

Sunday May 14, 2006

Adapted from The Star

## **Wooing Malaysian investors to Syria**

**BY PAUL GABRIEL**

HARD-hitting Western media reports about her country have hardly unsettled Syrian Ambassador to Malaysia Lamia Aasi.

The envoy, who was Deputy Finance Minister before her posting here in January last year, has been calmly countering what she terms as “biased media frenzy”.

“These reports don’t take into account the reality on the ground. Certain media are waging a hatred campaign against Syria, which is safe, secure and stable.

For 15 years, we have kept crime in check and people live without fear,” she said in an interview.



**PROMOTING TRADE TIES:** Aasi, seen here speaking to former Iranian president Mohamad Khatami in Kuala Lumpur recently, is promoting her country as an attractive centre for trade and investment.

Syria came under intense scrutiny after a United Nations report implicated Syrian and pro-Syria Lebanese officials in the killing of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri in February last year, with the Western press, quoting unnamed sources, alluding to a conspiracy theory involving Syria.

“President Bashar al-Assad has said it and I repeat it here: Syria has nothing to do with Hariri’s assassination,” added Aasi.

The countering aside, the business and IT-savvy envoy has been waging her own campaign here – that of promoting her country as an attractive centre for trade and investment.

“Over the last few years, Syria has been on a path of economic reform with an open-door policy on trade. Import and export restrictions have been removed; the rules are much relaxed,” she explained.

Paving the way forward bilaterally was the first Syria-Malaysia Business Forum held here last year. Preparations are under way for Damascus to host the next round in November.

Aasi said at the inaugural forum, cooperation was agreed on housing and construction, agriculture, banking and financing, and the setting up of an exclusive industrial site for Malaysian firms in Damascus.

“We are offering an industrial and commercial zone exclusively to Malaysian firms.

“We will provide land at no charge, and the Syrian government will provide special incentives and privileges.

“So far, we have only offered this scheme to China,” she pointed out.

Aasi said the agreement on housing entailed the construction of low-cost public housing in the Syrian capital on a joint-venture basis, adding that a Malaysian team would be heading to Syria to follow-up on the MoU.

Damascus, a city of four million people, is also looking to Malaysia to help resolve traffic congestion.

“We have signed an agreement for the construction of a ring-road around Damascus. Your CIDB (Construction Industries Development Board) recently sent a team over to plan for the project,” she added.

Malaysian help is also being sought by Syria, a country of fertile plains, mountains and deserts, on the building of water treatment and sewage plants.

“Syria is looking to Malaysia for a solution, to benefit from your expertise. I consider Malaysian companies very well developed in terms of management skills.

“When you want to succeed, management is key. Finance alone is not everything,” stressed Aasi, who holds an MBA.

The envoy also raised an interesting development on the tourism arena: “Many Syrian newly-weds are choosing Malaysia to spend their honeymoon. Many Syrians are arriving here on group tours.

“Langkawi and Penang are popular destinations for us. We are trying to persuade MAS to land in Damascus.”

Syria is also trying to attract more Malaysian travellers: during the recent MATA fair here, the Syrian Ministry of Tourism took up two booths.