



# POMEAS

Project on the Middle East and the Arab Spring

## Malaysia and the Arab Spring

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In one of his first speeches in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, delivered to the Malay Student Association at Oxford University on 17 May 2011, the Prime Minister Najib Razak propagated “justly balanced moderation.”<sup>1</sup> As he would do in every public statement, he underlined “diversity, dialogue, and peaceful co-existence” as the prevalent teachings of the Quran, which Malaysia purportedly upheld. Najib also referred to “inclusivity and diversity” as the key tenets of Malaysia’s approach to international relations - an allusion to his infamous 1Malaysia policy, which called upon the government agencies and civil servants to “more strongly emphasize ethnic harmony and national unity.”<sup>2</sup>

As discussed in further detail below, between 2011 and 2014, moderation evolved into a recurrent theme in Najib’s public appearances. The Prime Minister constructed a profile for Malaysia as a country that balanced national unity against its multiethnic composition, and intimated that the Arab Spring countries would be well advised to emulate its example.

This image, however, accords ill with what is often seen in popular depictions of Malaysia in the international press. This study will therefore look beyond the rhetoric of moderation, and explore the reason behind Najib’s flirtation with such diplomatic courtesies. Najib’s statements are rightly deconstructed as a rhetorical shield to guard the actual wait-and-see approach that allowed for a more strategic reflection on how Malaysia should react to the prospects of the Arab World. It is often iterated that national self-interest is never surrendered in favor of humanitarian concern. Indeed, a closer examination of Malaysian foreign policy reveals that the country has failed to exhibit a strong commitment to virtues of moderation and tolerance. Najib’s peace-indexed policy then served as a template for political action, only when it promised to further Malaysia’s agenda.

This paper will then deal with this very issue – the reason why Najib calculated that a hands-off approach to the region would forge advantageous conditions for the country. One factor was that, Malaysia would not derive any financial or political benefits from becoming entangled within the web of partnerships and responsibilities that characterize the Middle East.

Another factor, which weighed even more heavily on Najib’s decisions, was his need to appeal to his electorate, composed overwhelmingly of conservative Sunnis. Malaysia’s refusal to hurry into ironclad alliances pointed to a dilatory strategy. By not jumping on board with controversial resolutions, and thus not appearing at loggerheads with either the age-old dictatorships or newly minted governments, Malaysia aimed at shifting the international attention away from the home-front. In return, this allowed Najib to enact certain legislations that broadened his appeal to Malaysian conservatives – which were, nevertheless, sure to arouse the ire of the international community.

### **The UN Resolutions on the Arab Spring and a Malaysia on the Fence**

Appraising Malaysia’s reactions towards the United Nations’ resolutions presents the perfect case of how this rationale became implemented into action. For instance, the Malaysian representative expressed his strong disapproval of the UNSC Resolution 1973, which would form the legal basis of a military intervention into Libya and against Gaddafi. Malaysia claimed that, only by applying pressure on the Libyan President, and subsequently dissuading him from employing instruments of violence against the civilians, could the conflict be brought to a permanent resolution.<sup>3</sup> Whether Najib genuinely believed in the effectiveness of this “softer” approach is irrelevant, since this concern was not the primary driver behind Malaysia’s posturing. What would have been at stake, rather, was the country’s reputation. Throwing support behind armed coalition ran the risk of being interpreted as a symbol of intolerance and excess, and therefore appeared at odds with Najib’s vision for the country.

With the UN Resolution of 15 May 2013, however, Malaysia would be on board. This resolution “condemned violence, called for involved parties to immediately end the hostilities on all sides, and work together for an inclusive Syrian-led political transition to a democratic, pluralistic political transition.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it expressed complete disapproval of indiscriminate use of heavy artillery and chemical weapons against population centers, and demanded that all breaches of international law be ceased. Also welcomed was the formation of a multilateral system

that “could ensure that concrete and viable steps contributed to a comprehensive transfer of power,” and eventually instigate a transition into lasting peace.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the resolution on Libya, this did not commit the international body to armed involvement. As the Malaysian representative claimed, it rather upheld Malaysia’s stalwart conviction in the benefits of negotiating in good faith, bringing the parties to a constructive dialogue, and allowing for the people to determine their own future.<sup>6</sup> The diplomatic corps asserted that there could be “no military answer to violence, [but only] a political one,” and thus did not entertain any reservations about voting in favor.<sup>7</sup>

Malaysia’s voice would remain subdued on the Syrian conflict until 21 August 2013, when the city of Ghouta near Damascus became targeted with chemical attacks. Indeed, the Malaysian commitment to moderation almost fell by the wayside until the occurrence of this outrageous breach of conscience. Only then did the Foreign Minister, Datuk Seri Anifah Aman, publicly reprimand what had been transpiring in Syria, “calling upon those responsible for such inhuman actions to be brought to justice.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Datuk spoke of a “clear violation of international law” only in the context of waging chemical warfare, and conceded to dispatching an international body to inspect the site.<sup>9</sup> What deserves to be highlighted in even starker color is that Malaysia had previously voiced its opposition against sending in any troops or contingents, describing an action of this nature as a violation of sovereignty.

Yet, the reason why the Prime Minister changed tack at this juncture is significant. First of all, Assad’s resort to chemical weapons solidified the Syrian conflict as a humanitarian catastrophe, and prompted many activists, organizations and politicians to shift comfort to resistance to tackle this outrageous breach of conscience. Given the avalanche of criticism it triggered from the international community, it became a moral obligation to deliver a statement in condemnation of the attacks and demonstrate solidarity with virtually the rest of the world. This was also a case of Najib’s dilatory strategy. He delayed adopting a clear stance on the matter until a united front of resistance had already been formed. Chiming in with the chorus of opposition at this point, and thus appearing at odds with the Assad regime, would not have made Malaysia stand out. This demonstrated the way, in which Malaysia would conduct its international relations: in the “safest” way possible, where “safe” meant adopting a clear posture

only when the “red lines” had been drawn by other players in the global league.

### **What is Najib Trying to Hide?**

Malaysia’s commitment to moderation is certainly praiseworthy, but does not reflect the realities on the ground. Far from honouring the “obligations” of a pacifist nation, Malaysia is experiencing a backward slide on the human rights agenda. Since Malaysia’s general elections on 5 May 2013, the Najib administration has become bereft of the reform-oriented spirit that had guided the introduction of 1Malaysia legislation. Under the pretext of a sharp escalation in crime

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rates, Home Minister reintroduced the Emergency Ordinance of 1969 (that had expired in July 2012). He also amended the Prevention of Crime Act 1959, which furnished “a five person government-appointed panel” with arbitrary powers: it could now sentence any suspect to imprisonment for up to two years without having its decisions submitted to judicial review.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the Peaceful Assembly Act mandated that organizations with a membership of over seven people register with the Registrar of Societies to receive their permit for operation; under this act, the Registrar holds absolute discretion to declare any society unlawful, and has exercised this right against several organizations critical of the government.<sup>11</sup>

There are also a number of antiquated legislations that had been introduced under previous administrations and have hitherto not been repealed by Najib’s government. Sedition Act of 1948, which criminalizes “any speech spoken to excite disaffection” and enables the administration to sentence a convict for up to 30 years in prison, was introduced under the British rule and has never been repealed in the history of Malaysia. It has hitherto been invoked to indict dozens of activists, academics and civil society members that spoke, published, or launched protests against the

government.<sup>12</sup> Since the May 2013 elections, more than a dozen senior politicians and activists have landed on court for even tweeting memos the government did not approve of. The Printing Press and Publication Act (PPPA) is another holdover from the previous administration: it requires that the publishing houses apply for a government permit and have the content of their publications approved by the relevant authorities, who reserve the right to revoke these permits at any time at the behest of individual will.<sup>13</sup>

Another source of disquietude is the rampant anti-sectarianism. Anti-Shia sentiments have been on the rise in Malaysia since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 unleashed a myriad wave of emigration from Iran. According to the government estimates, the Shia in Malaysia have evolved into a sizeable community of around 250,000 subscribers, 100,000 of which is concentrated in the Malaysian capital.<sup>14</sup> Despite this anti-sectarianism that had been simmering beneath the surface, Kuala Lumpur had hitherto not played the center-stage for any large-scale anti-Shia protestations.

In this regard, the Syrian civil war elevated the simmering tension to a boil. Described as an epochal showdown between the Shia and the Sunni, this conflict pitted the two sects against each other, virtually fragmented the population into two opposing camps, and created a divide that came into sharper relief as the war ensued. Recent developments suggested that anti-sectarianism was solidifying. For instance, in September 2013, the Mufti Datuk Zahidi Wan hosted a seminar at the Islamic Centre in Kuala Lumpur with the title “Facing the Shiite

### ***The concept of a Malaysian Muslim community was being redefined at the exclusion of the non-Sunnis.***

Virus.” The fact that the Islamic Centre in the Malaysian capital, a government venue, hosted an event that directly antagonized the Shia population is telling: the concept of a Malaysian Muslim community was being redefined at the exclusion of the non-Sunnis. The Mufti also likened Shiism to bottled poison, and even went as far as to suggest that the administration should break its diplomatic relations with Iran.<sup>15</sup> He also advised the leadership to emulate the precedent set by Morocco in

interrupting the dissemination of Shia literature, just as it had fought to roll back the tide of communism.<sup>16</sup>

A month after the seminar on the “Shiite virus,” the Malaysian Appeals Court announced that newspapers, owned and widely read by the Catholic communities were prohibited from invoking the term “Allah” in their texts.<sup>17</sup> Also, it should be noted that the fatwa, issued by the Fatwa Committee for Religious Affairs in 1996, has still not be revoked. Imbuing anti-sectarian discrimination with legitimacy, this fatwa labeled Shiism as “deviant”: it banned the distribution of any material on the Shia beliefs and principles.<sup>18</sup> In technical terms, this constituted a fatwa and not legislation; therefore, there are currently no legal penalties for the practice or promotion of the Shia belief in Malaysia. It is, however, classified as an offensive act under Criminal Offenses Act, and accordingly, those found in infringement of the law could be fined up to 3,000 ringgit (close to US\$827) and/or face imprisonment for up to two years.<sup>19</sup> This fatwa has “officially” made Malaysia more intolerant and more viciously anti-sectarian than Saudi Arabia, where a legislation of this nature does not exist. The Saudi legal-code also is bereft of any fatwa against the practice of Shiism despite the prevalent Wahhabi belief.

#### **To be Moderate: To Keep Silent Insofar**

There is therefore almost an unbridgeable gap between Malaysia’s self-constructed international profile as a representative of “moderate” Muslim nations and its deplorable human rights record. Malaysia will be chairing the ASEAN and holding a non-permanent seat at the UNSC in 2015; this means that its human rights record will be subject to closer scrutiny. One wonders whether Malaysia will continue to set a poor precedent for other states in the region, or will address its own track record that has fallen considerably short of international norms.

As it currently stands, however, one is tempted to weigh in on the latter. The speeches indicate that the intensified clampdown on civil and political rights is hidden behind a thick veneer of humanitarian goodwill. What is more alarming in this regard, however, is the posturing of the ruling UMNO against the issue of human rights violations and the ideal of multiethnic coexistence: it regards Shiism as a divisive force amongst the population. Although this claim might be far-fetched, the Islamic sect is certainly a source of vexation for the UMNO and its conservative supporters.



The trends indicate that the Shia Malays throw their electoral weight behind the main opposition party, the *Malaysian Islamists*.<sup>20</sup> Najib is therefore likely to have presumed that they were partly to “blame” for his loss of popular vote in May 2013 elections.<sup>21</sup>

Fearful of a further erosion of public support and being ousted in the next round of elections, Najib has intensified his efforts to cling on to his support-base. In an effort to secure their backing, he concentrates on their credentials. This base consists of ultra-conservative Malays, who want the national administration to govern in the name of the Sunni Muslims only and the UMNO to promote Muslim supremacy.<sup>22</sup> They articulate an extreme brand of Islam, completely disconnected from the enlightened traditions and interpretations of

***This politicized approach to religion allows these right-wing groups to speak with impunity and act with exemption from the injurious consequences for their actions.***

the region. Its cadres have previously blocked Najib's attempts to widen Malaysia's scope of application, and thus ruining the Prime Minister's efforts to coopt the non-Muslim vote. They have even criticized the provincial administrations in Sabah and Sarawak for their perfunctory adherence to the Sharia Law and called for a stricter application of hudud punishments. These supporters are also responsible for much of anti-sectarian violence that runs rampant across Malaysia. While critics of the government are buried under unfair charges, those sympathetic to Najib are given free reign to incite violence and preach incendiary messages; they have even called for the mass burning of bibles and telling Chinese and Indian Malays “to go back home.”<sup>23</sup> This politicized approach to religion allows these right-wing groups to speak with impunity and act with exemption from the injurious consequences for their actions.

The imprisonment of Anwar Ibrahim in February 2015 on sodomy charges, the leader of the three-party coalition in opposition to UMNO, was also connected to Najib's political ambitions. It should be seen as an

attempt to crush the movements that threaten Najib's grip on power.<sup>24</sup> Ibrahim had first been accused of “sodomizing a political aide” in 2008, but the charges were dropped in 2012 for lack of evidentiary support. The court overturned his acquittal in March 2014 on account of some purported charges brought against Ibrahim by a “private individual,” yet the charges remain questionable.<sup>25</sup> The fact that Ibrahim's coalition posed the gravest threat to an UMNO victory in 2013 has raised suspicions that the reopening of the charge might have been politically motivated. Indeed, Ibrahim's career as the leader of the opposition has now been derailed. Not only is he disqualified from running in the upcoming elections in 2018, but his imprisonment could also shatter the coalition he is leading, thereby squeezing out any form of dissent or organized resistance to the government.

Some might be tempted to think that this high-profile trial could make matters worse for Najib. The severe criticism it received from Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's longest-serving Prime Minister for 22 years from 1981 to 2003, has propelled Malaysia into the limelight – the very scenario Najib would have wanted to avoid.<sup>26</sup> Mahathir also rebuked Najib's purchasing of an expensive jet and his wife's shopping sprees; questioned the UMNO's chance of being re-elected in 2018; and criticized the imprisonment of the members of the opposition for murky sedition charges. It should nevertheless be noted that Najib's core support base is unlikely to be bothered by the arrests of journalists, media personnel or the members of Anwar's family.<sup>27</sup>

This backsliding in fundamental freedoms and judicial independence is a clear sign of the Prime Minister's fundamental insecurity, and signals that he is likely to “do whatever it takes” to prevent Malaysia from becoming an object of criticism for international lobbyists. This is why Malaysia has voted in favor of only those resolutions that will not have the country entangled within a web of alliances and commitments. Limiting the sphere of the country's activism, Najib will have calculated, also limits the scope of attention it receives; this, in return, “protects” the administration from being pressured into pushing into force any policies that may cost the ruling party its support-base.

### **The Islamic State in Malaysia**

In August 2014, there appeared on Facebook photos of a 52-year old Malaysian jihadist, formerly a member

of Kumpula Mujahedin Malaysia, that had died in battle in Syria. His photo was “liked” by thousands of online users, who commented that the man had achieved a successful transition into heaven.<sup>28</sup> In October 2014, an advert-style back-page photo in Dabiq, an IS publication in English, featured a photo with three Southeast Asians along with a small child. The most recent development is a minute-long YouTube video that surfaced on 15 February 2014: it depicts four men with masks, who speak of their plans to bomb the courthouse in order to emblemize their mistrust in the judicial system.

The Islamic State conducts a recruitment campaign through social media. So far, these appeals seemed to have captivated some audience, and an estimated number of 80 Malaysians have so far joined the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>29</sup> The most significant mass-arrest happened in October, when 14 people were detained while attempting to travel to Syria.<sup>30</sup> One of those arrested was a senior government engineer with the Ministry of Energy, Green Technology and Water. Another government employee, whose position has hitherto not been disclosed, is reported to have joined the ranks of the IS in December 2013 for four months, after which he volunteered to return home and motivate recruitment. Perhaps the most bewildering development that has recently taken place was the arrest of a family of 4 along with their 14-year old child, who was in the process of arranging their travel to Syria. The police discovered pamphlets and jihad literature in their home that might have been employed to inculcate jihadi ideology into potential recruits.<sup>31</sup>

Encouraged by the success of the IS, four new militant groups have commenced operations and already slipped in under the government’s radar. Identified only through their acronyms (BKAW, BAK, ADI, and Dimzia), they are believed to be operating from the states of Selangor and Perka. Neither their affiliation with the grander fundamentalist chains nor their modus operandi have been teased out. The authorities see them as “permutations of earlier terrorist cells,” such as Jemaah Islamiyah or KMM, and suspect that they might even have been trained with the Abu Sayyaf in the neighboring Philippines.<sup>32</sup>

South Asian countries are certainly not strangers to extremist groups. There is, however, an element of novelty in the composition of these new threats. These organizations are bent on creating a “super”

Islamic Caliphate in the region that encompasses Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, southern Thailand and southern Philippines. Whether this caliphate is meant to supersede that envisaged by al-Baghdadi or complement it is up for speculation. What is certain, however, is that they are likely to pose a graver threat to the region than their counterparts operating in Indonesia, as the militants subscribe to, and fiercely champion, the Islamic State’s ambitions.<sup>33</sup>

### Countering Terrorism

Malaysia is fortunate not to have had any terrorist attacks on its own soil; yet, with the changing face of terrorism, it is becoming more difficult to monitor potential attacks. Online blogs, Facebook and YouTube accounts may be created and deleted with relative ease without drawing much suspicion from the authorities. There is therefore a growing need for vigilance. Malaysia will especially have to adjust its liberal visa policies: under the current visa regulations, Syrian and Yemeni citizens may claim visas upon arrival – a loose practice that renders these borders vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>34</sup> Also, it is easy to travel to Brunei, Hong Kong, China, or several other European hubs from Kuala Lumpur, and then proceed

### *The recent ban in China’s largely Muslim Xinjiang province on large beards and Islamic clothing is also likely to prompt a new wave of emigration.*

onwards to Syria via Turkey. Some have even travelled to Saudi Arabia under the pretense of performing the umrah, but then traversed the border into Jordan before securing a passage into IS-controlled territories.<sup>35</sup> The recent ban in China’s largely Muslim Xinjiang province on large beards and Islamic clothing is also likely to prompt a new wave of emigration.<sup>36</sup> In its latest crackdown on religious fanaticism, the city of Urumqi in the Xinjiang region prohibited women from wearing Islamic garments in public.<sup>37</sup> If faced with deportation, these Chinese Muslims might arrive at Malaysia’s doorstep, where they could easily be coopted by the IS functionaries.

What has Malaysia done to relegate the fundamentalist threat to the sidelines, then? Once again, Najib opted for a “moderate” approach to combatting extremism. In his speech to the 69th General Assembly in September 2014, the Prime Minister identified “moderation” as involving “all people to pursue their religion with peace” and ensuring maximum participation in the political process.<sup>38</sup> He claimed, indeed not incorrectly, that governments would benefit from committing to more inclusive politics and addressing the socio-economic factors that drove citizens to radicalization.<sup>39</sup> In fact, adopting “softer” measures is a smart tactic. Since ideologies are not popularized on the battlefield but disseminated on the Internet, the international community’s “message of peace” may find a larger audience if promulgated through social media.<sup>40</sup>

In this regard, Najib made an important point. He asserted that the governments should explore ways to improve the living conditions of their populace, and discussed his plans to develop the infrastructure in Sabah and Sarawak and bolster the security apparatus in Sabah, where the threat of extremism remains at its most intense. As will be discussed below, Najib might have propounded this “softer” approach for other motives. This, however, should not gloss over the importance of his claim – that infrastructure development “will go a longer way in stemming extremism than any boots or bullets.”<sup>41</sup>

Aside from the mass-arrests discussed above, Malaysia’s counter-terrorism efforts have yielded negligible results. In January 2015, an IS-fighter that addresses himself by the pseudonym Abu Hud announced on the terrorist outfit’s website that jihadists should avoid crossing into Malaysia, identifying this transit route as “suicidal.”<sup>42</sup> This, however, has not been substantiated with any factual evidence, and could therefore be a cunning plan designed to divert attention away from the borders. It should also be noted that Malaysia has proven apathetic towards tackling threats of this nature. A strong case in point are the missions to find Malaysian Air Flight MH370 that disappeared on 8 March 2014, and MH17 that was shot down on 17 March 2014 by the Russian-backed rebels in Ukraine.<sup>43</sup> Although the authorities have reassured the public that “they were doing their best,” nothing belonging to the aircraft has been discovered. As Tim Clark, the head of Emirates Airlines, have also pointed out, the fact that “the executive refused to give any details on what was on the cargo hold of the airplane” reflects poorly on

Malaysia’s efforts in this regard.<sup>44</sup>

Malaysia’s lethargy perhaps becomes less of a shock, when one factors in Najib’s silence vis-à-vis the Islamic State, when the group first made the headlines in Summer 2014. Prior to the wide circulation of gruesome beheading videos, the Prime Minister had even applauded the group’s resilience in the fights against its enemies. In a speech delivered to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the founding of UMNO’s Cheras branch, Najib averred that his party “must emulate the bravery of the ISIS fighters” to survive the upcoming elections and remain firmly anchored in power.<sup>45</sup>

Of course, Malaysia has changed tack since then: it now not only condemns the atrocities committed by the terrorist outfit, but also confirmed that the country would be onboard with launching air attacks upon the IS-controlled territories.<sup>46</sup> What is significant, however, is that Malaysia chose to remain on the sidelines of an international development, and broke its silence only when it had become “safe” and absolutely necessary to react.

There are also several reasons why Najib might at first have been hesitant to adopt a raucous tone vis-à-vis the IS. An active fight would have put the country under risk, from which Malaysia would not gain anything significant. This is why Najib is likely to have played it safe, until a high level of international attention became concentrated on the IS. Also, the initial profile of the IS as another Sunni-Muslim outfit, waging war against the West, could have appealed to Malaysia’s conservatives.<sup>47</sup> In this case, Najib would have chosen to wait, and not advance into any commitments, until a red line had been drawn; beheading videos and a large-scale Malaysian recruitment would have drawn this red-line.

### **Oil, Economy and a Non-international Malaysia**

A careful analysis confirms that Malaysia does not need the resources of the Middle Eastern markets. The Malaysian oil reserves, for instance, are the fourth largest in Asia, after China, India and Vietnam.<sup>48</sup> The country is also the world’s second largest exporter of LNG in 2013 after Qatar, with a natural gas production capacity that is currently being improved to serve the growing domestic demand. For instance, the recent investment in deep-water fields in the states of Sabah and Sarawak is likely to allow Malaysia to maintain its high natural gas production levels. The western part

of the country might be suffering from limited gas resources and rising demand, but the authorities have chosen to combat this shortcoming by encouraging the funding the regasification terminals. In peninsular Malaysia, where the revamped energy regeneration capacity has not proven equal to the task of curbing power outages, one witnesses now a widespread switch to coal, diesel and renewable sources.<sup>49</sup>

In light of these developments, has the Middle East then lapsed into irrelevance? Although Libya is the 11th most important import origin of crude petroleum for Malaysia, it still only accounts for a share of 2.41% of the country's total petroleum imports. Reviewing the ten largest import partners in this sector (Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Nigeria, Gabon, UAE, Azerbaijan, Australia, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar) furthermore leads one to the conclusion that Malaysia tends to conduct its economic engagement with the regional states.<sup>50</sup>

This is certainly not to suggest that Kuala Lumpur has been averse to enhance investment flows with the region. In fact, a bit less than a month before the Syrian civil war erupted, both countries had agreed to form a Joint Trade Committee on 1 February 2011 and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in

### ***Malaysia's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Arab Spring has been characterized by prudence.***

promotion of trade.<sup>51</sup> The investment flows between the countries remained very minimal thereafter, but it is important to note the willingness on both sides to expand upon existing relations: projects had included construction-level developments on the Damascus International Airport, renovating the parking spaces as well as the passenger terminal.<sup>52</sup>

In 2013, moreover, Malaysia showed signs of determination to diversify its market, and reached out to Saudi Arabia and the UAE for investment opportunities. The UAE channeled funds towards machinery equipment, petroleum and chemical industries, whereas the Saudi investors concentrated mainly on the Iskandar Johor Economic Development Area in southern Peninsular Malaysia. The Abu

Dhabi based Higher Corporation for Specialized Economic Zones also declared its intention to form partnerships with Malaysian Business Council and Malaysian International Chamber of Commerce, and work in tandem towards expanding the scope of South Asian financial activism in downstream oil and gas industries.<sup>53</sup>

The Middle East and the Gulf, however, is already too crowded with more ambitious South/East Asian companies, making it virtually impossible for Malaysia to "become the primary gateway for Middle East-Asia business partnerships."<sup>54</sup> This is why Najib, as the 2015 ASEAN Chair, has professed that he would be working on Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership – which will become the world's largest free trade agreement that involves Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, along with ASEAN countries.<sup>55</sup> Given the fact that the competition in the Gulf is likely to render Malaysia at a competitive disadvantage, Najib has chosen to concentrate his economic focus on the neighborhood, decreasing the likelihood of any economic cooperation formed between Malaysia and any of the Arab Spring countries.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that Malaysia's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Arab Spring has been characterized by prudence. The reason why Malaysia followed a low-profile line of policy toward these countries, however, hinges on the country's domestic situation. In this regard, this study has attributed explanatory power to the composition of Najib's electorate, and argued that Malaysia's foreign policy became linked to the Prime Minister's domestic concerns. Accordingly, how to retain the loyalty of his support base became the guiding principle and the primary driver of Najib's foreign policy.

Malaysia also does not have its own vision for the Middle East, and is far from trying to forge more advantageous conditions by altering the political landscape. Its chief objective is, on the contrary, to stand idly on the sidelines and not to get entangled within the web of responsibilities. In return, this allows the country to keep international attention away from a number of human rights violations at home; the "sticky situation" is that by not becoming an object of media focus, Najib turns a blind eye to the deplorable domestic situation that, he hopes, will secure him the votes of his conservative supporters.



Then, Malaysia did not formulate any overarching strategy vis-à-vis the developments in the Middle East. For Najib, entanglement promised no merits. Instead, the leadership worded its statements cautiously, declined to throw its weight behind the more ambitious project of a military intervention, and confined the sphere of their discussions to the range of “safer” topics. In the

absence of any political or economic benefits to derive from active involvement, Malaysia therefore remained silent, hoping to silently slip through the radar of the international community.

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*Project on the Middle East and the Arab Spring (POMEAS) arose in response to the upheavals that started in 2011 across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the subsequent developments of an unfolding regional process that mixed disappointments with opportunities. Building on the idea that the processes of academic inquiry, debate and public discussion can contribute to the emergence of a democratic political culture, it aims to initiate a forum open and accessible to people throughout the Middle East and beyond. POMEAS seeks to have impacts on both the discourse of experts and the climate of public opinion.*

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