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Visiting one of Islam's greatest warriors

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stepping out of the Shrine of Saladin yesterday. Saladin was one of the Muslim world's greatest military leaders in the 12th century.

The shrine is attached to the oldest place of worship in Damascus, the Umayyad Mosque.

The mosque, in the heart of old Damascus, stands on a site which has held a house of worship for over 2,000 years, beginning with a temple of the Aramaean god of thunder, Hadad.

In the first century AD, a Roman temple in honour of Jupiter was built on the ruins of the Aramaean predecessor. It later became a church dedicated to St John the Baptist.

The mosque was built in 635AD after the Arab conquest, and Muslims and Christians prayed there side by side for 70 years. The building later became solely a mosque.

Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali visited the mosque yesterday morning.

He presented a donation of US\$10,000 (RM38,000) to Mohamad Ziadah, Minister of Awkaf (Endowments), before visiting the Hamediah Souk which sells traditional textiles, carpets, brassware and jewellery.

Dr Mahathir said his perception of Islam has broadened after his visit because the mosque holds a crypt where the head of St John is kept.

To find a Christian relic inside a mosque is of course unusual. Certainly it will be a shock for Malaysians but it is clear that it is the teaching of Islam that we must respect the religion of others, he said at a dialogue with Syrian Islamic scholars yesterday.