



مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط
Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

UAE's approach to Iraq

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Since 2014

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Farzad Ramezani Bonesh*

The relationship between the UAE and Iraq dates back to 1971, Iraq was one of the first countries that supported the independence of the United Arab Emirates during the reign of Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr.¹

After strengthening relations during this period, the UAE tried to gain Iraq's support in its regional and international issues, such as confronting Iran. On the other hand, in the 1980s, the UAE supported Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, especially in economic² terms.

In 1991, the United Arab Emirates joined Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries in condemning Iraq's invasion of Kuwait 1990. Therefore, provided facilities for the West and helped to liberate Kuwait³.

Meanwhile, in the 90s, despite the tensions between the two countries, the UAE provided millions of dollars in food and medicine to Iraq and even violated the UN sanctions against the country. Despite the severance of diplomatic relations, the UAE was one of the largest providers of humanitarian aid to Iraq and called for lifting sanctions against Baghdad.⁴

At the beginning of the new century, the UAE reopened its embassy

1. <https://tinyurl.com/2ps5xboh>

2. <https://tinyurl.com/2ryscdfe>

3. <https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Arab-Emirates/Foreign-relations>

4. <https://tinyurl.com/2gx4wjep>

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in Baghdad which was closed for ten years following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.⁵ Also, the Iraqi embassy in Abu Dhabi was established by the official announcement of the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries after a 10-year break in July 2000. But relations faced ups and downs and other challenges until the fall of Saddam Hussein.

With the fall of Saddam Hussein and the beginning of a new era after 2003, the UAE was one of the top 12 financial sponsors of the Iraqi Governing Council for the renewal of the country.⁶

The UAE cancelled almost \$7 billion of its debt, including interest and arrears to Baghdad. However, various variables and factors caused the UAE to be more cautious in its relations with Iraq.

Supporting the partial lifting of international sanctions, withdrawal from the seventh chapter, complete desire for Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity,⁷ and Iraq's return to the Arab community have been parts of the UAE's approach to Iraq for the past two decades. Since the killing of the Egyptian ambassador in Iraq in 2005⁸, Arab countries such as the UAE were thinking of leaving Iraq. The United Arab Emirates also withdrew its top envoy from Iraq⁹ in May 2006 after one of its diplomats was kidnapped, and lowered the level of its representation in Iraq

5. <https://tinyurl.com/2gx4wjep>

6. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/part7.html>

7. نهي جاسم حسن ، مجلة العلوم السياسية والقانون. العدد 31 ، مح6 - مارس/آذار 2022 - امركزالديمقراطي العربي. برلين ، P142 :
<https://tinyurl.com/2jgwqf3v>

8. <https://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/06/05/iraq.main/index.html>

9. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-uae-ambassador-update-3-idUKL0655499820080707>

The visit of Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan to Baghdad on June 5, 2008, was the first visit of a high-ranking official from the Gulf Cooperation Council to Iraq since March 2003.¹⁰ In this regard, Al Nahyan officially invited Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to visit the UAE. Therefore, in June 2008, the Iraqi government announced that the UAE would send its ambassador to Baghdad. This was the first Arab ambassador in Iraq after the announcement of the return of ambassadors in 2005.

After that, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan welcomed Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in July 2008. But the relations worsened after Nouri al-Maliki accused Saudi Arabia of supporting terrorists in Iraq and summoned the ambassador.

The UAE's view of Nouri Maliki's government was the pursuit of the policy of "exclusionary, sectarian and marginalizing" a part of the Iraqi people. Many in the UAE thought that this approach would help escalate the situation, and increase political tension and security bloodshed in Iraq.

In the meantime, in the declaration field, attention to the independence and unity of Iraq, refusing to interfere in its internal affairs, and the need for a comprehensive political approach to resolve disputes and form an inclusive¹¹ government have also been important for the UAE. With Prime Minister Dr. Haider Al-Abadi's visit to the UAE in

10. https://en.on1.click/tiki-index.php?page=info_Iraq%E2%80%93United_Arab_Emirates_relations

11. نهي جاسم حسن، مجلة العلوم السياسية والقانون، العدد 31، مج 6 - مارس/آذار 2022 - امركزالديمقراطي العربي، برلين، P142
<https://tinyurl.com/2jgwf3v>

response to the official invitation, a new era of strengthening relations began. Abu Dhabi sought to adopt a more realistic approach in dealing with regional issues, new risks and common areas of approximation.

Important areas in the UAE's approach to Iraq

Security cooperation and countering ISIS: The negative effects caused by the emergence of ISIS in Iraq have spread to GCC countries. Therefore, in 2014, Abu Dhabi joined the campaign against ISIS. The UAE decided to support the Iraqi army.

During Haider al-Abadi's visit to Abu Dhabi in January 2015, UAE tried to restore relations between Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. In the bilateral dimension, he paid attention to the strengthening of security and defense cooperation, sharing of information in the fight against terrorism¹², and allocation of aid to the displaced people¹³.

Even now, cooperation to deal with security challenges, the necessity of security and military cooperation and the exchange of information to fight against terrorism and cases of common interest (Security - Anti-terrorism) are considered by Abu Dhabi in Iraq.

Competition with Tehran and Ankara:

In the past decade, the UAE has tried to compete with Tehran's influence in Iraq in a coordinated way with the Cooperation Council

12. <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2021/4/5/05-04-2021-uae-iraq>

13. <https://tinyurl.com/2ov4emzt>

or separately. Now the UAE is still worried about the increasing power of pro-Iranian groups and their influence on Iraqi government institutions¹⁴.

Although it is unrealistic for Iraq to completely distance itself from Iran, it seems that some in the UAE consider it useful to have a united Iraq with a strong army for the balance of power¹⁵ in the Persian Gulf, and even to revise the structure of the regional system of the Cooperation Council for Iraq's membership. From this point of view, it is very useful to strengthen ties and help to fully return to the Arab environment.

In 2017, Abu Dhabi also accused Turkey of “colonial and competitive behavior”.¹⁶ The UAE still considers some of Iran's and Turkey's approaches as the military intervention of Turkey and Iran, a clear violation of the sovereignty of an Arab country.¹⁷ The UAE has tried to challenge Turkey by approaching its opposition parties¹⁸.

.As some in Iraq believe that Abu Dhabi is giving financial aid to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and numerous money from the UAE have reached the PKK. This approach has caused reactions from Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government.¹⁹

Supporting the expansion of Iraq's relations with Arab

14. <https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Arab-Emirates/Foreign-relations>

15. https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria99_foley01.html

16. <https://tinyurl.com/2m6ro7vp>

17. <https://tinyurl.com/2gdpcdyu>

18. <https://tinyurl.com/2o3nn3u4>

19. <https://tinyurl.com/2qdlcdl4>

countries

Undoubtedly, the UAE's foreign policy is affected by several factors of geographical location, internal stability and security, and securing the economic benefits of being a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The countries of the Cooperation Council used almost the same approach regarding Iraq after 2003, although they could not maintain warm relations with successive Iraqi governments and the structural change in Baghdad provided little opportunity to improve relations, it seems that the reduction of expectations and the acceptance of some of the realities of Iraq has caused the scope of challenges to be reduced.

The change of regional geopolitics and reduction of tension:

Security concerns have always been a part of the United Arab Emirates foreign relations. Indeed, in the early 1970s, there were fears about the lack of continuity of the United Arab Emirates as a state.²⁰ Even now, the foreign policy of the UAE is to contain the effects of various regional crises.

The internal competition between the UAE and Saudi Arabia and the implementation of a more decisive foreign policy of the UAE since 2019,²¹ has made Abu Dhabi reduce its reliance on the support of the United States²² and Riyadh regarding Iraq. An important part of the

20. <http://countrystudies.us/persian-gulf-states/91.htm>

21. <https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Arab-Emirates/Foreign-relations>

22. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/current-iraq-gulf-relations-economics-over-politics/>

UAE's increased attention and reduction of tension with Iraq is part of a big strategy to change the dynamics of the regional power balance and reduce tension in relations with other actors such as Iran, Israel, Turkey and Syria. Abu Dhabi is trying to keep in mind the non-hostile action against Tehran²³ and peace with Tehran in its relations with Iran and Israel.

Supporting Iraq's role as a mediator:

In the past years, Iraq has tried to take a long leap in expanding relations with important and main countries of the Arab world and to have a bridge between Iran and Arab countries to normalize relations, calm the region and reduce the possible effects of tensions on Iraq.²⁴ Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi's efforts to overcome the tension in relations with Iran began after the attack on oil tankers near the coast of the UAE²⁵, Ansarallah's attack on the UAE, and Aramco's oil facilities²⁶. In the meantime, Abu Dhabi is trying to make Iraq play an important role and mediate in reducing the tension between Iran, the GCC, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the United States.

Maintaining diplomatic relations and strengthening the Iraqi government:

Iraq has an embassy in Abu Dhabi and a consulate in Dubai, and the United Arab Emirates has had an embassy in Baghdad and a consulate general in Erbil since 2012. By learning from the experience of past

23. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/86128>

24. <https://tinyurl.com/2olvnqkt>

25. <https://tinyurl.com/2qfsp6ll>

26. <https://tinyurl.com/2fdb7w8o>

fluctuations in relations, Abu Dhabi is trying to prevent breaking ties and maintain diplomatic relations with Iraq. It also seems that Abu Dhabi is interested in developing common interests with Iraq in various fields²⁷, and helping strengthen the Iraqi government by the strategic partnership in the field of modernization of government services and training of forces, helping Iraq to use the UAE government's experience in improving government services and raising its quality, implementing innovative plans, and strategic projects, etc.

Support the presence of Sunni Arabs in the power structure of Iraq:

The UAE has made significant investments to attract the attention of Iraq's Sunni population.²⁸ It seems that in the past years, Abu Dhabi has tried to reduce the influence of Turkey and Muslim Brotherhood movements among Iraqi Sunnis. In this view, the presence of Sunnis in the power structure of Iraq "without rejecting or marginalizing" them would be important. Meanwhile, it prevented the emergence of any extremist group that takes advantage of this situation.

Expansion of economic and trade cooperation:

At the international conference for the reconstruction of Iraq in Kuwait, Abu Dhabi pledged 500 million dollars to Iraq. From 2003 to 2009, investment by UAE companies accounted for half of all investments in the country.²⁹

27. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2021/10/19/great-developments-in-uae-iraq-relations-hailed-at-expo-2020-dubai/>

28. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/how-uae-using-climate-diplomacy-iraq>

29. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/06/29/iraq-as-a-theatre-for-the-gulfs-geostrategic-ambitions/>

The UAE is taking steps to diversify its economy and reduce its dependence on oil.³⁰ The country also the country is trying to invest in areas like extensive efforts to achieve the goals of the 2050 energy strategy of the UAE, the economic vision of 2030 and the promotion of the position in renewable energy, the expansion of ports, commercial infrastructures, increasing the capacity of ports, increasing the growth of the non-oil sector of the knowledge-based economy, and expanding tourism to 2050. In all these areas, Iraq can be an opportunity for cooperation.

Undoubtedly, the common economic interests force Abu Dhabi to establish strong relations with Baghdad. To show itself as a non-threatening economic actor, the UAE has also focused on investing in energy projects and commercial sectors. Abu Dhabi needs to strengthen the stability of the energy sector and ensure the security of Iraq's global energy³¹ supply.

In another dimension, the desire of the Emiratis to participate in the Ports Department of the Iraqi Ministry of Transportation was shown on September 17, 2021. Therefore, areas such as logistical assistance for the development and reconstruction of Iraqi ports, investment studies, management and operation in ports, and development of infrastructure and road and rail networks to Al Faw port are considered. It seems that the UAE is trying to create the UAE-Iraq-Turkey transit corridor.

30.https://www-atlanticcouncil-org.translate.google.com/blogs/energysource/the-uae-s-energy-future-a-long-term-strategy-beyond-hydrocarbons/?_x_tr_sl=en&_x_tr_tl=fa&_x_tr_hl=fa&_x_tr_pto=sc

31.https://www-thenationalnews-com.translate.google.com/opinion/comment/the-uae-is-a-global-role-model-in-sustainability-and-renewable-energy-1.948856?_x_tr_sl=en&_x_tr_tl=fa&_x_tr_hl=fa&_x_tr_pto=sc

Since passing from the Red Sea–Suez Canal–Turkey route already takes 20 days³², this route will be much shorter.

Abu Dhabi uses its economic power to strengthen its influence in Iraq and the Kurdistan region of the country. In July 2017, by investing 5.5 billion dollars; the UAE was among the top foreign investors in Iraqi Kurdistan.³³

Also, Abu Dhabi's effort to open a commercial affiliate in Iraq in July 2008, the presence of more than 100 Emirati companies, A recent investment of 3 billion dollars in Iraqi provinces³⁴, paying attention to the revival of the Arab Economic Cooperation Agreement, developing trade, encouraging investment between the two countries, the agreement to form the Iraq–UAE Business Council and facilitate the procedures,³⁵ all show Abu Dhabi's seriousness in having a wider presence in the Iraqi economy.

The volume of financial exchanges between Iraq and the UAE reached 15 billion dollars in 2020.³⁶ UAE exports to Iraq in 2021 were \$14.25 billion.³⁷ In addition, a large part of Iraq's imports is made by commercial companies located in the UAE. With Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al–Kadhimi welcoming the presence of Emirati companies

32. <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/181035/UAE-Iran-Turkey-transit-corridor-to-become-operational>

33. <https://tinyurl.com/2ps5xboh>

34. <https://tinyurl.com/2j4zuz6f>

35. <https://tinyurl.com/2oago4ze>

36. <https://tinyurl.com/2ktzlrsv>

37. <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-arab-emirates/exports/iraq>

and businessmen³⁸, it seems that Abu Dhabi prefers to increase the number of branches of Emirati banks in Iraq and Iraqi banks in the UAE, and include Iraq in some of the most economic fields. This will make Iraq more dependent on the UAE and will lead the UAE to surpass its competitors.

Strengthening soft power and cultural diplomacy:

For at least the past decade, Abu Dhabi has tried to address soft power approaches and a potential shift from political to economic interests, focusing on media, commerce, entertainment, sports, and education infrastructure, as well as health care in Iraq. The cooperation in dealing with the Corona epidemic during the outbreak of Corona and providing medical equipment, vaccination and providing many different aspects of support to Iraq have been part of the efforts of the UAE³⁹ in the past years.

On the other hand, in the UAE's look at Iraq, it is very important to strengthen the cultural, linguistic and Arab common points and to emphasize the fraternal, historical⁴⁰ and shared destiny ties with the Arabs.

Apart from the previous approaches such as the reward of the United Arab Emirates to the Iraqi football team on July 31, 2007⁴¹, the tripartite cooperation of the UAE with Iraq and "UNESCO" on the study of the preservation and restoration of cultural properties such

38. <https://tinyurl.com/2g9e9zyb>

39. <https://al-ain.com/article/uae-iraq-relations-visit>

40. <https://al-ain.com/article/uae-iraq-relations-visit>

41. https://stringfixer.com/ar/Iraq%E2%80%93United_Arab_Emirates_relations

as the Great Mosque of Al-Nuri and cultural, social and education places in the city of Mosul⁴², “Initiative to revive the spirit of Mosul”, building infrastructures for internally displaced people, etc. are parts of cultural diplomacy and establishing official relations with the people of the UAE in Iraq. In another dimension, the formation of the joint parliamentary friendship committee,⁴³ the positive influence and role of Iraqis living in the UAE,⁴⁴ and the presence of 100–150 thousand Iraqis in the UAE⁴⁵ can be platforms for strengthening cultural cooperation.

Vision

The Iraqi parties and groups pay attention to the type of action and activities of Abu Dhabi in recent years in Iraq with more sensitivity. The UAE’s actions in Iraq have been also the subject of personal attention by Sheikh “Qais Khazali”⁴⁶ and some other Shiite and Iraqi parties. Some Iraqi parties blame the UAE for interfering in Iraq’s internal affairs, trying to appoint pro-UAE governors, behind-the-scenes actions in the 2019 protests, and Financial involvement from Tahnoon Bin Zayed Al Nahyan (National Security Advisor of the United Arab Emirates), influencing tribal leaders. From their point of view, the role of Abu Dhabi in Iraq through its relations and links with several Iraqis,

42. <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/ar-AE/Missions/Baghdad/UAE-Relationships/Bilateral-Relationship>

43. <https://tinyurl.com/2ryscdfc>

44. <https://tinyurl.com/y7un2fqv>

45. <https://www.ipsinternational.org/is-iraq-part-of-the-uae/>

46. <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/senior-iraqi-official:-everyone-knows-uaes-bad-role-in-the-r>

Iraqi personalities, political affairs⁴⁷ and security affairs is scary⁴⁸.

In addition to some revelations about the actions of the UAE to monitor Iraqi figures,⁴⁹ the visa regulations for Iraqis, and the suspension of visas for Iraqi citizens,⁵⁰ have caused reactions in Iraq and its parliamentarians. It seems that Iraqi parties are more sensitive about the type of security, and political and even economic activities of Abu Dhabi in Iraq.

However, it must be said that various internal, regional and international security, political, economic and geopolitical factors and variables affect the future of relations between Iraq and the UAE. In the meantime, due to the not-so-much change of the ruling elite and the foreign policy team of the UAE and the type of goals and foreign policy of this country, it seems that the foreign policy of the UAE in Iraq will not witness any change.

However, moving away from the previous experience of breaking relations and periodic tensions, increasing opportunities and reducing threats will be the main focus of strategies in Iraq. In this situation, Abu Dhabi is likely to pay more attention to economic diplomacy and investment and expand commercial and economic relations with Baghdad.

47. <https://tinyurl.com/2ryscdfe>

48. <https://tinyurl.com/2ryscdfe>

49. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/how-uae-using-climate-diplomacy-iraq>

50. <https://tinyurl.com/2fh3vfef>