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**Title : AT THE FIRST MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON  
POLITICAL AND SECURITY ISSUES OF THE ASIA-MIDDLE EAST  
DIALOGUE (AMED)**

Honourable Dato' Joseph Salang  
Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs

His Excellency Datuk Rastam Mohd Isa,  
Secretary-General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia.

His Excellency Dato' S. Thanarajasingam,  
Chairman of the Organizing Committee

Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First and foremost, let me say how pleased I am to be here this morning to deliver the keynote address at the first meeting of the Asia-Middle East Dialogue (AMED) Working Group on Political and Security Issues. May I add my personal welcome to all participants. For those of you who have come from abroad, I do hope that you will find time to see Kuala Lumpur as well.

2. Today, the presence of so many participants in Kuala Lumpur bears testimony to the interest and importance that you and your government give to AMED.

3. As co-chair of this working group with Saudi Arabia, it is our earnest hope that this meeting will pave the way for Asia and the Middle East to enhance and further strengthen our regional ties. I am convinced that we can collectively benefit from this exercise. As participants in this working group, you have an important task, in the next two days, to look for synergies in our approach as well as action in meeting common political and security challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

4. As we all know, contacts between Asia and the Middle East long predates AMED. In fact over the centuries, ships have sailed through our respective regions establishing trade and cultural ties between Asia and the Middle East. The Straits of Malacca, for example, has always figured prominently in the history of Asia-Middle East relations. It brought traders from the great civilisations of the East into contact with one another. Arabs mingled freely, not only with the local people, but also with

traders from China, India and from other parts of the world. The 'spice route', in which the Straits was a key component, contributed to the emergence of the Malacca Sultanate, as the most prosperous empire and trading centre in Southeast Asia, in the fifteenth century. The intermingling of traders from India, China and the Middle East enriched the vibrant local culture and left their imprint on the cultural topography of the region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

5. Today, trade still plays a major part in the promotion and strengthening of ties between our two regions. With a population of more than 300 million people, economic growth averaging at 5% per annum and a combined GDP of over US\$1 trillion in the past three to four years, the Middle East has become an important market and business partner for Asian countries. We are encouraged to see the rapid economic development taking place in the Middle East. We believe there is great economic opportunity in the Middle East. These increased economic and trading interactions would invariably bring both our regions closer as we continue to work in partnership to bring mutual benefit.

6. Over the years, China has emerged as one of the major global economic powers. It is forecasted that China's GDP will match that of the United States at USD 11 to 12 trillion by 2015. Located between East Asia and South Asia, with a population of 500 million, a combined GDP of more than USD 800 billion, an economic growth of more than 6% in 2005, and endowed with natural and human resources, South East Asia would definitely contribute to the overall economic growth of Asia. With China's phenomenal growth coupled with the rapid and sustained economic growth in Japan, South East Asia and India, Asia is poised to become the global engine of growth. Some even believe that it foreshadows the rise of a world that would see the shift in the economic epicentre to the east. These developments will no doubt make Asia attractive to the Middle East as well.

7. Indeed, the ASEAN region has historically been at the confluence of major trading routes between the East and the West. The ASEAN of today has strong political and economic ties with China, Japan, South Korea and India. At the same time, ASEAN and its four Asian partners have close bilateral ties with countries in the Middle East. In this regard, ASEAN looks forward to playing an important role to link the rest of Asia with the Middle East.

8. The increasing number of official visits by leaders of the two regions is a good indication of the growing strength of ties between Asia and the Middle East. For example, less than a month ago, His Majesty, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, visited Malaysia, China, India and Pakistan. His visit no doubt served to strengthen ties between these countries and Saudi Arabia. In the years to come, Asia and the Middle East would continue to deepen and strengthen their relations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. We face a number of common challenges and concerns. These include some of the longstanding or chronic interstate and intrastate conflicts including the unresolved conflict in the Middle East. We are certainly familiar with these and I do not wish to repeat them. Since September 11, 2001 terrorism has emerged as a major security concern. In addition to the security challenges, we also have to contend with natural disasters and other calamities as well.

10. The resort to unilateral action by certain major powers has weakened the multilateral system upon which international peace and security and common prosperity had reposed. AMED has the potential to contribute significantly by adding value or providing an alternative angle to the global efforts to address these challenges.

11. The long term goal of this Working Group is to establish closer cooperation between our two regions which in turn will contribute to a secure, peaceful and prosperous region of Asia and the Middle East. At the inaugural AMED meeting last June, I had outlined three possible areas of cooperation that Asia and the Middle East could consider. They are:

- (i) Strengthening the global normative framework governing state behaviour and inter-state relations;
- (ii) Promoting inter-faith dialogue and understanding about Islam as a religion that is consistent with global norms; and
- (iii) Undertaking a multilateral approach to countering international terrorism and complementing other regional efforts.

12. Let me elaborate on some practical measures that could be undertaken to implement these three areas of cooperation.

13. Firstly, I would emphasise the importance of a framework for state behaviour and interstate relations, by drawing your attention to the fact that Southeast Asia region has managed to free itself from violent and destructive interstate conflicts. It had not been easy for a region that was once known as the 'Balkans of the East'. It is indeed remarkable that today the ASEAN region is free of such conflicts. It is that environment that had given the region the confidence to focus its energies and resources to building a peaceful, stable and prosperous region. Indeed the confidence level among the ASEAN states is today high enough for us to attempt to realise the ASEAN community by 2020 or even earlier.

14. How has this been possible? It is because we have consciously emphasised amity and cooperation in dealing with each other. Indeed we have successfully internalised this behaviour and have been able to move ahead with our cooperation even though we have our own share, perhaps more, of unresolved disputes over national boundaries, right of claim over Exclusive Economic Zones, as well as the islands and resources in the South China Sea. Over the years we have been able to convert

these habits into a durable code of conduct of inter-state relations. This code of conduct is the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation or TAC which is today a diplomatic instrument governing inter-state relations between states in South East Asia. Its importance is recognised by many countries outside the region including Australia, China, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Republic of Korea and Russia. There are others who have also expressed interest to accede to this Treaty.

15. In this regard, I believe that it would be a reasonable and practical goal for the Working Group to work on a mechanism similar to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation among the AMED countries. As I said earlier we have to be realistic and pragmatic. Going by ASEAN's experience we need not jump straight away into the deep end by attempting a legal code or treaty. We could start with a declaration of principles of amity and cooperation. We could then regulate our interactions within AMED in accordance with this declaration. Once again I must stress that there is no quick fix. Internalising these norms as part of our inter state relations would require years of patience and perseverance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

16. The second area is on promoting interfaith dialogue. The current uproar over the issue of caricatures published in Denmark and followed by other countries on the so-called principles of freedom of the press and democracy, is a classic example of religious insensitivity that could lead to animosity between religions. The caricatures which were clearly offensive, provocative and derogatory, had already led to numerous demonstrations that had resulted in the loss of innocent lives. It could have been resolved, at the very beginning, if only wisdom, understanding and sensitivities, and the exercise of prudence had prevailed. Instead, ignorance and obstinacy ruled the day. At issue here is a matter of faith in religion, and not unbridled freedom of speech or the press. I suspect, like many others too, that this singular act of insensitivity had set back our efforts to promote interfaith understanding that had been undertaken in the last few years.

17. At this critical juncture where it appears that interfaith dialogue and understanding is breaking down, I believe AMED could play a valuable role indeed. In Malaysia, a multi religious and multi-ethnic country, we have implemented the principle of moderation which is at the centre of Islam under the Islam Hadhari approach.

18. Our practice of moderation (wasatiyyah) is in line with the teachings of Islam which emphasizes on universal values and do not conflict with our own multi-racial makeup. Islam Hadhari approach has been formulated to ensure that in its implementation, it does not create any misunderstanding or anxiety among any group in a multiracial and multi-religious society.

19. This approach has so far attracted positive reactions from Muslim and non-Muslim nations. It is my belief that this approach could enable more dialogue and enhance the understanding between the Islamic world and the rest of the world. The Working Group could take on the role of becoming a bridge for a healthy exchange of dialogue among religions of people in Asia and the Middle East.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. The third area is counter terrorism. All over the world many initiatives are being undertaken against terrorism and to strengthen counter-terrorism capabilities. In fact counter-terrorism has become a growth industry. We do not have problems with such activities, and indeed Malaysia too has implemented a number of such activities. Where we do have problems is the fact that double standards and selectivity are becoming more and more pronounced. Preaching good governance and democracy as an antidote against terrorism while at the same time repudiating it when people express their free will does not send the right signal. It is important for us in AMED to emphasise that it is not democracy and good governance that we are against but double standards and duplicity in its implementation and observance.

21. Related to this aspect is the need to understand the root causes of terrorism. I would encourage this AMED Working Group to spearhead cooperation between Asia and the Middle East in not only discussing the root causes of terrorism but more importantly to effectively drive home the message that terrorism will not be crushed unless the root causes are eliminated.

22. The Working Group could create a platform for dialogue for AMED countries to further discuss the issue. We need to understand and evolve our own responses, and not merely react to or repeat certain set pieces of assessment and responses. This platform should serve as an informal mechanism that would bring together scholars, officials and experts from the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) of the AMED countries on terrorism and counter-terrorism issues.

23. It is also important for us to take the initiative in creating public awareness programmes in countering terrorism. In this regard, Malaysia through its Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) which was established in 2002 is happy to work together with other Counter Terrorism Centres in AMED countries in offering courses in counter terrorism. SEARCCT has so far established collaborations with international organizations and various agencies from other countries including the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Korea, Japan, Canada, the Commonwealth Secretariat and APEC. To ensure the successful implementation of the courses, similar arrangements could be made among the AMED countries in terms of module development, expertise and manpower.

24. Besides that, timely and effective collection, sharing, and use of credible and reliable information/intelligence are also crucial factors in ensuring the success of international cooperation in combating terrorism. Therefore, providing systematic ways for promoting and sharing regional research on terrorism and counter terrorism among the AMED countries could enhance the capabilities of Asia and the Middle East regions to counter terrorism, drawing on our individual strengths and perspectives. In this connection, the Working Group could establish linkages and promote networking among the counter-terrorism centres in AMED countries in order to encourage AMED members to pursue the principles of inclusiveness in sharing information, study findings, insights as well as exchange of information and experiences on terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

25. As we look forward to the bright economic prospects for our region, clearly we also need to address the issue of energy security. The global demand and supply of oil and gas and the prevailing high prices of oil is high on the priority preoccupations of all countries. At the inaugural AMED meeting, there was consensus that stable and secure supplies of oil and gas were crucial for the continued growth of AMED countries. Energy security is a concern for both consumers and producers. The oil and gas producing states are concerned over the lack of security in demand as consumer states' policies and regulations change over time. Meanwhile, the consumer states are concerned about the transparency of information and assurances on how supplier states are working to ensure the stability of oil supply and prices through their plans and strategies to expand production.

26. Therefore it is clear that energy security would only be strengthened by interdependence and cooperation. Such cooperation should acknowledge the economic development, energy resource endowments, energy requirements and energy market structure of each country. In view of the importance of the issue the Working Group could encourage cooperation on energy security.

27. Possible areas of cooperation that could be considered are:

- Efficient utilization of energy resources during production, distribution and consumption of energy through the sharing of information and experiences on policies and programmes in individual economies;
- Facilitation of financing for energy programmes to meet the region's energy needs by encouraging investment in the broad range of energy projects, including energy efficiency, renewable energy and energy infrastructure;
- Cooperation of energy-related research to enable the production, transportation and consumption of energy resources using cost-effective and environmentally-friendly technologies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

28. In regions as diverse as ours, cooperation between countries is imperative. It is Malaysia's firm belief that cooperation enhances understanding and constructively reduces uncertainty. Consequently the transparency and predictability will ultimately lead to a safe and stable political and security environment in which all can thrive. I am deeply convinced that we can collectively benefit from this AMED dialogue process. Though we may differ in terms of history, geography, culture and many other aspects, we are united in our common desire for peace, security, stability and prosperity.

29. I hope that in the course of your deliberations, the proposals that I have made could be examined in greater detail so that they could be translated into practical cooperative measures. If we are able to do that, I would say that we would have truly embarked on a common path to peace and stability, progress and prosperity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

30. On that note, I have the honour to now declare the meeting open.

Thank you.