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PM's visits open a new level of bilateral relations with Algeria, Syria

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IT came as a jolt to see the huge photographs of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad lining the streets of Algiers in honour of his visit; it's not done in Malaysia but it is a popular practice in Arab countries.

Alongside Dr Mahathir, pictures of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika also adorned the lamp-posts of Algiers.

But they certainly can't outdo the number of photographs of Syrian President Dr Bashar Al-Assad and his late father Hafez Al-Assad on display in Damascus.

Dr Mahathir made official visits to Algeria (last week) and Syria (this week), both very different countries.

But it is more than evident that both consider Malaysia a role model in terms of its economic success and progressive brand of Islam.

At every dialogue and Press conference, the questions fell into two categories: the secret of Malaysia's economic success, and its development as a modern Muslim nation.

Dr Mahathir was not stingy with his answers. His detailed responses are familiar to Malaysians, but they drew rapt attention from the Algerians and Syrians. It was no exaggeration to say that the moderator of every dialogue session had a hard time bringing it to a close.

True to his belief in strategic partnership, Dr Mahathir told them that Malaysia was always willing to "open its books" and if any of its strategies fit, they were welcome to them.

The visits are the first time a Malaysian Prime Minister had gone to either country, and they were thus getting-to-know-you trips as much as trade and investment missions.

Both countries are keen on getting Malaysian investment. Malaysian trade with both countries is currently small, and investment even smaller except for the one Petronas project in Algeria.

The reason for this, said Dr Mahathir, was a lack of familiarity with either country's systems and policies, and a sense of caution over their stability.

Algeria, in particular, is still grappling with violence since the military cancelled the 1992 election which the Front Islamique du Salut (Islamic Salvation Front) party was about to win.

Bouteflika's conciliation programme in 2000 had brought some peace, but the situation remains serious.

The impact on the Algerian economy is evident. Unemployment is high. The infrastructure is basic and in urgent need of maintenance.

Syria, which has a more robust economy, is moving gradually from a centrally-planned system to the free market.

It, too, wants to know how Malaysia had built its economy and gained technological know-how. It had, in particular, expressed interest in Malaysia's privatisation programme and efforts to join the information age.

With regard to Islam, there was intense interest in Dr Mahathir's views and Malaysia's experience in successfully blending Islam and economic development.

Again, his answers would have covered familiar ground for Malaysians, but they often drew applause from the Algerians and Syrians.

In Damascus, in particular, the Syrians kept the questions flowing hard and fast at the numerous dialogues.

Dr Mahathir didn't mince his words. He warned about the Western domination of the world, but also did not spare the Muslims.

He urged Muslims to unite, to start acting with clear thinking rather than emotion, and to make greater effort to learn the technology of the West in order to become powerful.

He also voiced his controversial opinion on terrorism: that those who killed innocent civilians were committing acts of terror but in some cases such as the Palestinians, there were mitigating circumstances.

Whether controversial, frank or outspoken, his views did go down extremely well and the response was tremendous. It perhaps shows that there is actually quite a lot of common ground in the Muslim world which can be tapped.

Dr Mahathir, who described both his visits as very successful, received a warm welcome in both countries. In Algeria, he spent over three hours in discussion with Bouteflika, and in Syria, Dr Bashar hosted him to a private dinner.

The visits opened up a new level in bilateral relations, and did a lot to enhance the standing of Malaysia.