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# Iran and Iraq: The Search for Balance in Bilateral Relations in Light of the Iraqi borders and Political Forces Issues

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# Iran and Iraq: The Search for Balance in Bilateral Relations in Light of the Iraqi borders and Political Forces Issues

Hameed Ridha Al-Ibrahimi \*

## Preface

In describing the status-quo of the Iranian-Iraqi relations and the challenges and opportunities facing the two countries, it can be said that they both have many common strategic points. If they reach a particular stage, they can turn into strategic partners. However, both countries have many differences. This might lead the two countries to an all-out war if it is not resolved logically by adhering to political principles and following international law, taking into account broad regional participation.

The common features between the two countries can be described but are not limited to: religion, religious tourism, long shared borders, bilateral economic capabilities, regional security ...etc. e. However, one can focus on a limited number of them.

Shiites make up more than 60% of the population in Iraq, which is the second-largest Shiite country in terms of population after Iran. In addition, in the time of the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani –the supreme authority– Najaf, is far from the governmental connection. Yet, the Najaf Seminary is the primary reference for all Shiites in the world.

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The predominant majority of Shiites in both countries could constitute a very suitable platform for cultural exchange. However, if the geopolitical and regional challenges between the two countries can not be contained, the Shi'ism factor would not control the potential tensions between the two countries. For example, if the Iran-Iraq war is considered the biggest massacre of the Shiites in the current era, this war witnessed a confrontation between two Shiite fronts on both sides, represented by the brutal conflict in the east of Basra in 1986 and 1987.

Nevertheless, the potential capabilities between the two sides in exporting food, oil derivatives, and technical and cultural cooperation are essential areas common to both parties, and they do not need to be clarified on their importance.

On the other hand, some issues may lead to rising problems between the two countries. The most urging of which is the border dispute of Shatt al-Arab. Iraq has great potential in energy and is in dire need of open water for transportation, but its access to this area is minimal, mainly because of legal impediments. From the beginning of the twentieth century until the end of the Eight Years' War, Iran and Iraq went through periods of unrest on their water borders. The Iraqi officials' attitudes in the post-Saddam era show that this issue remains unresolved. In this regard, this paper we will present proposals on how to solve this dilemma.

Another issue that raises conflicts between the two countries is how Iran deals with the central government and the political stability in Iraq. In the past two decades, Iranian foreign policy towards Iraq, particularly after Saddam Hussein's ouster, has dealt with different Iraqi governments and foreign political actors. This matter is not limited to Iraq, but Iran has already been involved in Lebanon, Yemen, and

Palestine. There are many armed groups in these countries, and they are not accountable to the central governments. In some cases, such as the fall of Gaza or Sanaa, those groups sought to overthrow the official government. Iran's approach towards the central government was not consistent, but it was fluctuating. During the period of ISIS in Iraq, Iran worked to assist the central government and preserve Iraq's territorial integrity. However, regarding foreign relations and the control of illegal armed forces, Iran has done the exact opposite, as Tehran has become patronage for semi-legal groups. The Iranian approach in dealing with the central Iraqi government is based entirely on fulfilling Iranian interests. Whenever Iran feels that the stability of Iraq will lead to strengthening its relations with the Arab and Western world, Iran would resort to using force to destabilize the situation. This issue has been documented by many statements expressed by all Iraqi officials calling for not turning Iraq into an arena for regional settlements. The Shiite forces were divided as well. The Shiite factions that formed the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) had different positions. The PMF is currently divided into three different factions, traditional, pro-Iranian, and authoritative.

The traditional faction includes Saraya al-Salam and Badr, among others. Despite the desire to distance themselves from the United States, they have maintained relatively close relations with Iran. This faction criticizes the uncontrolled weapons in Iraq and stresses strengthening the central government's authority. It also wants to improve relations with Arab countries while this faction realizes that the continuous provocations of the rebel factions could concern the neighbors and consequently isolate Iraq. Thus, these forces are aware of the importance of the region's countries in maintaining Iraq's internal balance. The pro-Iranian faction includes Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl

al-Haq, al-Nujaba, and others. This faction is a non-state armed force and does not follow the PMF leadership. These armed groups operate independently and without the permission of the Iraqi government in Syria, and we could say that they form the “Arabic speaking factions of the Quds Force in Iraq.” These factions created sub-movements with deferent names such as “Rab’ Allah, Ashab Alkahf, and others to reduce the expected cost of attacks against US forces in Iraq. These factions are officially at war against the central government and the US embassy in Baghdad. Finally, the authoritative faction (Marjaiya) follows the government and is not considered close to Iran. This faction follows the Iraqi Prime Minister, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.

### **Proposed Solutions**

Regarding border stability, it is essential to point out that Iraq, despite the changes in its various governments and the emergence of new political forces, does not accept the agreement of Shatt al-Arab’s borders. In this regard, the Iraqi government must realize that the signing of the 1975 agreement in Algeria occurred due to a relative balance of power between the two countries in a situation in which Iraq was at its strongest. Iraq hasn’t been able to change the situation even when Iran was in the most vulnerable and weakest conditions in 1988, where Saddam –despite his great political gamble– was forced to adhere to the terms of that agreement. On the other hand, Iraq must focus on a key question: What does Iraq want from the Shatt al-Arab? If Iraq is looking for a method to secure the transport of energy and goods through this port, whether with or without the 1975 agreement, it must reach detailed, long-lasting agreements with Iran in this regard. Iraq cannot rely on the provisions of the 1975 agreement alone or even any other agreements. Bilateral problems can be solved only if both parties adhere to the terms stated in the agreement. The committees

stipulated in the text of that agreement must be reactivated, and both parties must take the necessary steps for reconstruction and development projects in the Shatt al-Arab. The economic boom on both sides of the Shatt al-Arab is vital to maintain security in the region. Besides, both parties' destruction during the Eight-Years War makes both sides view a military solution in this region as a last resort in conflict. The establishment of free trade zones in the area, and ultimately joint local economic and commercial projects will create a partnership and economic interdependence in the interests of both sides. This will facilitate technical problems and enhance permanent security on the southern water borders of both countries.

Regarding the issues related to political relations, each of Iran, the United States, and the region's countries have their own concerns about Iraqi foreign policy due to the 1980s and 1990s events. In this context, it should be noted that, unlike the 1980s, Iraq today enjoys a plurality political structure and an unprecedented democratic power. Simultaneously, the Iraqi political spectrum is committed to maintaining a high level of political relations with Iran and restoring ties with Arab countries. This can be seen through the official political discourse of all these currents and forces. In the meantime, Iran must firmly refrain from weakening the Iraqi central government while maintaining good relations alongside the political spectrum. The continued destabilization of official Iraqi sovereignty will turn optimistic or hesitant parties (even Shiite ones) into powers that see Iran as an obstacle to development and stability in Iraq and will lead them to seek an alliance with the Arab and global world against Iran. This negative view of Tehran has intensified since the protests of October 2019, and today it forms a robust political view in Iraq. This happens even though the Western military presence in Iraq reached its lowest levels in the post-ISIS era, but many pro-

Iranian armed groups were formed.

The persistence of the idea that any reduction in the US military role will lead to the strengthening of Iran's power in Iraq will quickly lead local and regional authorities to increase their movement by encouraging the United States to play a more significant role. Along with the regional parties, Iran must agree to ensure non-interference in Iraqi affairs outside the official framework, encouraging the Iraqi political forces to form the country's foreign policy according to general rules and Iraq's national interest. On the other hand, the Iraqi state must realize that, unlike the Lebanese case, which witnesses the existence of Hezbollah as the most powerful military force, and in contrast to the Yemeni case, where the Houthis control the capital, the paramilitary groups in Iraq are much smaller than the official army. Also, these groups do not control certain lands, so they must be dealt with strictly to prevent the continuation of assassinations and intimidation. Of course, the Iraqi government's response to these groups will significantly influence how Tehran deals with Baghdad.

But there is another critical point in the way Iran deals with Iraq, which is Iraqi Kurdistan.

All the various Iraqi political parties, even Iranian ones, agree on the threat that the Kurdish region poses to the safety of Iraq and Iran together.

The Kurdistan Regional Government sees itself in a temporary relationship with Iraqi sovereignty. It will not hesitate to take advantage of any opportunity to break this relationship and detach from it. On the other hand, the Kurdistan region has positive relations with Turkey despite tension with groups such as the PKK.

This complex situation can be solved by emphasizing several points. The first is the need for the Iraqi government to have legal control over all of its territories through the federal government's control of border crossings. Because of its tensions with Turkey, Iran may use the PKK groups and some PMF factions in northern Iraq, which is not acceptable by Baghdad. Iran's continued use of active paramilitary groups in Iraq to promote its regional policies will ultimately (in this case, for example) lead to Turkish intervention and wide-ranging regional tensions. At this point, the government should not show any indulgence or restraint with the military presence of these unruly groups.

At present, it can be said that Iran lacks a correct and balanced assessment of what could satisfy the Iraqi political spectrum through its foreign policy. The burden of persuading Iran to adjust its policies falls upon the political parties, spectrum, and high-profile figures in Iraq. Besides, a large part of the Iranian assessment of Iraq is based on the Iraqi military forces' role on the ground.