

# WEEKLY ANALYSIS

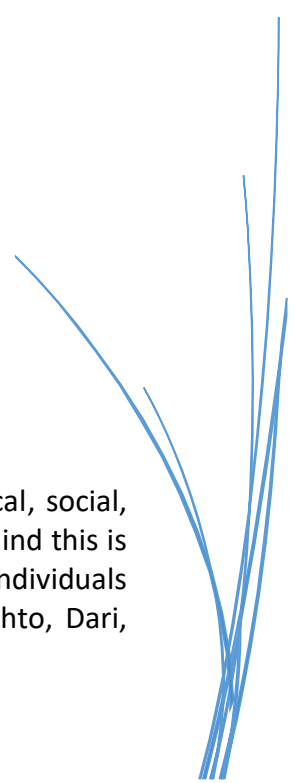
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## A LOOK AT THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN AND MALAYSIA

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Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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## A LOOK AT THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN AND MALAYSIA

### Introduction

The political transformations following 2021 in Afghanistan and the return of the Islamic Emirate to power brought about significant changes in the patterns of the country's international relations. One of the central challenges for the Islamic Emirate during this period has been the question of international legitimacy and access to diplomatic and economic mechanisms. Under such circumstances, Islamic countries can play a pivotal role in reducing political isolation and re-establishing Afghanistan's position within the international system. From the perspective of international relations theories, religious and cultural solidarity can serve as a form of *soft power*, paving the way for legitimacy-building and regional engagement. In this context, examining the Islamic Emirate's relations with countries that hold prominent political and economic positions in the Islamic world becomes particularly important.

Among Islamic countries, Malaysia occupies a distinctive place in Afghanistan's foreign policy due to its successful experience in integrating Islamic values with modern development. With its dynamic economy, advanced educational system, and active diplomacy in international organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Malaysia has managed to present a model for harmonizing Islamic identity with modernity. Moreover, Malaysia's capacities in the fields of Islamic banking, technology, and higher education can address part of Afghanistan's economic and academic needs. The country's active participation in OIC meetings concerning Afghanistan also demonstrates Kuala Lumpur's willingness to play a constructive role in regional developments and to support the Afghan people on the basis of Islamic and humanitarian principles.

Despite its significance, relations between Afghanistan and Malaysia have rarely been studied comprehensively and systematically in the scholarly literature. Therefore, examining the political, economic, cultural, and educational dimensions of these relations can not only fill an existing research gap but also contribute meaningfully to the formulation of the Islamic Emirate's foreign policy and to the rearticulation of constructive engagement with the Islamic world.

### BACKGROUND OF AFGHANISTAN–MALAYSIA RELATIONS

The historical and diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and Malaysia can be traced back to the establishment of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1969, of which Afghanistan became a member at its inception. Malaysia, as one of the founding members of



the OIC and with its successful experience in integrating Islamic values with modern development, has played a strategic role in shaping multilateral Islamic policies. This membership and active participation in the OIC provided a platform for both formal and informal interactions between the two countries, laying the groundwork for cultural, educational, and economic relations.

From 2001 to 2021, during the period of the Islamic Republic in Afghanistan and the country's engagement with the international community, Malaysia actively participated in reconstruction projects and in strengthening Afghanistan's human and institutional capacities. This cooperation included admitting Afghan students to the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), organizing joint educational and religious programs, and taking part in conferences on Islamic banking and Sharia-related research. During this period, Malaysia supported Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts, with a particular focus on humanitarian, educational, and developmental cooperation, while Afghanistan sought to benefit from Malaysia's experience in governance and sustainable development.

Following the collapse of the Republic in 2021 and the return of the Islamic Emirate, bilateral relations entered a sensitive phase. Although Malaysia has not formally recognized the new government, it has continued engagement through multilateral diplomacy, particularly within the OIC framework. In recent years, Malaysian delegations have visited Kabul, emphasizing areas such as cybersecurity, diplomatic training, accountancy management, and civil service development. Malaysia has also maintained active participation in OIC meetings on Afghanistan, voicing support for the rights of Afghan women and girls, while seeking to play the role of mediator and facilitator through cultural, economic, and educational diplomacy. This balanced foreign policy, emphasizing Islamic cooperation, non-interference, and support for sustainable development, reflects a cautious yet proactive trajectory of engagement between Afghanistan and Malaysia, particularly in humanitarian and non-political domains.

### **MALAYSIA'S POSITION TOWARD THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE AFTER 2021**

Following the collapse of the Republic in August 2021 and the rise of the Islamic Emirate, Malaysia—similar to many Islamic and Asian countries—adopted a cautious and pragmatic stance toward Afghanistan's new political reality. In sessions of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Malaysia has repeatedly expressed concern over the human rights situation, particularly the exclusion of Afghan women and girls from education, and has called for the immediate removal of educational restrictions. At the same time, Malaysian representatives have emphasized that Afghanistan is facing humanitarian crises, food insecurity, and chronic unemployment, urging the international community to respond to these challenges through dialogue and confidence-building measures. This position reflects



Malaysia's attempt to maintain a balance between Islamic principles, humanitarian concerns, and the geopolitical realities of the region.

At the bilateral level, since 2022, Malaysia has dispatched several official delegations to Kabul aimed at expanding economic, educational, and diplomatic engagement with the Islamic Emirate. In one such visit, a Malaysian delegation led by the Prime Minister's envoy met senior officials of the Emirate, including Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, and underscored the importance of short-term training programs for Afghan diplomats and civil servants. These visits indicate Malaysia's willingness to preserve working and technical relations with the Islamic Emirate, although such interactions have not yet amounted to formal diplomatic recognition. During these exchanges, Emirate officials have requested Malaysia to provide educational and health facilities for Afghans residing in Malaysia, signaling efforts to strengthen humanitarian and cultural ties between the two countries.

At the regional and international levels, Malaysia has sought to maintain its role within Islamic and Asian frameworks without compromising its human rights principles or domestic policies. The country has supported engagement with the Islamic Emirate in combating narcotics and has advocated for alternative livelihood programs for Afghan farmers. Simultaneously, Malaysia has used international platforms to call for sustainable and predictable humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, stressing that regional economic and social cooperation is vital to achieving peace and stability. These positions demonstrate that, despite the absence of formal recognition of the Islamic Emirate, Malaysia pursues a balanced and multilayered policy toward Afghanistan—one grounded in Islamic principles, humanitarian concerns, and regional interests.

## **THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE AND MALAYSIA**

Following Afghanistan's political transformation in 2021 and the return of the Islamic Emirate to power, political relations between Afghanistan and Malaysia entered a new, cautious phase. As a successful Islamic country in Southeast Asia, Malaysia has consistently sought to play a mediating role in its engagement with Islamic governments. Although it has not formally recognized the Islamic Emirate, even after Russia recognized the Emirate in July 2025, Malaysia has continued to emphasize the conditional integration of Afghanistan into the international community, while reinforcing the role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as a cost-effective platform for dialogue and mediation. At the level of practical diplomacy, however, Malaysia has taken steps to expand relations. Official Malaysian delegations visiting Kabul—including representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Interior—have met with Emirate officials, signaling the willingness of both sides



to establish political and diplomatic channels of communication. In these meetings, the parties discussed the expansion of religious, cultural, and economic ties, with Malaysia conveying its goodwill message to Kabul through its special envoy. Such interactions demonstrate Malaysia's attempt to maintain its official stance on the legitimacy of the Emirate's government while simultaneously employing soft diplomacy to play a meaningful role in regional developments.

At the policy level, Malaysia has sought to strike a balance between its Islamic principles, its human rights commitments, and Afghanistan's political realities. In recent meetings, Malaysian officials expressed optimism about Afghanistan's political trajectory and proposed expanding cooperation in areas such as diplomatic training, information technology, accounting, and civil service development. These initiatives highlight Malaysia's pragmatic approach to engagement with Afghanistan, one focused on capacity-building and the transfer of governance best practices. For its part, the Islamic Emirate has requested Malaysia to provide educational and health facilities for the more than 3,000 Afghans residing there, reflecting efforts to strengthen both humanitarian and political ties between the two nations. Political analysts argue that Malaysia, by drawing on its own experiences with Islamic governance, could assist Afghanistan in overcoming political isolation. These perspectives suggest that, although still unofficial, political relations between the two countries are gradually taking shape on the basis of shared interests and cultural values.

At the regional and international levels, Malaysia has sought to sustain its role within the OIC and other international forums, using these institutions to articulate its positions on Afghanistan. The Afghan Foreign Minister has participated in OIC meetings, expressing appreciation for Malaysia's humanitarian assistance, particularly in the aftermath of the Herat earthquake. Such interactions illustrate both countries' reliance on multilateral diplomacy to strengthen political ties. Looking ahead, it is anticipated that the Islamic Emirate could leverage visits by delegations from Islamic countries, especially Malaysia, to reduce political isolation and create an environment conducive to eventual international recognition.

### **THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE AND MALAYSIA**

Economic relations between Afghanistan and Malaysia entered a new and cautious phase following the political transformations of 2021. Malaysia, as one of Southeast Asia's most successful economies, has expressed an interest in expanding cooperation with Afghanistan by drawing upon its experiences in trade, banking, and infrastructure development. In virtual meetings between Afghanistan's Ministry of Industry and Commerce and Malaysia's Ministry of Economy, the two sides have discussed investment opportunities in the sectors of mining, energy, transportation, and industrial production. Malaysia, highlighting



its capacities in import and export, has declared its readiness to assist in developing Afghanistan's trade infrastructure, including the establishment of distribution hubs in Kabul and Kuala Lumpur. These proposals reflect Malaysia's pragmatic approach to engagement with Afghanistan, an approach centered on capacity-building and the transfer of successful economic experiences.

At the bilateral trade level, Afghanistan has sought to attract Malaysian investors to strengthen domestic economic growth. However, Afghanistan's trade balance with Malaysia has remained consistently in deficit over the past three years:

د ۱۳۰۷-۷ جدول: د بهرني سوداګري بیلانس د هېواد په توپیر (زر ډالر)  
جدول ۱۳-۷: بیلانس تجارت خارجی به تفکیک مملکت (هزار دالر)

Table 13-7: Trade Balance of Goods by Countries (thousand US\$)

| S/N | Country              | ۱۴۰۲<br>2023-24   | ۱۴۰۱<br>2022-23   | ۱۴۰۰<br>2021-22   | هېواد/ مملکت                                | شمېره<br>شماره |
|-----|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---|----------------|
|     | <b>Total balance</b> | <b>-6,798,401</b> | <b>-5,169,189</b> | <b>-4,050,687</b> | د بهرني سوداګري بیلانس / بیلانس تجارت خارجی |                |
| 1   | Iran                 | -1,897,930        | -1,442,308        | -1,109,533        | ایران                                       | ۱              |
| 2   | China                | -1,500,490        | -1,243,897        | -712,430          | چین   | ۲              |
| 3   | Pakistan             | -635,388          | 12,473            | -157,452          | پاکستان                                     | ۳              |
| 4   | Kazakhstan           | -249,634          | -328,244          | -318,482          | قزاقستان                                    | ۴              |
| 5   | Uzbekistan           | -343,662          | -253,810          | -375,287          | ازبکستان                                    | ۵              |
| 6   | Japan                | -86,532           | -30,986           | -69,548           | جاپان                                       | ۶              |
| 7   | Turkmenistan         | -458,185          | -427,423          | -325,068          | ترکمنستان                                   | ۷              |
| 8   | Malaysia             | -164,888          | -146,664          | -167,044          | مالیزیا                                     | ۸              |
| 9   | Russia               | -409,469          | -286,194          | -50,722           | روسیه                                       | ۹              |

- In 2021 (1400), the deficit stood at USD 167 million,
- In 2022 (1401), it declined to USD 146 million,
- But in 2023 (1402) it rose again to USD 164 million.

This pattern suggests that Afghanistan's imports from Malaysia significantly exceed its exports, resulting in unbalanced trade relations. During meetings with Malaysian delegations, Afghanistan's Ministry of Industry and Commerce emphasized the importance of creating joint markets for Afghan products such as carpets, cotton, mineral stones, and saffron. Proposals for joint trade conferences to showcase the economic potential of both countries have also been raised. Malaysia, in response, welcomed these initiatives and pledged to send technical teams to Kabul to explore cooperation in banking, logistics, and cybersecurity. These interactions suggest that while trade relations remain in their early stages, there is substantial

potential for sustainable and balanced development, provided such cooperation is managed strategically.

At a structural level, Afghanistan and Malaysia are considering the creation of legal and technical frameworks to facilitate joint investments. The Afghan Ministry of Industry and Commerce has proposed establishing specialized teams in Kabul and Kuala Lumpur to address legal and technical issues related to investment. This step could help build trust between Malaysian investors and Afghan economic institutions. Malaysia, drawing upon its successful experience in developing industrial parks, has also signaled its willingness to assist Afghanistan in designing and implementing similar projects. Undoubtedly, if such cooperation is supported by international and regional institutions, it could strengthen Afghanistan's economic infrastructure and reduce its dependence on foreign aid. Overall, economic and trade relations between Afghanistan and Malaysia are taking shape around shared interests, complementary capacities, and the political will of both sides.

### **THE CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION**

Cultural relations between Afghanistan and Malaysia, despite geographical and historical differences, have been built upon shared religious and civilizational values. In recent years, particularly after Afghanistan's political changes in 2021, these relations have entered a new stage. As a Muslim-majority country with a successful record of cultural coexistence, Malaysia has continued its cautious stance toward Afghanistan's interim government while maintaining engagement through cultural diplomacy. Visits by Malaysian delegations to Afghanistan's leadership demonstrate the willingness of both sides to expand religious, cultural, and humanitarian ties. In these meetings, Malaysia's cultural contributions, especially its humanitarian assistance during the Herat earthquake, were acknowledged, while requests for greater social and cultural cooperation were also raised. This dynamic illustrates how religious commonalities and Islamic values provide a viable foundation for sustaining and strengthening cultural relations even amidst political challenges.

In the educational sphere, Malaysia has played an active role by offering short-term training programs for Afghan diplomats and civil servants, including courses in information technology, accounting, public administration, and civil service development. These initiatives are designed to enhance Afghanistan's administrative and technical capacities and reflect Malaysia's commitment to transferring its governance and educational expertise. At the same time, the Islamic Emirate has requested Malaysia to provide educational and health facilities for the thousands of Afghans residing there, underlining the importance of education as a key dimension of bilateral engagement at both governmental and community levels.



Over the past two decades, Malaysian universities, particularly the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), have hosted hundreds of Afghan students across various disciplines. Through programs such as the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program (MTCP) and partnerships with Afghanistan's Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia has facilitated free or subsidized study opportunities. These initiatives have not only enhanced Afghanistan's academic capacity but also established a network of scholarly and cultural interactions between the two countries.

Academic and university-level cooperation between Afghanistan and Malaysia extends beyond student admissions to joint conferences and collaborative research projects. Malaysian universities, particularly in Islamic studies, comparative law, and Islamic banking, have developed connections with Afghan academic institutions, while Afghan scholars have benefited from research fellowships in Malaysia. Efforts to sign memoranda of understanding between universities of both countries aim to improve educational quality and establish joint research centers, demonstrating the depth of academic ties.

The cultural and Islamic proximity of Afghanistan and Malaysia, anchored in shared religious values and common perspectives on Islamic education, provides a favorable environment for regional and transregional convergence. Malaysia, with its successful experience in integrating Islam and modernity, serves as a model for Afghanistan, while institutions such as the OIC can act as facilitators of cultural bridges. If managed effectively, this cultural and educational closeness could further reinforce cooperation in economic and political spheres.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN AFGHANISTAN–MALAYSIA RELATIONS

### Challenges

Despite limited informal engagement and cultural diplomacy, relations between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Malaysia face several significant challenges:

#### 1. Lack of International Recognition of the Islamic Emirate

One of the most fundamental obstacles to expanding bilateral relations is the issue of political recognition. Like many Islamic countries and fellow members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Malaysia has refrained from establishing official diplomatic relations with Kabul. As a state committed to multilateral diplomacy and international law, Malaysia has declared that recognition of the Islamic Emirate is contingent upon the formation of an inclusive government, adherence to human rights, and the safeguarding of fundamental freedoms. This stance, which aligns with the policies of the United Nations and Western countries, indicates that unless the Islamic Emirate meets international standards of legitimacy, relations with Malaysia will remain largely symbolic.



## 2. Western Political and Diplomatic Pressure

The United States and its allies, through economic instruments, financial sanctions, and influence within international institutions, have sought to prevent the Islamic Emirate from achieving legitimacy. Malaysia, given its extensive economic and security relations with the West, is also exposed to such pressures and cannot easily pursue an independent policy toward Afghanistan. Any formal rapprochement with the Islamic Emirate risks consequences for Malaysia's relations with the United States, the European Union, and international financial institutions. Consequently, Malaysia has adopted a cautious approach, maintaining humanitarian and cultural ties with Afghanistan while avoiding official or political engagement with the Emirate.

## 3. Divergent Perspectives on Human Rights

Human rights issues represent one of the most fundamental barriers in Afghanistan–Malaysia relations. While Malaysia is committed to Islamic values, its stance on women's rights, education, and social participation is more open compared to that of the Islamic Emirate. The Emirate insists that women's rights should be defined within the framework of Islamic Sharia and Afghan culture, whereas Malaysia emphasizes women's access to education, participation in the labor market, and inclusion in political and social spheres. This divergence has led Malaysian officials, in international forums, to express concerns over the status of women in Afghanistan and to call for social reforms by the Islamic Emirate. Such normative differences not only hinder closer cultural and political engagement between the two countries but also negatively affect the international image of the Islamic Emirate.

## 4. Absence of Legal and Diplomatic Infrastructure

The Islamic Emirate's lack of adherence to international conventions, the absence of active embassies, and restrictions on engaging with global institutions have prevented the establishment of a stable framework for relations with countries such as Malaysia. For its part, Malaysia, citing the lack of legal guarantees, policy transparency, and concerns about security implications, has refrained from investing in or formally engaging with the Emirate. As a result, bilateral relations remain limited to public diplomacy, informal meetings, and humanitarian cooperation, falling short of evolving into strategic and long-term partnerships.

To overcome these challenges, the Islamic Emirate must undertake fundamental reforms in governance structures, embrace international diplomatic norms, and build trust with Islamic countries, including Malaysia.



## OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the challenges, there are also notable opportunities in Afghanistan–Malaysia relations that cannot be overlooked:

### 1. Malaysia's Strategic Role as a Bridge between Afghanistan and the Islamic World

At a time when Afghanistan faces political challenges and diplomatic isolation, Malaysia has the potential to serve as an effective bridge between the Islamic Emirate and the broader Muslim world. Owing to its distinctive position in Southeast Asia and its well-established diplomatic and cultural infrastructure, Malaysia is well placed to amplify Afghanistan's voice in both Islamic and international forums. The presence of Malaysian diplomats in Kabul and their meetings with senior officials of the Islamic Emirate underscore the willingness of both sides to expand engagement and share experiences. This creates avenues for Afghanistan to learn from Malaysia's achievements in areas such as Islamic governance, cybersecurity, economic development, and social services. In effect, Malaysia could function as an active intermediary, facilitating Afghanistan's closer integration into the global Islamic community.

### 2. Leveraging the Capacity of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

The OIC offers a valuable platform for strengthening Afghanistan–Malaysia relations within the framework of multilateral Islamic cooperation. Malaysia, as an active member of the OIC, has consistently supported humanitarian and development-oriented initiatives in Afghanistan and has participated in discussions on the country's evolving situation. The Islamic Emirate, in turn, has sought to utilize OIC meetings to attract greater political and economic support. Joint efforts in areas such as trade, Islamic banking, investment in mining and agriculture, and the establishment of shared markets are promising avenues for cooperation. With the removal of legal and banking obstacles, these opportunities could contribute to Afghanistan's economic transformation while enhancing Malaysia's role as a mediator within the Islamic world.

### 3. Islamic Diplomacy and the Expansion of Soft Power

Islamic diplomacy, as an instrument of soft power, represents another opportunity for deepening bilateral relations. By emphasizing religious values and seeking constructive engagement with Muslim-majority countries, the Islamic Emirate can employ Islamic diplomacy to garner cultural, political, and academic support. Malaysia, with its successful record of harmonizing Islam and modern development, offers a model of Islamic governance from which Afghanistan could benefit. Strengthening Islamic diplomacy between the two countries would not only bolster Afghanistan's international legitimacy within the Muslim world but also facilitate more effective engagement with other Islamic states. Grounded in



mutual respect and shared Islamic values, such diplomacy could help project a more positive image of Afghanistan across the Islamic world.

#### 4. Academic and Cultural Cooperation for Human Capital Development

Beyond the political and economic spheres, cultural and academic collaboration presents a further opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations. Initiatives such as faculty and student exchanges, joint academic conferences, cooperation in Islamic education, and dialogue on human rights could significantly contribute to building Afghanistan's human capital. With its reputable Islamic universities and successful experience in developing modern education within an Islamic framework, Malaysia is well-positioned to share knowledge and expertise with Afghanistan. These partnerships could not only foster dialogue among intellectuals from both countries but also contribute to the intellectual growth and social development of Afghanistan's younger generation.

### CONCLUSION

The relationship between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Malaysia has developed within a framework of cautious and conditional engagement. Kuala Lumpur has thus far refrained from formally recognizing the Kabul government; however, through Islamic multilateralism, particularly via the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as well as humanitarian and technical channels, it has maintained avenues for dialogue and issue-specific engagement. This policy, consistent with OIC directives, has emphasized addressing Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, establishing coordinated mechanisms of interaction, and linking cooperation to conditions such as the formation of an inclusive government and adherence to human rights.

The visits of Malaysian representatives in 2024 and 2025, alongside the hosting of an Afghan educational delegation in November 2024, demonstrate a policy of non-recognition combined with issue-based dialogue aimed at transferring governance and educational expertise within the framework of international law.

In economic, commercial, cultural, and educational spheres, a pattern of gradual progress along low-risk pathways has also been evident. Although bilateral trade has remained limited and volatile, exchanges increased during 2024 and 2025, largely in the form of trade, educational services, and humanitarian assistance. The operations of the Malaysian Humanitarian Center in Kabul, coupled with initiatives such as the award of 100 university scholarships in 2022, have reinforced this trend. Nonetheless, sanctions, banking restrictions, the absence of legal guarantees, and persistent human rights concerns, particularly regarding girls' education, continue to obstruct the expansion of formal ties.



As such, until minimal reforms are undertaken, such as the sustainable reopening of educational opportunities for girls and guarantees for social participation, relations will largely remain confined to OIC-led cooperation and small-scale projects. Should such reforms materialize, Malaysia could leverage its strengths in Islamic banking, trade, and multilateral diplomacy to become Afghanistan's "technical bridge," facilitating institutional partnerships in mining, agriculture, and higher education. Absent these reforms, however, the most likely scenario is a continuation of limited, issue-based engagement, without meaningful progress toward formal recognition.

## Recommendations

1. The Islamic Emirate should take concrete steps toward political reform, the establishment of an inclusive government, and the protection of human rights to create conditions for formal engagement with Islamic countries, including Malaysia.
2. Joint mechanisms within the framework of the OIC, such as economic, educational, and cultural committees, should be developed to provide a platform for multilateral cooperation.
3. Expanding scientific and cultural diplomacy through faculty and student exchanges, as well as joint academic conferences, can strengthen human and intellectual linkages between the two countries.
4. Establishing facilitative institutions in the fields of Islamic banking and trade, aimed at overcoming financial and legal barriers, could pave the way for greater investment and bilateral commerce.

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