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Pakistan's approach in expanding relations with Iraq

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Since 2014

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Farzad Ramezani Bonesh *

Pakistan–Iraq relations in the past

Following Pakistan's independence from India in 1947, Iraq has been the first Arab country to recognize Pakistan and support it in the Bengal crisis.¹ Bilateral relations between Iraq and Pakistan, as a result of their presence in different global blocs and different political systems in Iraq, at times were cold and sometimes dark. As a result, relationships have seen many ups and downs over more than seven decades.

An important turning point in Pakistan–Iraq relations was the 1955 'Santo Pact' or 'Baghdad Pact' to counter communist spread in the region. But with the formation of the pro-Soviet republic in Iraq in 1958, Baghdad withdrew from the military alliance.

After the initial cold relations, Iraq's support for Islamabad in the 1971 war with India somewhat warmed relations, but the discovery of a weapons cache at the Iraqi embassy in Islamabad² in 1973, the expulsion of the Iraqi ambassador³ to Pakistan, and later a dispute over the Iran–Iraq war, caused tension in the two side's relations.

Later, despite the support of General Mirza Aslam Beg, the then Chief of Staff, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait⁴, the occupation of Kuwait and the Persian Gulf War in 1990 further strained relations between the two countries. Although, the emergence of a new political order in

1. <https://historypak.com/pakistan-iraq-kuwait-war-1990/>

2. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1824741>

3. https://dbpedia.org/page/1973_raid_on_the_Iraqi_embassy_in_Pakistan

4. <http://countrystudies.us/pakistan/86.htm>

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Baghdad after Saddam led to the complete normalization of Pakistan–Iraq relations.⁵ But the course of relations had not expanded for various reasons.

Recent political and diplomatic relations

With the fall of former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hossein’s regime in 2003, Pakistan provided relative support for Iraq’s new regime. Over the past two decades, various officials have traveled to the two countries, but the relation has been smooth. In the last two years, however, there have been signs of the beginning of a new round of wider interactions and relationships.

In this regard, the visit of the Pakistani Minister of Military Production to Baghdad in January 2021, the visit of the Iraqi Minister of Defense to Islamabad in February 2021, the visit of the Pakistani Minister of Religious Affairs and Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Army to Iraq in March 2021, the visit of the Pakistani Foreign Minister in May 2021 to Iraq, Pakistani Defense Minister’s meeting with Iraqi President, meeting of Joint Chiefs of Staff of the two countries,⁶ Iraqi Prime Minister’s visit to Islamabad were among the most important events.

In another dimension, the opening of more bilateral missions⁷, the signing of memoranda of understanding between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the two countries on cooperation in diplomacy training⁸ and increasing cooperation in international forums (UN and OIC)⁹ on strengthening diplomatic relations between Iraq and Pakistan, have led to more strengthening of relations in recent years.

5. <https://thefrontierpost.com/pakistan-iraq-bilateral-relations/>

6. <https://tinyurl.com/y8wgvvy8e>

7. <http://urdu.radio.gov.pk/11-08-2021/pakstanaarak-ka-siasi-taalkat-ko-mzid-bamksd-aktsadi-shrakt-dari-mi-bdln-pr-atafak>

8. <https://tinyurl.com/y7qz3mek>

9. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2302274/pakistan-greatly-values-its-relations-with-iraq-qureshi>

In this regard, the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding of 'Bilateral Political Consultations' and the establishment of a mechanism for regular consultations on bilateral and international issues of interest¹⁰ is another step in promoting relations and regional and international cooperation for the two countries.

Geopolitical interests and diversity in foreign policy

Regarding the article 40 of the Constitution of Pakistan ¹¹, the preservation and strengthening of fraternal relations with Islamic countries in foreign relations is also under the consideration regarding Iraq. The development of high-level relations with Muslim countries is also in line with the outlook ¹²of the Prime Minister, Imran Khan.

After the election of Imran Khan as Prime Minister in August 2018, the two countries have found more commonalities in their positions on the developments in the region, the field of relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council, relations with China, opposition to normalization of relations with Israel, support for regional talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia, war in Yemen and so on.

Maintaining national security and geostrategic interests, including Kashmir¹³, is important for Islamabad. But over the past few years, India has established close strategic ties with many Middle Eastern capitals. This has sometimes made Pakistan unhappy with their silence on India's approach to Jammu and Kashmir issue. Pakistan has made several attempts to raise the issue of Kashmir ¹⁴in international forums against India. Meanwhile, looking at Iraq, Islamabad wants Baghdad to support its approach to Kashmir.

10. <https://henryclubs.com/pakistan-iraq-reaffirm-long-standing-friendly-relations/>

11. <https://www.pakistanembassy.dk/about-pakistan/foreign-policy/>

12. <https://www.dawnnews.tv/news/1160917>

13. <https://www.pakistanembassy.dk/about-pakistan/foreign-policy/>

14. <https://www.geo.tv/latest/364735-pakistan-iraq-agree-to-establish-political-consultation-mechanism>

There is a tendency among Pakistanis that Islamabad should work on its self-sufficiency.¹⁵ So Pakistanis have long sought diversity in their foreign policy. Pakistan seems to be seeking to engage with other countries by reducing the full focus of foreign policy on the United States and China.

Pakistan is also trying to include Iraq in its expansion plan, taking into account regional and international rivalries, managing hostile relations with India and balancing relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran¹⁶. On the other hand, Iraq is one of the countries that does not have a strategic conflict with Pakistan and is increasing cooperation with non-Arab regional actors such as Islamabad.¹⁷ Both Iraq and Pakistan have sought to balance their relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia and to try to remain neutral in the face of conflicts in the Middle East.¹⁸ In this regard, Islamabad and Baghdad have repeatedly tried to facilitate interactions between Tehran and Riyadh.

Soft power and religious and cultural relations

In foreign policy goals, it is important to promote Pakistan as a dynamic, progressive, moderate and democratic Islamic country, to develop friendly relations with all countries of the world, and to protect the interests of Pakistani¹⁹ immigrants abroad.

Pakistan, with a population of more than 220 million, is one of the most populous countries in the world and has the largest Shiite population after Iran. Iraq is also a Shiite-majority country. In this regard, different religious, cultural and social commonalities between

15. Khalid Mehmood, Zeeshan Ahmad (2020) How Pakistan's foreign policy pendulum swung in 2019, *tribune*, : January 1, 2020

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2128346/1-foreign-policy-pendulum-swing/>

16. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1668572>

17. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2322385/iraq-reasserting-past-prestige>

18. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1824741>

19. <https://www.pakistanembassy.dk/about-pakistan/foreign-policy/>

the two countries have caused Pakistan to pay more attention to Iraq.

Every year, a number of Pakistani Shiites travel to Iraq to visit holy sites. The presence of Pakistani scholars in Iraq and the Pakistani origin of Ayatollah Bashir Najafi²⁰, one of Iraq's religious leaders, have also increased the cultural ties between the two countries.

On the other hand, there are many followers of the Qadiriyya sect in Pakistan, and every year several caravans travel to Iraq to visit the grave of the sect leader, Abdul Qadir Gilani. Approximately 200,000 Pakistani pilgrims²¹ travel to Iraq each year for religious rites.

In recent years, apart from the visit of the Pakistani Minister of Religious Affairs to Iraq²², the policy of managing Pakistan pilgrims,²³ signing an agreement to promote tourism,²⁴ facilitating the issuance of visas and facilities for tourists, especially pilgrims,²⁵ increase air travel after more than two and a half years²⁶, the opening of Pakistani missions in Karbala and Najaf²⁷ have provided important opportunities for the expansion of the tourism sector between the two countries.

Elsewhere in Islamabad in March 2021, Pakistan sent a shipment of medical aid to Iraq to fight the Coronavirus,²⁸ and awarded 1,000 scholarships to Iraqi students in 2021.²⁹ These approaches can be considered as an emphasis on cultural and friendly relations between the two countries.

20. <https://www.alnajafy.com/>

21. <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistani-foreign-ministers-trip-to-iraq-the-latest-seam-in-pakistans-outreach-to-the-gulf/>

22. <https://tinyurl.com/y8wgvy8e>

23. <https://thefrontierpost.com/pakistan-iraq-bilateral-relations/>

24. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/927100-pakistan-iraq-agree-to-uplift-tourism>

25. <https://www.radio.gov.pk/18-02-2022/pakistan-iraq-call-for-enhanced-liaison-for-visa-facilitation>

26. <https://www.ina.iq/139993--7-.html>

27. <https://www.ina.iq/150041--.html>

28. <http://www.paknewsar.com/pakistan/8552>

29. <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistani-foreign-ministers-trip-to-iraq-the-latest-seam-in-pakistans-outreach-to-the-gulf/>

Development of military and defense relations

Extremism and terrorism have become a major security challenge for Pakistan and Iraq. Strengthening cooperation in the fight against terrorism and extremism, strengthening cooperation in the fight against international terrorism and drug trafficking, can be effective in curbing this challenge

Pakistan has previously supported Iraq through military assistance and intelligence sharing during Iraq's fight against ISIS. This marked the beginning of a new relationship³⁰ of security cooperation, support and exchange of information. Iraq has also repeatedly condemned terrorist attacks in Pakistan.³¹

In this regard, the two countries emphasize the need to exchange delegations in order to increase cooperation on security issues in the fight against terrorism, sharing expertise and information³². Pakistan is one of the weapons producing countries. The country is very active in producing military equipment³³ including aircraft, tanks, armed vehicles, ammunition and institutes for military training of officers and pilots.

Meanwhile, in the past few years, the two countries have paid more attention to visit of military officials,³⁴ and the strengthening of bilateral military cooperation between the two countries and training courses is being hold for Iraqi military personnel in Pakistani defense training institutes³⁵.

In addition, Pakistan's defense exports in recent years have had

30. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1824741>

31. <https://www.mofa.gov.iq/islamabad/ar/>

32. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1626604/pakistan-iraq-to-enhance-security-defence-cooperation>

33. <https://thefrontierpost.com/pakistan-iraq-bilateral-relations/>

34. <http://www.paknewsar.com/pakistan/8315>

35. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1626180/fm-queishi-leaves-for-three-day-visit-to-iraq>

customers such as Myanmar, Nigeria, and Azerbaijan. ³⁶ Iraq is still seeking to strengthen its defense systems and conduct 'anti-UAV' operations. Therefore, ordering 12 JF-17 Thunder Block III fighter jets from Pakistan ³⁷ can be an important help in maintaining the security of Iraq and increasing Pakistan's military exports. It also indicates the continuous growth ³⁸ of bilateral defense relations and the exchange of high-level delegations between the two countries.

Economic cooperations

Pakistan is shifting its priorities from geostrategic to geoeconomic³⁹. Imran Khan's government desperately needs to attract foreign investment. ⁴⁰ Pakistan's foreign policy places particular emphasis on economic diplomacy to reap the benefits of the globalization process as well as meet the challenges of the 21st century. ⁴¹ There is also a tendency among Pakistanis to focus on economics and public diplomacy.⁴²

Pakistan's GDP has grown well and if all goes well, Pakistan's economy will grow well in the coming years. However, unlike the trade relations between Iraq and India, the volume of trade between Iraq and Pakistan is very small. Transactions between Baghdad and Islamabad have so far been less extensive; with major efforts include two Pakistani cement plants in Iraq, a hotel in Karbala and a contract

36. <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/iraqi-defence-minister-confirms-purchase-of-fighter-jets-from-pakistan/>

37. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2322385/iraq-reasserting-past-prestige>

38. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1626604/pakistan-iraq-to-enhance-security-defence-cooperation>

39. <https://subhekabul.com/%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86/why-did-relations-between-pakistan-and-the-middle-east-change/>

40. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1668572>

41. <https://www.pakistanembassy.dk/about-pakistan/foreign-policy/>

42. Khalid Mehmood, Zeeshan Ahmad (2020) How Pakistan's foreign policy pendulum swung in 2019, *tribune*, : January 1, 2020

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2128346/1-foreign-policy-pendulum-swing/>

between the Pakistani oil company and the Iraqi government⁴³.

In 2019, Pakistan exported \$ 66.2 million to Iraq. The main exporting goods from Pakistan to Iraq are construction materials, polystyrene and rice. In return, Iraq exported \$ 18.1 million to Pakistan⁴⁴. The main products exported from Iraq to Pakistan were petroleum, gas, fruits and petroleum coke. Pakistan's exports to Iraq in 2021 were \$ 44 million. And Iraq's exports to Pakistan was \$ 112 million.⁴⁵

However, encouraging Pakistani companies to invest in Iraqi provinces, opening an economic agency in Erbil,⁴⁶ signing a tourism memorandum,⁴⁷ activating the private sector,⁴⁸ and signing a memorandum of understanding between the Federation of Iraqi Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Commerce⁴⁹ and Industry of Pakistan could increase and facilitate trade and diversify bilateral cooperation.

In addition, having one of the most populous countries, Pakistan is in great need of attracting potential markets and petroleum products. Iraq, on the other hand, could make a good contribution to Pakistan's energy supply.

The construction of oil pipelines from Basra to the port of Gwadar or Karachi is still in its infancy, but could be an important gateway for Iraq to connect with other Asian countries. Also, due to the existence of energy pipelines off the coast of Iran, Iraq and Pakistan can consider oil and even gas swaps between the three countries. On the other hand, both countries have good relations with Iran and China. Iran's position

43. <https://www.ina.iq/135783--.html>

44. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/pak/partner/irq>

45. <https://tradingeconomics.com/pakistan/imports/iraq>

46. <https://www.basnews.com/fa/babat/723055>

47. <https://www.ina.iq/146716--.html>

48. <https://tinyurl.com/y7qz3mek>

49. <https://tinyurl.com/y8en8j7v>

between these two countries in the great economic plan of China's Silk Road can increase the scope of multilateral cooperation based on this plan.

China is also the largest foreign investor in Pakistan. So the China-Pakistan corridor and the development of the port of Gwadar in Pakistan⁵⁰ could be a gateway for goods and even Iraqi oil reserves to Central Asia and China. On the other hand, Iraq's emphasis on its efforts to enter the Pakistani oil market⁵¹ could also be aimed at opening up a major market for Iraqi oil and diversifying oil imports for Pakistan.

India and Pakistan are also embroiled in a war over rice exports to the European Union.⁵² In fact, the Iraq can be a good market for Pakistani food products.

In addition, approaches such as Pakistan's support for Iraq in gaining full membership in the World Trade Organization⁵³ could increase the scope of economic cooperation in international institutions.

Vision:

Pakistan and Iraq have no major territorial, geopolitical or security disagreements. However, Pakistan and Iraq agreed to turn their excellent political relations into a more meaningful economic partnership⁵⁴. But there is still a long way to reach a mutually beneficial partnership⁵⁵ between Pakistan and Iraq. Meanwhile, the growth of

50 . *Economic Times* (2020), p 5 ,

51. <https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/Iraqi-is-seeking-a-foothold-in-Pakistan-s-oil-market-Minister-Hussein-says>

52 . *Asiatimes* (2020) India, Pakistan in winner-take-all rice war, November 12, 2020.

<https://asiatimes.com/2020/11/india-pakistan-in-winner-take-all-rice-war/>

53. <https://ina.iq/eng/16135-iraq-and-pakistan-discuss-strengthening-economic-partnership-and-activating-the-private-sector.html>

54. <http://urdu.radio.gov.pk/11-08-2021/pakstanaarak-ka-siasi-taalkat-ko-mzid-bamksd-aktsadi-shrakt-dari-mi-bdln-pr-afak>

55. <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistani-foreign-ministers-trip-to-iraq-the-latest-seam-in-pakistans-outreach-to-the-gulf/>

defense, political and diplomatic relations between the two countries has been highlighted in recent years, but the lack of a broad economic relationship is a major weakness of relations.

In fact, any political or diplomatic effort without the benefit of extensive economic cooperation is an incomplete attempt to communicate. In the meantime, if stronger steps are taken in activating the joint committees of Iraq and Pakistan, completing the agreements and memorandums between the two countries,⁵⁶ it can be hoped that the economic relations between the two countries will reach billions of dollars in the coming years. Othevise, the continuation of the status quo cannot be compared to the pattern of India-Iraq or Turkey-Iraq relations.

56. <https://tinyurl.com/ybjpt6f5>