

THE INFLUENCE OF THIRD STATES IN SHAPING MALAYSIA-LEBANON RELATIONS UNDER MAHATHIR AND ABDULLAH BADAWI: THE ROLE OF ISRAEL AND SYRIA

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Abstract

Although it is generally recognised that West Asia is an important focus of Malaysia's foreign policy, there is a lack of critical scholarship on Malaysia's relations with the region. As such Malaysia's relations with the region are simply assumed to be driven by economic interests and religious affinity. In reality, Malaysia's relationship with West Asia is far more complex as would be suggested by her relations with Lebanon. Despite the absence of any material benefit to Malaysia, Lebanon is the second state after Saudi Arabia with whom Malaysia established diplomatic ties in the region in 1963. Despite Lebanon's chronic political instability and the ever-present threat of attack by Israel, Malaysia invested heavily in this relationship. This article examines Malaysia's relationship with Lebanon under the leadership of Mahathir and Abdullah Badawi. Under both leaders, Malaysia committed substantial financial and other resources to support Lebanon. It is argued that this apparent discrepancy between the absence of material benefit for Malaysia and her unilateral support for Lebanon was driven by their perception towards Israel and Syria.

Keywords: Malaysia-Lebanon, Malaysian foreign policy, Mahathir, Ahmad Abdullah Badawi, Rafik Hariri, Fouad Siniora

Introduction

Development strategies of developing states tend to use diplomatic relations as one of the channels to secure their needs for state building. This is to say that for developing states diplomatic relations with other states serve as a means of securing resources for socio-economic development, fostering internal social cohesion, building legitimacy of state institutions and governing regime, and seeking international recognition of their state borders, territorial integrity, and sovereign independence (Ayoob 1995). Therefore, developing states must be highly selective and parsimonious in their choice of diplomatic relations to secure these needs in the most cost efficient and effective manner. However, Malaysia's bilateral relations with Lebanon do not fit this observation.

To begin with, Lebanon is a tiny state. At 10,452 sq. km Lebanon is only roughly half as big as the state of Perak. Lebanon also lacks natural resources. Her principal economic activity is mostly based on tourism, banking and transshipment services. Due to the vast distance that separates the two nations, their different historical experiences and economic orientations, there were practically no shared interests or links, whether in cultural, religious, or educational fields. There was, however, a small amount of trade between the two states prior to the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1963 amounting to only about half a million dollars or 0.01% of Malaya's global trade (Government of Lebanon 1965).

Regardless of the lack of material advantage offered by Lebanon, she was the second West Asian state with whom Malaysia established diplomatic relations. Since then, Malaysia had committed considerable financial resources and diplomatic resources into maintaining this relationship. Malaysia extended financial assistance to Lebanon on several occasions for example Malaysia was a major financial donor during the Paris II conference in 2002. Malaysia also extended emergency financial and reconstruction assistance to Lebanon in the aftermath of Israel's attack in 2006. Since 2006 also, Malaysia has maintained a battalion of peacekeepers in southern Lebanon under the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) at considerable cost. Yet by the end of 2009, the relationship was still lopsided as there was still no significant material benefit for Malaysia. Even two-way trade was only about USD 96.1 million accounting for just 0.03 % of Malaysia's global trade as shown in the Table 1 below.

Why did Malaysia commit so much effort and resources into nurturing and sustaining this relationship? This article examines the bilateral relations between Malaysia and Lebanon from 1994-2009 under the leadership of Mahathir and Abdullah to discern the factors that have sustained and underpinned this relationship. It makes use of previously inaccessible cables and reports from the files of the Malaysian ministry of foreign affairs that were sent to the National Archives in 2015-2016.

The article is made up of four sections. A brief description of Malaysia's interests in West Asia is set out in the first section. The subsequent section traces Malaysia's interest in Lebanon while the third and fourth sections examine the relationship under the leadership of Mahathir and Abdullah, respectively.

Malaysia's Strategic Interests in West Asia

Malaysia has multifarious interests in West Asia that developed and expanded gradually over the years. Immediately after independence, Malaya's interest in the region was limited to providing assistance to her citizens who went to perform the Hajj pilgrimage. Consequently, Malaya's first diplomatic mission in West Asia was established in Saudi Arabia. In this regard, a consulate was opened in Jeddah in 1958 to provide consular support for the pilgrims (The Straits Times 1958). Today, the region continues to be important for religious reasons. Although Malaysia's hajj quota in 2018 is only 30,200 (Chow 2017) but over 200,000 more visit Mecca annually for the *umrah* according to the Malaysian embassy in Saudi Arabia (Embassy of Malaysia 2018). A smaller number of Malaysians also visit Jerusalem with approval from the authorities. In order to provide consular support for the increasing number of Malaysians travelling to the region, the consulate was upgraded to a Consulate General in 1985 and a separate, full-fledged embassy was established in Riyadh to handle bilateral relations. West Asia has also always been an important destination for Islamic education for the Malay Muslims. They have long sought religious instruction in countries such as Yemen and Syria. Before the Arab Spring, it was estimated that there were more than 1000 Malaysian students in Yemen and another 700 in Syria (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012).

As a trading nation, the need for trade and investment also underpins Malaysia's interests in the region. As early as in the 1960s, the region's potential as an important trade partner was recognised. Thus, even under Tunku Abdul Rahman, the government sought to sign trade agreements with the major economic economies of the region (The Straits Times 1967). The region is also an important source of investment. The quest for new sources of foreign direct investment became an urgent need for the government following the 1969 racial riots and the adoption of the New Economic Policy. To make up for the shortfall in foreign direct investment, the government under Abdul Razak Hussein and Hussein Onn actively courted the Arab states for loans and investment (The Straits Times 1975, The Straits Times 1976). Malaysia also has trade interests, albeit the small volume of two-way trade. In 2017 Malaysia's total trade with the region amounted to RM 58.18 billion (Ministry of International Trade and Industry 2017). As this represents only about 3.92% of Malaysia's total exports worldwide, Malaysia sees great potential in increasing trade and investment with the region.

Malaysia also has significant political interests in the region. Malaysia's image as a "moderate" Muslim country underpins her strong political ties with the countries of the region. Her policy of not openly taking sides with any particular Islamic denomination or interpretation of Islam is well received by the countries in the region where a

plurality of Islamic beliefs co-exists under strong control from the authorities. Hence, Malaysia had been able to balance its relations with all states in the region despite their own internal differences due to religious, political, and social orientations. Thus, the region has been a rich source of support in the international arena even in the early days of independence. Malaysia's bid for positions in key posts such as the UN Security Council and other elected posts in the international fora benefits from undivided support of this region.

On the other hand, the Arab states count on Malaysia to support their position in the Arab-Israeli conflict in the international fora. This is not limited to the United Nations alone but also in other fora where they are not represented such as ASEAN and its related fora, Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Asia-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC), Commonwealth and others. In many of these fora, Malaysia is often chosen as the lead speaker to speak on the situation in West Asia. By speaking on their behalf, Malaysia renders an important service in softening criticisms against the Arab states.

The 1990s saw the emergence of tourism as an important economic sector. The 911 incident and the changing attitudes in the West no doubt contributed to the appeal of the East. Undoubtedly, Malaysia's image as a safe, modern, and moderate Muslim country as well as a shopping haven is an attraction. Seaside resorts such as Langkawi are also popular honeymoon destination. In 2012, Malaysia earned RM 2.637 billion, from West Asian tourists (Tourism Malaysia 2017).

Coming on the heels of increased tourism, Malaysia has been gaining recognition as an important destination for higher education. Most of the students come from Iran, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Oman. The disruption of life in Syria due to the civil war and the situation in Iraq also encouraged many middle-class Syrians and Iraqis to send their children to complete their tertiary studies in Malaysia. In 2016 there was an estimated 18000 students from West Asia studying in various fields in Malaysia. This amounted to 13.3 % of the total foreign student population. On the conservative basis of 10,000 students spending an annualized expenditure of RM40, 000 per student per annum, it is estimated that Malaysia earns about RM 720 million annually from these students (Ilango Karupppannan 2014).

Malaysia also extends technical assistance to several countries in the region through the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP). Under these programmes, Malaysia offers training for civil servants in various areas such as management, finance as well as specialised technical courses. Cooperation in the field of security is also growing in importance. Malaysia procures some of her defence assets from countries such as Turkey. Malaysia also has other forms of military-to-military cooperation handled by the office of the defence attachés in the embassies in the region. Malaysia also maintains an analogous technical assistance programme for military personnel under the Malaysian Defence Cooperation Programme (MDCP). This cooperation has been useful in providing an additional layer of interaction between Malaysia and the West Asian countries. To cater for these interests, the Malaysian government gradually established resident embassies in the entire region. The following section discusses the origins of Malaysia's diplomatic representation in Beirut.

Malaysia's Interests in Lebanon

Diplomatic relations was officially established on 16 July 1963. The Malaysian foreign ministry records show that the Lebanese government was the first to express interest to establish diplomatic ties at the level of ambassadors with Malaya (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1963). However, the Malayan government did not appoint an ambassador to Beirut. As explained by the then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaya deliberately followed a policy of not expending resources in maintaining a large foreign service. Furthermore, as Indonesia had declared the *Konfrontasi* (a conflict between Malaysia and Indonesia due to Indonesia's opposition to the formation of Malaysia in 1963) a few months earlier, the Malaysian government needed to conserve her resources to handle the evolving crisis.

However, two years later, West Asia became important for Malaysia. Unknown to the government, Indonesia has mounted a campaign among the Afro-Asia states with the aim of blocking Malaysia's participation in the grouping. Indonesia's aim was to use the grouping as a platform to deny international recognition for the newly formed federation of Malaysia. Indonesia also attempted to drive a wedge between Malaysia and the Arab states by painting Malaysia as being close to Israel and therefore against the Arabs (The Straits Times 1965a). Consequently, by 1965 Malaysia realised that she needed a strong diplomatic representation among the Arab and Afro-Asian states. In this regard, Beirut was chosen as a suitable city for Malaysia's second diplomatic representation in West Asia. Beirut was famous for its press freedoms and as a major diplomatic capital. Furthermore, Beirut was also a trade and financial capital of West Asia. As a "hub of international politics" with so many diplomatic missions and intelligence agencies, Beirut would be an excellent listening post for the government to keep an ear on and counter the campaign

mounted by Indonesia together with China and Pakistan against Malaysia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Despatch 1965b). Fortunately for Malaysia, by the time she had an accreditation in Beirut, the *Konfrontasi* was close to being resolved. However, after the *Konfrontasi*, the embassy served as the focal point for Malaysia's efforts to win over the Arab states. Although, politically, it was even considered desirable for Malaysia to have a full-fledged embassy in Beirut, deteriorating political and security conditions in Beirut precluded such a move. With the onset of civil war in 1975, bilateral relations were held in abeyance. It would take almost two decades before meaningful relations could resume.

Malaysia-Lebanon relations resumed under the leadership of Mahathir and Rafik Hariri after nearly a 25 year break. A few years earlier, in 1989, the civil war officially ended with the signing of the Taif Agreement. Recognising Syria's influence over Lebanon, the agreement was drafted to give Syria limited control over Lebanon to oversee the transition from war to peace. Syria eventually managed to strengthen her control until she had effective tutelage over Lebanon (Saseen 1990; Hinnebusch 1998; Aboultaif 2016). However, as the post-war Lebanese state appeared to be in danger of reverting to war due to the government's inability to prevent economic collapse, the Syrian government picked Hariri, a billionaire politician with extensive regional connection, as the third prime minister, to head the government. While keeping the country's defence and strategic policies under its control, Syria essentially wanted Hariri to focus on the economy (Nizameddin 2006).

Given his limited autonomy, Hariri made economic restoration the priority of his "government of economic salvation" (Najem 2012). The centrepiece of his economic programme known as Horizon 2000 (Najem 1998) was to restore Lebanon's pre-civil war glory as the economic and financial hub of West Asia. Hariri's economic policy was also underpinned by his own political agenda to enable Lebanon to break free from the shackles of Syrian domination. He was convinced that the path to his dream lay in creating conditions for the resolution of the long-standing Arab Israeli conflict. The external conditions were propitious. For the first time all the parties to the West Asia conflict had met under one roof under the auspices of the Madrid conference (Office of the Historian 2017). Following the first Gulf war, the balance of forces had turned in favour of the United States, Saudi Arabia and the moderate Arab states (Bannerman 1992). Syria, now bereft of her erstwhile ally, the Soviet Union, also had no choice but to join the ongoing peace initiative (Plaut 1999). In Israel, the newly elected Labour government under Yitzhak Rabin was more open towards peace talks with the Arabs. These initiatives ultimately led to a major breakthrough with the signing of the Oslo agreement between Israel and the PLO in 1993 and separate tracks of peace talks with the Front-Line states, Jordan and Syria (Shlaim 1994).

Therefore, Hariri, like many others, was convinced that peace between the Arab states and Israel was close to becoming a reality. Hariri knew that if peace talks with Jordan and Syria went well, then the final piece of the peace puzzle would be Lebanon. He was confident that Lebanon and Syria would be prepared to sign a peace treaty with Israel if the latter agree to proceed with peace negotiations (United Nations 1998). If Israel, Syria and Lebanon were to finally conclude a peace agreement, the potential threat to Syria would vanish. Once Israel was no longer a threat then the justification for Syria's occupation of Lebanon would also cease. Hence, for Hariri, restoration of the Lebanese economy was the key to Lebanon's freedom and independence from Syria's control. In this context, bilateral relations with Malaysia was to serve as one of the channels to secure external support for his plan to restore Lebanon's importance as an economic hub as the "Singapore of West Asia" (Denoex and Springborg 1998).

Malaysia-Lebanon Relations under Hariri and Mahathir

In this connection, Mahathir and Malaysia was Hariri's role model (Hariri. 2010. Interview). Malaysia's track record as an Asian tiger economy enthralled political leaders, the policy community and the academia alike (Davis and Gonzalez 2003). Like the other foreign leaders, Hariri too was eager to know Mahathir's "secret formula". The first time that Hariri and Mahathir met was at the 7th summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Casablanca on 13 December 1994. During that initial meeting both men struck up a lasting friendship. Mahathir recalled Hariri as a man in hurry and a very persuasive individual who was keen to learn from Malaysia's experience (Mahathir 2016 Interview). Reflecting his haste, barely three months after his encounter with Mahathir, Hariri made his first official visit to Malaysia on 23 March 1995. The visit enabled Hariri to see for himself Malaysia's development and to attract foreign investment for Malaysia to develop Beirut's infrastructure that had been destroyed in the civil war (The Straits Times 1995a). Observers have noted that both Hariri and Mahathir shared similar characteristics. Both were autocratic, and both took direct interest in the mega projects that were given to crony companies so much so they were labelled "autocratic free-marketer" (Young 1998).

For different reasons, Mahathir had also come to the same conclusion about the prospects for peace in West Asia. In anticipation of progress in the peace negotiations, Malaysia had also tentatively started to explore the possibility of establishing normal relations with Israel to take advantage of the huge business and trade opportunities (The Straits Times 1993). Therefore, since 1993 Mahathir had reached out to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin following Israel's decision to recognize the PLO. In a letter dated 23 December 1993, Mahathir hoped that both Israel and Palestine would be able to reach peace soon and conveyed Malaysia's desire to follow suit with formal relations with Israel (The Star 2012). In June 1994, Malaysian papers broke news that Tunku Abdullah, brother of the King and chairman of a publicly listed company, Melewar Group had visited Israel (The Straits Times 1994a). Tunku Abdullah was quoted as saying that the visit was to merely explore business opportunities (The Straits Times 1994f). However, the fact that Tunku Abdullah also met with Prime Minister Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres suggests that the Israeli government understood his visit to be an informal and exploratory step by Malaysia. Although the official contacts with Israel were downplayed, the private sector was encouraged to explore trade ties with Israel (The Straits Times 1994b; 1995b; 1996; 1997). Interestingly, the Malaysian government also relaxed the ban on visiting Israel for religious purposes even though both countries did not have any diplomatic relations (The Straits Times 1994d, 1994c). The government also continued to reach out to Israel through interaction at various multilateral meetings (The New Paper 1994e).

Mahathir's visit to Lebanon in 1997 to reciprocate Hariri's visit further convinced him that Hariri was serious about his plans to put Lebanon back on the map as the business hub of West Asia. All traces of the destruction caused during the civil war and the Israeli bombardments had been completely cleared. In its place, stood rows and rows of new buildings and broad Paris-like avenues. Therefore, by supporting the Hariri government through economic collaboration (Mokhtar Hussain 1997a), Malaysia would contribute to the fostering of a conducive climate for regional peace. This required close cooperation. Several agreements were thus concluded between Malaysia and Lebanon including a trade agreement, investment guarantee agreement and an avoidance of double taxation agreement. Certainly, his actions were not purely altruistic. Mahathir hoped that Malaysia could also reap the economic benefits from the Lebanese economic reconstruction as well. Therefore, under Mahathir, the private sector was encouraged to invest in infrastructure development, housing and construction, telecommunications, power generation and distribution, banking and finance (Mokhtar Hussain 1997b). Despite the vibrant bilateral relations, material benefit was still modest. Trade for example had merely increased to USD 27 million just before the Asian financial crisis set in.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis forced the Malaysian government and the private sector to scale down ambitious plans or cancel them altogether (Daouk 1997). The other Malaysian private sector companies that accompanied Mahathir on his visit to Lebanon found that not only was the cost of doing business in Lebanon exorbitant but also risky. Hence, Malaysian companies never managed to undertake any major investment projects in Lebanon. Even the call by Tajudin Ramli, the head of the Malaysian private delegation that accompanied Mahathir on his official visit, for the Malaysian private sector to consider joint venture partnership with Israeli companies to reduce their risks went unheeded (Mokhtar Hussain 1997b).

In Lebanon, Hariri's ambitious reconstruction programme ran into trouble as the euphoria that followed the end of the civil war had waned as the international and external assistance promised by the Arab states had been diverted by the Gulf War. The shortfall in revenue forced his government to rely on deficit spending to finance his economic programmes. Inevitably, austerity measures also led to cancellation of some projects that were linked to the president and other cabinet members. Thus, the government was often paralysed over infighting among the cabinet members over budget matters (Najem 2012). Hariri's relationship with the Syrian president also suffered as his disagreement with the Lebanese president who was backed by Syria was interpreted as an affront to the Syrian leadership. Due to the intractable political impasse, Hariri resigned in 1998 (Gambill and Abdelnour 2001).

Therefore, after 1998, bilateral relations entered into an uncertain period. The relationship only resumed when Hariri won the general elections in 2000 and was again re-appointed as prime minister on 23 October 2000 (Gambill and Abdelnour 2001). There was renewed effort by both leaders to promote bilateral ties. The peace process was very much a central theme in their mutual objectives as the external conditions still appeared favourable to peace. The Palestinian-Israeli negotiations were showing promise. The Ehud Barak government was keen to conclude a peace deal with Palestine. The Clinton administration too, being in its final leg was keen to see a peace agreement before the president's term ended. However, Hariri's second term as prime minister was more challenging. The high level of debt incurred by the government curbed his ability to carry out ambitious programmes. Further, as Lebanon's public debt had become a major burden on the government's ability; he had to reach out to his friend Jacques Chirac, the President of France for help. Therefore, when Chirac invited Mahathir to an emergency donor conference in Paris to

raise USD 5 billion (Habib 2002) to help Lebanon avert bankruptcy, Mahathir agreed (Mahathir 2016 Interview). At that donor conference known as the Paris II, Mahathir committed USD 300 million (The Star 2002a). Malaysia was the third largest donor out of a total of seven donors (Al Nahar 2002b). Malaysia also continued to assist Lebanon outside the Paris II framework. The available records show that all in all, Malaysia supported Lebanon with USD 750 million in financial assistance (Government of Lebanon 2003). This remarkable show of solidarity by Malaysia towards Lebanon cannot simply be attributed to national interests alone. Furthermore, in 2002, Malaysia's economy was still not quite out of the woods yet so to speak. The rationale will be examined in the following discussion.

Table 1: Malaysia's two-way trade with Lebanon

Year	Trade volume (USD million)
1975	1.4
1976	0.4
1977	1.0
1978	0.7
1979	0.5
1980	1.3
1981	1.4
1982	0.9
1983	1.1
1984	1.9
1985	1.8
1986	2.3
1987	3.2
1988	5.1
1989	4.3
1990	5.3
1991	6.3
1992	10.2
1993	10.3
1994	15.7
1995	19.7
1996	22.0
1997	27.1
1998	29.1
1999	22.3
2000	24.9
2001	31.1
2002	32.2
2003	41.5
2004	46.2
2005	45.8
2006	42.8
2007	66.9
2008	95.9
2009	95.9

Source: The data was compiled from several sources namely (Markas 1997; World Bank 2018).

Although Paris II helped Hariri domestically, bilateral relations could not be sustained on a high level as domestic political conditions changed in both countries. After announcing his intention to step down, Mahathir resigned in October 2003 (BBC 2003). In Lebanon, Hariri's unspoken agenda of forcing Syria out of Lebanon was not unnoticed by Bashar al Assad. As observed earlier, bad blood had already been building up between Hariri and Bashar al Assad. The latter perceived Hariri's clashes with the Lebanese president and other pro-Syrian officials as an attempt to undermine him. Therefore, on one occasion, Bashar Al Assad had summoned Hariri to Damascus and warned that "if you and Chirac want me out of Lebanon, I will break Lebanon" (MacFarquhar 2005). Chaffing under Syria's attempt to control him and mired in his own political battles, Hariri also resigned, almost a year later in October 2004 (Harris 2005). Both these leaders were replaced by second liners who were politically much weaker than their predecessors. Mahathir was replaced by Abdullah Badawi while Fouad Siniora took over as prime minister after Hariri's tragic assassination a few months after his resignation.

Bilateral Relations under Abdullah and Siniora

Under Abdullah and Siniora, bilateral relations ceased to be a priority. For Abdullah, his priority was to consolidate his own standing within his political party as he had inherited the leadership without his own mandate. Therefore, it was imperative that he stamped his own style in order to come out from Mahathir's shadow (Welsh and Chin 2013). One area where change was discernible under Abdullah's leadership was in foreign policy. Although Malaysia's foreign policy towards West Asia remained unchanged, bilateral relations with Lebanon took a backseat. Abdullah also differed from Mahathir in terms of approach (Khadijah Khalid 2013). Whereas Mahathir used to be the primary driver of foreign policy, Abdullah gave greater latitude to the foreign ministry to act within the overall thrust of Malaysian foreign policy.

Bilateral relations underwent a further setback as Lebanon was plunged into political instability following Hariri's assassination on 14 February 2005. The assassination, widely attributed to Syria's involvement, sparked massive protests in Beirut calling for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. The Cedar Revolution, as the protests came to be known, was seized by the international community to apply pressure on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon (Knio 2005). Within days, Syria was forced to withdraw from Lebanon on 30 April 2005 following the adoption of the UN Resolution 1559. A period of instability followed as the Syrian instituted order in Lebanon collapsed and the individuals picked by Syria to head the government were unable to restore peace. The instability only ended with fresh elections in which a coalition of anti-Syria parties won a landslide victory. Hariri's right hand man in his political party, Fouad Siniora was unanimously appointed as prime minister (Moubayed 2005).

Naturally, Siniora's priority was to restore political stability. The most practical option was to form a government of national unity comprising all political parties. However, the conflicting agenda of the parties virtually paralysed foreign policy (Najem 2012). Hence, bilateral relations languished. While the government was inwardly focussed, the Arab-Israeli relations had taken a turn for the worse. In response to the deteriorating conditions in the Palestinian occupied territories, Hezbollah, though a part of the government, unilaterally conducted cross-border incursions into Israel. The fledgling government was shocked when Israel responded with a massive aerial bombing campaign on Lebanon that started on 14 July 2006 and lasted 33 days (BBC 2008).

Although Lebanon had ceased to be a foreign policy priority, Malaysia as Chair of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) had to react to the Israeli onslaught in order to prove her ability to lead the organisation. Therefore, an emergency OIC meeting was convened in Putrajaya (United Nations 2006). On the eve of that meeting, Abdullah announced Malaysia's readiness to despatch up to 1000 soldiers to serve as peacekeepers under the United Nations Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) (BBC News 2006a). A slew of other measures and assistance followed. This included direct financial assistance for humanitarian and reconstruction purposes as well as another USD 1 million at the Paris III donor conference in 2007 (Embassy of Malaysia 2015). Apart from direct financial assistance, Malaysia also assisted Lebanon in the form of debt rescheduling by reduction of the interest rates and also deferring the repayment period and extension of overall repayment period for the financial assistance given under Paris II (Government of Lebanon 2007). Over and above that, Malaysia also included Lebanon into her technical assistance programme under the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP).

After the war there was some effort to resuscitate bilateral relations. Malaysia attempted to export her Malaysian Smart Card technology to Lebanon. If successful, the project would have been the first major commercial cooperation between the two countries. Malaysia's success in using the technology to deliver public services appealed to Siniora (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006b). The Lebanese prime minister knew that if Lebanon could render much of its public services electronically, it would free the government from being hostage to the politics of any party. Therefore, Siniora wrote to Abdullah for Malaysia's assistance to start with a Smartcard project in the hope of jump starting the Lebanese government's plan to implement its own e-Government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2007). As the project was expected to generate upwards of USD 29 million, Abdullah also approved USD 500,000 funding for the Malaysian Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) to undertake a feasibility study (Kumar 2009). After several visits to Lebanon, MDeC successfully conducted the study and a pilot set-up proved that the project could be implemented in Lebanon. However, MDeC was taken by surprise when the proposal to implement the project was opposed by the relevant government departments. At the root of the problem was the resistance of the ministries to share their databases. The ministry of the interior which held most of the social data was unwilling to share its database with ministries headed by Hezbollah ministers. As no party was willing to share its database for fear of revealing its strength or weakness, the Lebanese Cabinet could not muster enough support for the project. Therefore, Malaysia's hope to export her Smartcard technology to Lebanon was abandoned.

Siniora was also interested in Abdullah's concept of Islam Hadhari. As a concept from a fellow Sunni leader, Siniora wanted to introduce Islam Hadhari in Lebanon in the hope of strengthening the Lebanese Sunni political base. Therefore, in 2006 Siniora invited Malaysia to endow a Chair of Islam Hadhari at a Lebanese university (Embassy of Malaysia 2015). Although Siniora's request was approved by the Malaysian cabinet, the Ministry of Higher Education which was tasked to implement the project, acted tardily reflecting the lack of popular support for the controversial Islam Hadhari. In Lebanon, Hariri's like for Islam Hadhari did not find support in his cabinet. It was feared that it could be misinterpreted as a new Islamic ideology that could further exacerbate Sunni-Shiite tensions in Lebanon.

Therefore, Siniora requested Malaysia to set up the Chair at the Maqassid Institute of Higher Islamic Studies instead (Embassy of Malaysia 2015). As the Maqassid Institute was not part of the government structure, he hoped to overcome domestic resistance. With further delays, both governments managed to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding for the establishment of the Chair. However, before it could be signed, the Malaysian Attorney General's Chambers (AGC) threw a spanner in the works by inquiring whether the Maqassid Institute had the legal standing or authority to sign agreements with foreign governments. The AGC also sought a formal instrument of authorization. By the time the Maqassid Institute replied, Abdullah had effectively been rendered into a lame duck as political pressure built up for him to resign following the disastrous electoral results of the 12th general elections held on 8 March 2008. He could therefore no longer push for the project. Meanwhile in Lebanon, the political situation turned for the worse. Political standoff between the government and opposition parties almost culminated in a civil war when Hezbollah, in a show of strength, militarily occupied West Beirut (CNN 2008). Following the standoff, Siniora stepped down as prime minister on 25 May 2008. Almost a year after Siniora's resignation, Abdullah resigned on 3 April 2009. With that the Islam Hadhari proposal was never revisited.

By the end of Abdullah's leadership, Malaysia-Lebanon bilateral relations had still not made many advances in other areas. Attempts to bring Malaysian investment failed. Other Malaysian companies also did not invest in Lebanon as they found Lebanon to be a hard place to do business. Even the direct flights to Beirut started by the Malaysian Airlines (MAS) in 1996 floundered after a few years. In 2010, MAS stopped its flight to Beirut. Likewise, Proton's effort to penetrate the Lebanese market also failed due to bad business model.

Concluding Remarks

The article showed that despite the resources that had been poured into the relationship by Malaysia under Mahathir and Abdullah, bilateral relations in general remained modest. Nevertheless, despite the differences in Mahathir's and Abdullah's perceptions, Lebanon was a priority in Malaysia's overall foreign policy. Mahathir was a strong leader who enjoyed popular support at home and internationally. He shared Hariri's conviction that the Labour government in Israel under Yitzhak Rabin was ready for peace. Hariri too, believed that by positioning itself as an economic hub, Lebanon could encourage the peace process and finally conclude a peace treaty with Israel. Ultimately his aim was to deprive Syria of the rationale to remain in control of Lebanon. Mahathir, who shared this view, believed that bilateral cooperation especially in economic areas could help Lebanon achieve its goal. So while the pursuit of bilateral gains for Malaysia was important, Mahathir's motivation was derived from a hope of keeping Israel committed to peace with Lebanon and the region in general.

Abdullah on the other hand was a weaker leader whose immediate preoccupation was to shore up his political standing at home. As such, bilateral relations were relegated to a lower priority which would be expected of a relationship with a small state such as Lebanon. Bilateral relation was also not a priority for Siniora. Coming after the collapse of Syrian-led political order following the assassination of Hariri, Siniora was preoccupied with the onerous task of building a working government. However, as Israel's sudden and massive attack on Lebanon threatened to bring about a general collapse of the state and perhaps a return to civil war, Malaysia had to step in. As the Chair of the OIC, Abdullah had to show leadership capacity especially in leading the OIC to stand up against Israel. Hence, bilateral relations with Lebanon once again became a foreign policy priority for Malaysia. Therefore, under Abdullah, Malaysia also committed significant financial and technical resources in supporting Lebanon and also in sending a battalion of peacekeepers to serve under UNIFIL in an open-ended commitment.

In the final analysis, it can be concluded that the perception of Mahathir and Abdullah towards Israel explains why the Malaysian government committed huge financial and other resources to support Lebanon despite it being a lop-sided relationship. The difference between Mahathir and Abdullah was that Mahathir together with Hariri set the pace and content of bilateral cooperation, whereas the actions of Abdullah and Siniora, were dictated by the developments in the external arena.

Endnotes

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