

5. Iraqi-Russian Relations amidst US Security-Focused Engagement

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Iraq has a long and complicated history with the United States, and security and military engagements have been the primary driver of the relationship. Iraq's relations with Russia, on the other hand, have been more transactional and economically-oriented. At a time when there are signs of US disengagement from the Middle East and North Africa while Russian and Chinese activities in the region are increasing, it is useful to trace the past US and Russian strategies in Iraq and assess how the United States could better tailor its strategy toward Iraq in the future in order to achieve durable outcomes that would bring benefits to both sides such as a responsive government, a thriving economy, and security.

Background: Iraq's Relations with Russia and the United States

Iraqi-Russian relations are a continuation of the Iraqi-Soviet relations that were re-established in 1959 after the collapse of the Baghdad Pact and the establishment of a republic in Iraq on the ruins of the Hashemite Monarchy, which was in place from 1921 to 1958¹. For the next forty years, Iraqi-Soviet re-

¹ The Baghdad Pact was a defensive organization founded in 1955 to promote political, military and economic goals of its members (Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan

lations developed rapidly as Iraq continued to depart from its traditionally strong relations with the West. By the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union (USSR) was the main arms supplier to Iraq, and cooperation between the two countries rapidly developed to include education, agriculture, industrial capacity, and energy. Iraqi oil found an important market in the USSR and the Eastern European Bloc, while Soviet oil companies entered the Iraqi energy sector to cooperate with Iraq's state-owned oil company after the nationalization of Iraq's oil industry in 1972-73.

Meanwhile, the United States' policy toward Iraq has taken many turns since Iraq became a republic, many of which have been reactive. US policy shifted dramatically following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990². After forming a coalition of thirty nations to expel the Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the United States led a robust international diplomatic effort to isolate Iraq and impose the strongest economic and political sanctions the UN Security Council (UNSC) ever imposed on a country. The sanctions were proposed initially to the UNSC as a non-military measure to force former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to withdraw his forces from Kuwait, which had he annexed and called "Iraq's Nineteenth Province". However, the sanctions remained in place even after the liberation of Kuwait, while their rationale and purposes evolved over the years – from the dismantling of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, to the destruction of ballistic missiles, to the completion of reparations payments to Kuwait and other third-party victims of the 1990 invasion. Throughout the 1990s, the economic sanctions were augmented by limited air strikes of mixed purposes.

and Great Britain). Its final formation was disrupted by the Iraqi 1958 *coup d'état* which was led by General Abdul-Karim Qassim. It was modeled after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and for a similar purpose, namely to prevent the expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East.

² For an overview of US policy toward Iraq, see A. Kadhim, "Opting for the Lesser Evil: U.S. Policy toward Iraq 1958-2008", in R.E. Looney (ed.), *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations*, London, Routledge, 2009, pp. 467-83.

Eventually, US policy evolved to include regime change as a stated goal, after Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, which stated: “It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime”³. However, this law stopped short of authorizing the president to use military force to cause regime change in Iraq. It allowed the president “to direct the drawdown of defense articles from the stocks of the Department of Defense, defense services of the Department of Defense, and military education and training”, and to provide up to \$97 million for Iraqi opposition groups to undertake efforts to topple Saddam Hussein.

To use US military might to remove the Iraqi regime from power, President George W. Bush needed Congress to pass an Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF). In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the political will to do so was found. Congress passed the AUMF Against Iraq Resolution of 2002, which authorized the president “to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate in order to: (1) defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq; and (2) enforce all relevant UN Security Council Resolutions regarding Iraq”⁴. President Bush used this resolution to invade Iraq in March 2003.

The United States invasion of Iraq altered Iraqi-Russian relations dramatically. Iraq became subsumed in the US sphere of influence, leading to a great reduction of Iraqi-Russian economic and political cooperation. This reversal of roles compelled Moscow to change its post-11 September cooperation

³ 105th Congress Public Law 338. From the U.S. Government Printing Office, “[Iraq Liberation Act of 1998](#)”, page 112 STAT. 3178, Public Law 105-338 (last retrieved on 6 July 2019).

⁴ 107th Congress Public Law 243. From the U.S. Government Printing Office, Page 116 STAT. 1498, Public Law 107-243 “[Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution of 2002](#)” (last retrieved on 6 July 2019).

with the United States, which included Russia's support for the US "War on Terror", the invasion of Afghanistan, and even US counterterrorism activities in Russia's own hemisphere.

Russia strongly opposed the US invasion of Iraq and objected to handling the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime outside of the framework of the UN Charter. Speaking at a joint news conference alongside French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, Russian President Vladimir Putin told journalists: "The faster we go along the path as set down by international law, the better it will be. The longer we delay a resolution within the UN framework, the more it will look like a colonial situation"⁵. However, Putin agreed to cooperate with the new Iraqi government and the United States and said that Russia was ready to "forgive Baghdad some \$8 to \$12 billion in debt", as requested by the United States⁶.

Russia had a \$3.5 billion, twenty-three-year deal with Iraq to rehabilitate Iraqi oil fields, including the West Qurna oil field – one of the world's largest oil deposits – and was expecting development rights to Majnoon oil field and other locations. Additionally, Russian companies had a large share of work in all other sectors in Iraq. Putin's acquiescence to help the US-installed post-Saddam government in Iraq was aimed at protecting all these economic and geostrategic interests.

Full US Engagement in Iraq and Regional Challenges (2003-2011)

While it is commonly argued that establishing a democracy in Iraq was not an original goal of the 2003 invasion, several US laws such as the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 and the 2002 Iraq AUMF explicitly emphasized the establishment of democracy as a goal to accomplish in Iraq. For example, the 2002 AUMF

⁵ "Putin, Chirac, Schroeder Discuss Post-Saddam Iraq", *PBSO NewsHour*, 11 April 2003 (last retrieved on 20 July 2019).

⁶ *Ibid.*

reaffirmed the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 as having “expressed the sense of Congress that it should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove from power the current Iraqi regime and promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime”. Furthermore, Congress stated in the 1998 Act:

It is the sense of the Congress that once the Saddam Hussein regime is removed from power in Iraq, the United States should support Iraq’s transition to democracy by providing immediate and substantial humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi people, by providing democracy transition assistance to Iraqi parties and movements with democratic goals, and by convening Iraq’s foreign creditors to develop a multilateral response to Iraq’s foreign debt incurred by Saddam Hussein’s regime⁷.

This call for establishing a democracy in Iraq was received with great enthusiasm by some members of the Bush administration, who envisioned an Iraq that would be a model for the Middle East. Despite the invasion’s rough start, the process of building a democratic framework for Iraq began almost immediately with the selection of a Governing Council representative of all ethno-sectarian groups to promote inclusive governance. Moreover, a transitional administrative law was drafted and signed by the Governing Council, and a cabinet was selected to govern as a provisional administration and prepare for the election of a constituent assembly to write a permanent constitution. By the end of 2005, Iraqis wrote and ratified the first permanent constitution since the Monarchy (which was from 1921 to 1958), and in 2006, they had their first democratically elected parliament and government in forty-eight years. Other democratic practices, including civilian control over the military and the peaceful transfer of power, were established for the first time since Iraq became a republic in 1958.

⁷ “Iraq Liberation Act of 1998”..., cit.

As Iraqis began assuming political power and taking control of their country, a passionate debate over the future of relations with the United States began to take shape among the political elite and social circles of Iraq. The question was: should Iraq continue to host US military forces and grant them immunity against prosecution under Iraqi laws, under a negotiated status of forces agreement, or ask the United States to withdraw from Iraq? Although there was an equally strong argument for both sides of the debate, the outcome was pre-determined in favor of the US withdrawal. Having been designated as an occupation force in UN Security Council Resolution 1483 on 22 May 2003, the United States could not end the occupation and secure legitimacy for the Iraqi government unless all American troops serving in Iraq were withdrawn. The withdrawal of US troops on 31 December 2011 was also a fulfilment of a campaign promise made by President Barack Obama, who opposed the war in Iraq. The talks between Iraq and the United States that led to the withdrawal were essentially a joint effort to end the US military presence in Iraq.

From the early days of the occupation, the United States was not the only player in Iraq. Several regional players entered the conflict as spoilers. Iran saw Iraq as both a threat and an opportunity. A strong, independent, and democratic Iraq would stand in the way of Iranian plans to create a contiguous sphere of influence to the Mediterranean. For that purpose, Iran needed to drive the United States out of Iraq, ensure a friendly government was in control of the country, and maintain a strong level of influence on Iraqi domestic and international policies. The American course of action was perfectly compatible with the Iranian strategy. When the United States forces departed from Iraq, they left a fragile state divided among ethno-sectarian political neophytes with mutually exclusive visions for the Iraqi state. These factors, combined with its weak security forces, made Iraq exactly what Iran preferred it to be: a market for Iranian goods and a vulnerable neighbor that was barely strong enough to carry its own weight and thus could not push back against Iranian intrusion.

With official US declarations about the intent to make Iraq a model for the Middle East, other leaders in the region, especially among the Arab neighbors of Iraq, were determined to prevent a ripple effect. Saudi Arabia and Syria were instrumental in the effort to make the American project so painful that it would not be repeated elsewhere. From the negative media coverage to allowing extremist religious messages to be announced in mosques and public gatherings, some of Iraq's neighbors were complicit in the violence and terrorism that plagued Iraq for years. Terrorist financing was another menace that came from some Gulf countries without any serious governmental efforts to prevent it. The words of Prince Turki al-Faisal, former director of Saudi Arabia's intelligence service and former ambassador to the United States, are very revealing:

Saudi leaders would be forced by domestic and regional pressures to adopt a far more independent and assertive foreign policy. Like our recent military support for Bahrain's monarchy, which America opposed, Saudi Arabia would pursue other policies at odds with those of the United States, including opposing the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq and refusing to open an embassy there despite American pressure to do so. The Saudi government might part ways with Washington in Afghanistan and Yemen as well⁸.

Prince Turki's words appeared in an article that threatened Saudi retaliation against a looming US veto of a Palestinian statehood petition to the United Nations, and which was carefully timed to come out on the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, which were carried out by a group of nineteen al-Qaeda members (fifteen of them Saudi citizens). It was a flagrant message that the US partnership with Saudi Arabia is a double-edged sword for the West. Prince Turki cited Saudi Arabia's "opposing the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki", which included,

⁸ Prince Turki al-Faisal, "Veto a State, Lose an Ally", *The New York Times*, 11 September 2011.

inter alia, media attacks on the Iraqi government and its armed forces that played into the hands of terrorism. Saudi Arabia feared that a successful story of transition from tyranny to democracy in Iraq would create an American desire to replicate the process in other areas, which would leave the Saudi royal family as a despotic anomaly in the region.

The Saudis were also anticipating another threat from Iraq: the increase of Iraqi oil production to levels that could replace Saudi Arabia's output as the highest OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) exporter. Iraqi officials had revealed their intention to reach 10 thousand barrels per day (mbpd), which would challenge Saudi's export levels. Being the top OPEC exporter earned the Saudis more than high revenues. Their status as top exporter was also a strong reason for the international community to tolerate domestic transgressions against human rights and their longstanding exportation of extremist religious ideology which has given rise to an assortment of terrorist organizations worldwide. Saudi stability has been important in ensuring the continuing flow of its share of oil exports to the market, so the international community has been willing to look the other way as the Saudis continued to undermine security in many parts of the world. Iraq's success in exporting 10 mbpd or more would have challenged the Saudi status of being "too big to fail". The Saudis realized this potential and did all they could to prevent it.

The Challenges Posed by Syria and ISIS

In the case of Syria, the Iraqi government claimed it had solid information that Bashar al-Assad's regime was in fact facilitating the training, financing, and travel of foreign terrorists to Iraq and that it continued to do so until the beginning of Syria's civil war. Assad was another despot who feared being a candidate for regime change if the neoconservatives in Washington succeeded in democratizing the Middle East, and he too spared no effort to hinder the progress of Iraqi democratization. The

United States had less leverage with Assad than with the Saudis; therefore, the Syrian regime continued its malign activities against Iraq for many years, until the Syrian uprisings in 2011 gave Assad and his intelligence establishment bigger fish to fry at home.

Despite Assad's malign activities and at the risk of alienating the United States, the Iraqi government maintained a neutral position toward Syria's internal conflict, which played into the hands of Russia and Iran, who wanted to protect the Syrian regime from collapse. The Iraqi position was not without a reasonable cause, however. The Iraqi government saw the opposition to Assad as an assortment of extremist groups – backed by Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf Arab countries – that included a few terrorist organizations whose victory would assure further activities to destabilize Iraq. As much as the Iraqis wanted Assad to go, they viewed him as the lesser evil. Iraqi fears indeed materialized on 10 June 2014, when Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a terrorist group that took advantage of Assad's weakness and established a stronghold in eastern Syria, launched an attack on the Mosul province of Iraq and succeeded in the following months in taking control of almost one-third of Iraqi territory. It cost Iraq thousands of lives to liberate these territories, and the cost of reconstruction is estimated at \$88 billion⁹.

Facing this existential threat from ISIS, and having not received the F-16 fighters it ordered in September 2011, Iraq approached Russia for a quick supply of jet fighters. Five second-hand Russian SU-25 jets were delivered by late June 2019¹⁰. As the war to defeat ISIS continued, Iraq joined Russia, Syria, and Iran to form a joint intelligence-sharing cooperation coalition which was announced in September 2015, with a joint information center in Baghdad to coordinate their operations

⁹ M. Chmaytelli and A. Hagagy, "Iraq says reconstruction after war on Islamic State to cost \$88 billion", *Reuters*, 12 February 2018.

¹⁰ C. Poccock, "Frustrated Iraqi PM Buys Russian Fighters", *AINOnline*, 27 June 2014.

against ISIS. The coalition invited the United States to join, but the request was denied. While acknowledging Iraqi sovereignty, the United States voiced serious concerns about the goals of the newly established coalition. Colonel Steve Warren, spokesman for the US coalition against ISIS, said: “We recognize that Iraq has an interest in sharing information on ISI[S] with other governments in the region who are also fighting ISI[S]. We do not support the presence of Syrian government officials who are part of a regime that has brutalized its own citizens”¹¹.

Meanwhile, Russian-state owned and private energy firms, such as Gazprom, Rosneft, and Lukoil, are investing heavily in Iraq. Gazprom, Russia’s third-largest oil producer, started its operations in Iraq in 2010 in the Wasit Province to the east of Baghdad. In the summer of 2012, the company began working on two other projects in the northern Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Unlike their American counterparts, Russian companies have less transparency requirements and more flexibility to cut operating costs, not to mention their lower security concerns, which give them a strong competitive advantage in Iraq.

After the American Pax?

Since the 1991 war to liberate Kuwait, the region has been under a permanent shadow of violent conflict. The Middle East, and particularly Iraq, has not been the beneficiary of the “American Pax” or its prospects, if any existed since. There have been two major wars on Iraq, led by the United States, along with several *ad hoc* bombardments and twelve years of crippling economic sanctions, mostly implemented and enforced by US military mechanisms and for security-related purposes.

All this history created in the minds of Iraqis an image of the United States as a belligerent nation rather than a peacemaker. Against this backdrop, US engagement with Iraq since 2003 has

¹¹ J. Mullen and Y. Basil, “Iraq agrees to share intelligence with Russia, Iran and Syria”, *CNN*, 28 September 2015 (last retrieved on 20 July 2019).

been very difficult to process by the generations of Iraqis who lived through these decades. Added to this pre-existing negative accumulation are renewed words and actions that support the expectations of war over the claims of peacemaking. As a result, the United States may be surpassed by competitors who arrive in Iraq and the region as business partners with interests that have no use for military means to protect them. World economic powers, such as China, Korea, and some European countries, have enjoyed greater trust and better access than the United States.

Unlike the Gulf Arab states, Iraq has a history of military prowess that ruled out the need for foreign military bases or defense agreements with Western powers. This is both a matter of longstanding military policy and national pride. The Iraqi forces are not what they used to represent in the regional balance of powers, but this reality has not altered the Iraqi choice of self-reliance. As the decision to end the presence of US forces in 2011 and the battle against ISIS demonstrated, Iraq values its independence more than the guarantees of military alliances with strong powers. The Iraqis did the heavy lifting and made the majority of the sacrifices to liberate their territories and accepted a minimum support from the international coalition, which they framed as a duty of the international community to help Iraq defeat a threat to every country in the region and beyond. Iraqi leaders never stopped reminding everyone that they fought and defeated ISIS on behalf of the world.

In the absence of a strong defense commitment from the United States, Iraq is following a security strategy that is based on stepping up the readiness of its armed forces and avoiding any entanglement in regional conflict. When Iraq's military – which was inadequately trained and equipped by the United States to handle interior threats in the period of reform following the invasion – proved to be incapable of meeting the ISIS-era challenges, Iraqis did not surrender or run to foreign militaries to protect them, but rather mobilized a more powerful force from Iraqi volunteers in a matter of days and put

their security capabilities on track again. This resilience sets Iraq apart¹².

Iraq's unique history and tradition of strong independence demands that the United States treat Iraq differently than some of its regional allies. Iraq cannot be reduced to the status of a protectorate or a junior partner. Even if future conditions forced Iraq to accept this status, it would be short-lived. In the past, Iraq compensated for the lack of strong Western alliances by resorting to a partnership with the USSR and the Eastern Bloc. In the current competitive system, Russia stands as a ready and willing alternative that is not going to be incompatible with Iraq's major regional ally, Iran. For durable relations, the United States must treat Iraq as a valued partner, akin to that of Israel or Turkey – a status that allows Iraq a margin of independence and autonomy.

This partnership must also be multidimensional, where the interests of both sides are equally enhanced, and the dividends are distributed to the satisfaction of both sides. In the absence of full US engagement with Iraq, there will not be an American monopoly on the country's economic and political relations. In the coming decade, Iraq will become more integrated in the Asian market and the grand plans Russia, China, and India are implementing in the Middle East¹³. Whether it will build its own port in Basra or use Kuwaiti ports, Iraq will soon be a link and passageway between the Gulf, the West, and the East; as the Road and Belt Initiative is shaping up and other regional plans, such as Kuwait's Silk City, begin to integrate the region economically.

¹² In the days that followed the ISIS invasion of Mosul, the Iraqi military collapsed and left the country in a defenseless state. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani issued a fatwa (religious edict) calling on all Iraqis to join the Iraqi Armed Forces and defend the country. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi men heeded the call and took up arms to fight the terrorist group. For more about the fatwa and its aftermath see, A. Kadhim and L. Al-Khatteeb, "What Do you Know About Sistani's Fatwa?", *The Huffington Post*, 10 July 2014.

¹³ Iraqi leaders consider the large economic plans as opportunities to provide employment for Iraqi labor and chances for Iraq to expand its economy, which is fully reliant on oil revenues at the present time.

Iraq's traditional relations with Russia will continue to thrive not only in the energy sector, but in many other economic and infrastructural sectors as well. The imperative question, in these strategic decisions, will be how Iraq can balance its relations between an economically oriented East and a militarily oriented America.