranian revolution. In the immediate aftermath of the Iranian revolution, Anwar led an ABIM delegation to Iran for a meeting with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, subsequently advocating for an “Iranian Liberation and Solidarity Day.”

Since then, Anwar has undergone a transformative evolution as a political figure. He founded the People’s Justice Party (PKR), a multi-ethnic political entity, and espoused a vision of “moderate” and “compassionate” Islam. Nevertheless, Anwar has been notably intentional in projecting himself as a Muslim statesman on the global stage, exhibiting vocal engagement on a multi-

tude of issues pertaining to the Muslim world. This proclivity is evident in his immediate post-assumption of power conversations with [Turkish President](#) Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Hamas Political Bureau Chief [Ismail Haniyeh](#). It is noteworthy, however, that Anwar, since assuming office, has not conveyed any indication of an intention to depart from established norms governing Malaysia's Middle East policy, and chose Saudi Arabia as his maiden Middle Eastern visit destination following his assumption of office.

It is worth mentioning that the Malaysian foreign minister, after his Iran visit and a subsequent trip to Iraq where the reopening of the Malaysian Embassy in Baghdad was announced, [referred to these visits](#) as the “the beginning for Malaysia to play a role as a proactive country in international relations, especially in West Asia, in addition to the active diplomacy mission founded by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to enable Malaysia to return to the international scene in facing and dealing with global issues.” This reflects Anwar's intent to enhance Malaysia's presence in the region.

During the visit, the two foreign ministers also [discussed](#) setting up visits for the premiers of both countries in the near future. The visit of the Malaysian foreign minister to Iran was followed up with a bilateral [meeting](#) between the Malaysian prime minister and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Following this meeting, Anwar took to [Facebook](#) to reiterate his emphasis on economic collaboration that had been articulated by Zambry during his visit to Iran. He underscored Malaysia's aspiration to



fortify its bilateral ties with Iran by fostering cooperation across various domains, including the economic, educational and food security fields, as well as in science and technology. Additionally, he expressed a desire to explore new avenues of cooperation. Conversely, the Iranian President's Office issued a [statement](#) that highlighted the importance of culture as a pivotal facet for expanding relations between the two nations. The statement also claimed that the Malaysian prime minister commended Iran's remarkable advancements in the realms of medicine, pharmaceuticals, science and technology and the military. It is noteworthy that these proclaimed accolades by the Malaysian prime minister did not feature in any official statements released by the Malaysian side.

The bilateral engagements between Iran and Malaysia run parallel with significant concurrent diplomatic developments involving both the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as their respective member states. Two noteworthy developments merit attention in this context. Firstly, there is the [formal accession](#) of all GCC member states to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). Secondly, the inaugural ASEAN-GCC summit, hosted by Saudi Arabia on October 20 of this year, took place under Malaysia's role as the [ASEAN country coordinator](#). During this landmark summit, the two regional organizations issued a [joint statement](#) committing to advancing relations across various domains, encompassing trade, investments, security and cultural exchange.



Given the shared religious and cultural affinities between Malaysia and the GCC member states, notably Saudi Arabia, Malaysia holds a pivotal role in facilitating the GCC member states' entry into the ASEAN market. Furthermore, it was officially [declared](#) that Malaysia will undertake the role of host for the second ASEAN-GCC summit in 2025. This announcement carries profound implications, as it signifies a noteworthy evolution in the summit's format. Going forward, the summit will gather leaders at the highest level [every two years](#), with a rotation mechanism in place, adding a layer of regularity and structure to this important diplomatic assembly.

## **Conclusion: Outcomes of the Visit and the Future of Malaysia-Iran Relations**

The Malaysian foreign minister's visit to Iran and the meeting between Prime Minister Anwar and President Raisi, like past such diplomatic engagements, primarily revolved around discussions on bilateral agreements. While the visit could be seen as a symbolic achievement by the Iranian government to bolster its perceived legitimacy following the Mahsa Amini protests and because of the harsh socioeconomic conditions, it lacked substantial tangible outcomes. According to reports, the conversations between the two parties spanned various sectors, including agriculture, ICT, academia, research and trade. Nevertheless, there was no formal memorandum of understanding established between the two sides, nor did they divulge any specific plans for enhancing collaboration in these aforementioned areas to the public.

It is worth noting that Malaysia is indeed keen on exploring avenues for economic cooperation with Iran, as evidenced by the presence of a significant business delegation accompanying the foreign minister during his visit. However, the previous setbacks experienced by Malaysian businesses due to the United States' withdrawal from the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal may deter Malaysian investors from taking bold steps in the future. Conversely, the heightened interest exhibited by GCC member states, notably Saudi Arabia, in bolstering economic ties with ASEAN member states, including Malaysia, reflects their intention to present themselves as more feasible, sustainable and dependable economic partners, especially when juxtaposed with the uncertainties associated with analogous endeavours involving Iran.

A future visit to Iran by the Malaysian prime minister will likely offer a clearer perspective on the extent to which Malaysia is willing to harness the full potential of its bilateral relations with Iran. The latter, on the other hand, is poised to leverage Malaysia as a destination for its global pursuit of dual-use technology and foreign currency through shell companies. While Tehran continues its efforts to build upon the existing gains in Malaysia, the depth of Putrajaya's commitment to the partnership remains an evolving aspect of their diplomatic calculus.

