

15 years on, Iraq waits for Malaysia to reopen Baghdad Embassy

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KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 18 (Bernama) – In the larger interest of the two countries, Iraq hopes Malaysia will soon re-open its embassy in Baghdad, says Charge d' Affaires of the Embassy of Iraq in Malaysia, Hassan Muhsen Al-Haidari.

Hassan said hopes were much higher than before, with the new government ruling Malaysia. This was manifested in the congratulatory letter sent by Iraqi Prime Minister, Dr Haider Al-Abadi to his Malaysian counterpart, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Hassan said many countries had re-opened their embassies after the Iraq War in 2003, but Malaysia, which had long-standing relations with Baghdad had yet to follow the footsteps of the other countries.

In an interview with Bernama recently, he pointed out that Malaysia had thrice sent delegates to Iraq in 2011, 2012 and 2014 to assess the situation in Baghdad, but so far to no avail.

According to a report, Malaysia shut down its embassy in Baghdad in March 2003 during the war.

Hassan said many Malaysians were interested to forge business links in Iraq and had made enquiries at the Iraqi Embassy here. Nevertheless, they hesitated or put a stop to their plans when they came to know that the Malaysian Embassy had been closed for many years.

He said re-opening the embassy could help facilitate many different levels of ties and links between Iraq and Malaysia and the people of the two brotherly Muslim countries.

He stressed the presence of a Malaysian embassy would go a long way in enhancing bilateral ties, especially in trade, investment, economy, education, tourism and cultural fields and at the same time, strengthen people-to-people ties and promote new areas of cooperation.

“Here, we are trying to help as many Malaysians as possible, who are enquiring various matters on Iraq like business and trading opportunities...but they can only gain confidence if they also liaise with Malaysian embassy officials. Unfortunately, the embassy has remained shut for many years,” he said.

Currently, Malaysia’s interests in Iraq are represented by Malaysia’s embassy in neighbouring Jordan. Iraq opened its embassy in Kuala Lumpur in the mid 1970s. There are currently 50 foreign embassies and many consulates based in Iraq.

In the context of bilateral relations, Hassan pointed out that Petronas, Malaysia’s national oil company, had a presence in Iraq since 2010. In 2016, total two-way trade volume was estimated at US\$1.5 billion.

Iraq’s main export to Malaysia is oil. The Arab country imports mainly medical related products and equipment, palm oil and electronic and electrical products from Malaysia.

Hassan also said the Iraqi Airways, the Middle Eastern country’s national carrier, was flying once a week from Baghdad to Kuala Lumpur since 2013, but since 2017, it had increased to twice weekly, which was a manifestation of the ever growing people-to-people ties, thus the importance of reopening the Malaysian embassy.

Currently, there are some 3,500 Iraqi students in Malaysia. In 2016, some 24,000 Iraqis visited Malaysia and it rose to 30,000 last year, a fact which Hassan said reinforced the necessity for Malaysia to reopen its embassy. There are also about 300 Malaysians working in Iraq, mainly in the petroleum sector, related to Petronas’ activities in Iraq.

The diplomat pointed out that education ties between the two countries were growing as many Iraqis studied in Malaysia and the Iraqi Government had so far, recognised 12 Malaysian universities so far.

“The Iraqi students and parents will feel safer if they go through proper government channels, and for that, the presence of the Malaysian Embassy in Baghdad is very much needed,” he noted.

Hassan was confident that even a bigger number of Iraqi students would prefer to go to Malaysia to pursue higher education, once Malaysia had a diplomatic representation in Baghdad.

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