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Interview – Shazelina Z. Abidin

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This feature is part of a series of interviews with the contributing authors of *Foundations of International Relations*.

Shazelina Z. Abidin is the Director General of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations of Malaysia. She received her PhD from the University of Sheffield. She joined the civil service of Malaysia in 1996 after graduating in Law and Politics from Queen Mary and Westfield College of the University of London, UK. She spent a number of years at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia before being posted to Washington DC in 2000. Upon her return to the Ministry, she alternated between bouts of work and further studies, completing an MSc at the University of Edinburgh, and completing a posting to the Malaysian Permanent Representation to the United Nations in New York. She holds an Honorary Research Fellowship from the University of Sheffield and has been a monthly columnist for Malaysia's English newspaper *New Straits Times*, since December 2012.

You chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* deals with international organisations – how did you first get involved in thinking about this particular area?

It was easy to write about International Organisations – I spent four years as Malaysia's representative to the United Nations in New York, covering different portfolios: development issues, General Assembly matters, legal issues, terrorism matters, though my pet subjects were always human rights and the responsibility to protect.

In terms of your journey from one-time student to professional life, how did you find your way and can you give a brief summary of your career thus far?

I was always drawn to the diplomatic profession, deciding at the age of 16 that I would find a way to become an ambassador. The subjects that I took at undergraduate level were all designed to put me on my path of achieving that dream. After obtaining a B.A. (Hons), I applied for the civil service and insisted on working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I was lucky – they were on the lookout for officers. It was at the ministry that I continued with a Masters, and eventually a PhD, paid for by the Government. My first political desk was Europe in the 1990s, followed by a posting to Washington D.C. when September 11 happened. Then I came back to the ministry to do human rights, before my posting to New York (UN). From New York I did my PhD and taught US foreign policy to British students. After that it was an appointment as ambassador to Senegal and other countries in West Africa, before coming back to head the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I used to think that the world was black and white. I no longer do. There are always multiple sides to every story. I used to think that you should stick to your principles no matter what. Now I know that the national interest trumps all else, and if a country is clever enough, then it will have a good narrative to go with its foreign policy decisions. The shift came about almost immediately after Colin Powell's assertion to the Security Council (in 2003) that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and were planning to use them if he wasn't immediately stopped.

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Do you think it is more important for academics (and students by extension) to dedicate most of their time to understanding the world, or instead actively to working to change it?

There has to be a balance between the two. If you cling to your ideals and only work towards changing the world, there will only be heartache and disappointment. The world rarely changes overnight, and even then, the underlying fundamentals remain the same. So it is important for academics to understand that they are studying international relations as it is formulated by the people who have the power to dictate its terms.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in and around the discipline of International Relations?

In current affairs – this is where discourse is at most robust and speculative. Learn as much as you can, read everything, observe everything.

Those who read your chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* will take away many ideas and thoughts with them, but is there something specific you would like to leave in their minds?

I want them to understand that international organisations are only as strong as their members allow them to be. No matter how supranational the organisations think they are, they are still bound by earthly rules.