



Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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"For All We Know", is dedicated to the young people who entered the armed forces in order to further their education.



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LETTERS

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Letter from Kuala Lumpur by Sean Foley

In spring 2002, I was in Syria researching the life of a nineteenth-century Muslim saint and scholar, Shaykh Khalid Naqshbandi. One day, I was invited to attend the *dhikr*, the ritual remembrance of God, at the home of Shaykh Nazim al-Qubrusi, a significant contemporary follower of Shaykh Khalid. When I arrived at Nazim's home in Syria, I was formally introduced to the Shaykh, who asked me in Arabic about my research on Shaykh Khalid. After we spoke for a few minutes, Nazim switched to English, explaining that it was the only language that everyone present could understand, since a number of his followers were Asian Muslims or Western converts to Islam. Nazim's Malaysian followers were hard to miss—their traditional caps clearly differentiated them from the others.

The importance of Nazim's Malaysian followers, however, was not clear to me until I returned to my apartment in Damascus and spoke with a neighbor. He surprised me by asking if I had met any Malaysians during my visit to Nazim. When I answered that I had, he told me about the Southeast Asians who study in Islamic seminaries in the Arab world and added that some travel to Syria before they go on Hajj. He also noted that Syrians viewed Malaysia as a more realistic and desirable model for economic development than the West, since it was a successful and modern society that nonetheless retained a clear Islamic identity. Ironically, a commercial for Malaysian tourism then flashed across the television in my friend's home and served to reinforce his points. Pictures of modern skyscrapers, jungles, beaches, and other attractions appeared on screen along with the constant refrain, "Malaysia—Truly Asia." As we continued talking that night, I understood that I had uncovered a critical but often understudied aspect of the Muslim world: the community of faith that connects Southeast Asia to the Middle East. Indeed, Islam is not just a faith of deserts and the Middle East; it is also the faith of millions of people in the tropical climate of Southeast Asia.

Nearly a decade later, I find myself living in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of the nation that seemed like a distant dream in 2002. There is little question that this city is modern. Highways as large as any interstate highway in the United States cut across the city. These roads are supplemented by an impressive public transportation network of busses, commuter trains, light rail, and a monorail. The Kuala Lumpur Tower—the fourth largest tower in the world—and the Petronas Towers—the largest twin towers in the world—define the city's futuristic skyline. Below the Petronas Towers (and in countless other parts of the city) are multi-story malls. These malls feature stores (and food courts) that cater to every possible taste. Some malls feature vast indoor amusement parks with their own roller coasters. Western musicals, Shakespeare plays, and classical musical concerts highlight the city's social calendar along with local artistic productions. While Malaysia has oil and gas reserves, it has diversified its economy and excels in industries as different as electronics, finance, and tourism. Today, Malaysia is an important trading partner for the United States and a market for foreign direct investment.

At the same time, visitors cannot miss that they are in a Muslim society. Veiled women are a common sight in Malaysia, and the Masjid Jamek, the Masjid India, and the Masjid Negara are three of the many mosques that grace the skyline of Kuala Lumpur. Most restaurants and cafes, including the dozens of Starbucks, McDonalds, and KFCs, advertise that they are Halal, or in compliance with Islam's dietary regulations. A chandelier donated by master craftsmen in Isfahan, Iran adorns the entryway to the Kuala Lumpur Tower. Signs in Arabic are present in the city center and one hears Arabic spoken in many parts of the city, including in Chinatown. There merchants often greet any individual who looks even vaguely Middle Eastern with Arabic phrases such as: "Ashra ringgits, habibi" ("ten ringgits, my friend").

Yet Malaysia is not a tropical Saudi Arabia or a technologically-advanced Iran. The country's government remains committed to adhering to a moderate vision of Islam and combating religious extremism. In Kuala Lumpur there are no religious police, whose function is to enforce public morality. The official language, Bahasa Malaysia, shares space in many settings with English, Hindi, and Mandarin. Many Chinese, Indian, and Western women do not veil, and it is common in Kuala Lumpur to see Chinese women wearing tightly-fitting clothing from the leading European fashion houses. In addition, the country's Chinese and Indian minorities maintain their own houses of worship. Within a few blocks of where Chinese merchants hawk their wares in Arabic, one finds churches, Chinese temples and the Sri Mahamariamman, an enormous Hindu temple with a seventy-five-foot-high tower gate decorated with depictions of Hindu gods. Malaysia also has the largest Sikh temple in Southeast Asia. Nor is Kuala Lumpur's diversity unusual: in Malacca one street alone boasts a mosque modeled on a Chinese pagoda, an ornate Chinese temple, and a Hindu shrine. Malacca also features historic churches, monuments to the famous Chinese and European mariners who have visited the city, and a Portuguese Christian community that has flourished there for centuries.

At the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Americans face three daunting challenges in international affairs: militant Islam, the emergence of an economically powerful Asia, and the world financial crisis. There are few nations better positioned to help Washington address these challenges than Malaysia. The nation's economy continues to grow despite the global economic downturn, and it has maintained an admirable record of reconciling seemingly incompatible global forces. Not only does it balance Islam with modernity at home, but it also maintains warm ties with the West along with Islamic (and non-Islamic) nations whose ties with the West remain greatly strained. Americans would be well advised to pay close attention to the views of this vibrant Muslim nation situated in the heart of Asia.

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