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Dr Mahathir arrives in Syria for two-day official visit

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrives early today in this ancient city for a two-day official visit, which covers diverse ground from business and regional concerns, to academic dialogues with ulamas and think-tanks.

He is the first Malaysian Prime Minister to visit Syria.

First on the agenda is a meeting with Syrian President Dr Bashar Al-Assad who succeeded his father Hafez Al-Assad in 2000 at the age of 34, and is credited for building a more open society.

Syria, long a socialist state living in political and economic isolation, is now loosening the tight controls, including moving from a centrally planned economy to free market system.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Syria was interested in Malaysia's experience in building a progressive Islamic nation, and becoming a middle-income country.

"They want to exchange views on this," he said.

He added that Dr 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.

"They will discuss the Middle East problems, and the need for a comprehensive solution that will include Syria," Syed Hamid said.

Syria had lost the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and has held occasional peace talks with Israel for its return.

Dr Mahathir will also meet Syrian Prime Minister Mustapha Mero.

Syed Hamid said both countries had strong political ties since diplomatic relations were established in 1958, but trade and investment lagged behind.

Bilateral trade was at US\$67.3 million (RM225.74 million) last year, with Malaysia exporting US\$66.3 million worth of goods to Syria, and importing only US\$1 million.

Malaysia's main exports to Syria are timber and palm oil, while it imports mainly cotton and herbal medicine from the republic.

The 70-member delegation includes representatives from 22 corporations including Proton, Airod, Petronas and information technology (IT) companies.

IT is of specific interest as Dr Bashar is a strong advocate of computer literacy and the Internet.

Dr Mahathir will hold a dialogue with Syrian businessmen, and also address private sector leaders and think-tank representatives on Malaysia's experience in development and nation-building.

The Prime Minister will open Proton's showroom in Harasta. Last year, Syria imported 600 Proton Waja and Wira cars, and 100 Perodua scooters.

During the visit, Malaysia and Syria will sign nine Memoranda of Understanding including on Science and Technology Co-operation, IT, education, trade and bilateral payments.

Dr Mahathir will also hold a dialogue with ulama and Islamic leaders, chaired by former Damascus University professor Mohammad Tawfil Al Bujairami.

He will visit the Umayyad Mosque, one of the most sacred sites in the Muslim world, and hand over a donation of US\$10,000 to Minister of Awkaf Mohamad Ziadah.

The mosque, located in the heart of the city, was built in the seventh

century, and stands on the site of a former temple to the Roman god Jupiter and Christian Church dedicated to St John the Baptist.

Dr Siti Hasmah has a separate programme, including opening a badminton clinic by a Malaysian coach, visiting the Damascus University, and attending meetings with the First Lady Asma Al-Assad and General Union for Women chairman Sou'ad Bakoor.

Malaysia opened its mission in Syria last year, while Damascus established an embassy in Kuala Lumpur the same year.

The delegation includes Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie, and Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Law Hieng Ding.

Menteris Besar in the delegation are Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim (Perlis), Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman (Johor) and Datuk Musa Aman (Sabah).

Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah leave for home on Tuesday night, after a three-leg African tour which began in Algeria last Sunday.