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IRAQ AND PAKISTAN AN ASYMMETRIC PARTNERSHIP AT THE HEART OF THE CRISIS

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● **Opinion Article**



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On 7 August 2026 in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan signed the Mecca Joint Deterrence Agreement: a collective defence pact stating that any armed attack on any of the three countries must be treated as an attack on all of them. The alliance brings together Saudi economic power, the world's leading oil exporter; Turkish military strength, the only NATO member in the bloc; and Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, the only one in the Islamic world. The signing came a few months after Pakistan mediated the ceasefire between the United States and Iran, and a few days after Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan publicly declared that the agreement "should not remain limited to three countries". Who will be next? Iraq is not named, but the logic of the new regional architecture being built around the Mecca Agreement points inevitably towards Baghdad. To understand why, one must start with a structural paradox that runs through Iraqi politics in 2026.

The impossible neutrality

Baghdad officially declares neutrality in the conflict between Iran and the USA, but is unable to practise it. This is not the product of a misguided governmental choice nor of a particularly ineffective ruling class: it is a contradiction inscribed in the very architecture of the post-2003 Iraqi State, and understanding it is indispensable to grasping why Iraq needs a partner like Pakistan. The system of *muḥāṣaṣa ṭā'ifiyya* (the confessional distribution of institutional offices among the country's main communities,

which the 2005 Constitution does not formally codify but which practice has made binding) assigns the presidency of the Republic to a Kurd, the presidency of the Council of Ministers to a Shia, and the presidency of parliament to a Sunni. This mechanism, designed to guarantee the representation of all communities after the fall of Saddam Hussein, has over time produced a system in which no relevant political decision can be taken without the consent of all blocs, and in which each bloc has an interest in blocking decisions that do not directly benefit it. The practical result is a structural deadlock: Iraq's ruling class takes months to form a government after each election, six months in the case of the November 2025 elections, and equally long to take foreign policy decisions that would require speed. On the Iran–USA crisis, positions diverge radically: the pro–Iranian Shia factions of the *Al-It̤ār al-Tansīqī* (Coordination Framework), the main Shia parliamentary bloc, which groups the parties close to Tehran and controls the relative majority of parliament, see the conflict as a war against the Shia world; the Sunni communities cannot support openly pro–Iranian positions; the Kurdish parties depend on the American military presence for their security in the north of the country. In this context, neutrality is not a strategy: it is the minimum equilibrium point around which an otherwise impossible coalition holds together. The Popular Mobilisation Forces provide the operational device through which this deadlock is managed. Formally integrated into the Iraqi federal

armed forces, with over 230,000 men and an annual state budget of approximately 3.6 billion dollars, the PMF includes very different factions, some nationalist and integrated into the governmental chain of command, others ideologically and operationally dependent on Tehran. When the latter launched drones against American bases or clashed with Israeli forces, the Baghdad government was able to maintain that these were not acts of the Iraqi State, but rather autonomous actions by groups that (despite receiving public funding) do not operate under the control of the Council of Ministers. All three of the main parties to the conflict struck targets in Iraq during 2026, and the pro-Iranian groups within the PMF systematically violated official neutrality, conducting attacks from Iraqi territory and deteriorating Baghdad's relations both with Washington, which suspended the transfer of dollar assets as a pressure tool, and with the Gulf countries. Prime Minister Zaidi set 30 September as the deadline for disarming all militias present on the territory and reintegrating them into the state security apparatus, but even his own allies within the *Al-Iṭṭār al-Tansīqī* consider it unrealistic. To further complicate the picture, the Iraqi economy entered an acute crisis following the closure of the Strait of Hormuz decreed by Iran in response to the American-Israeli bombardments of 28 February. Iraq depends on oil exports for about 88% of its state revenues, and the closure of the strait effectively zeroed these revenues for weeks, forcing the government to urgently seek alternative

export routes. It is in this context of economic vulnerability and political paralysis that the neutrality imposed on Baghdad acquires, paradoxically, a diplomatic value: a country that does not belong definitively to any alignment, that has ties with everyone and obligations to no one, is a precious interlocutor for anyone wishing to maintain open channels in an increasingly polarised region. An adviser to Prime Minister Zaidi told Chatham House that “Iraq could be a door to open Iran to the West”, a phrase that reveals Baghdad’s awareness of this mediation card as a strategic resource in a game the country cannot win alone.

Pakistan within the Mecca Alliance: the Iranian problem

For Pakistan, the signing of the Mecca Agreement introduces a structural tension that Islamabad will have to manage with extreme care in the months to come. The agreement, whilst not explicitly directed against any specific country, as Turkish Vice-President Cevdet Yilmaz was careful to point out, is in a context in which it was signed that is unequivocal: the Iran–USA war, the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia, and Israeli pressure on Turkey and Qatar make it difficult to ignore the anti–Iranian dimension of the new alliance. And yet Pakistan cannot afford to treat Iran as an enemy, for demographic, religious and diplomatic reasons. On the demographic level, Pakistan is the second country in the world for Shia population after Iran, with a community estimated at between 40 and 50 million faithful, approximately 20% of the total population.

This dimension cannot be separated from domestic politics: Pakistani history is marked by episodes of sectarian violence between Shias and Sunnis, and any government in Islamabad must take into account the sensitivity of the national Shia community when positioning the country in relation to Iran. On the diplomatic level, the Pakistani embassy in Washington has hosted the Iranian section of interests in the United States for decades, an arrangement that has given Islamabad a unique advantage as an intermediary between Tehran and Washington and was decisive in making Pakistan credible as a mediator in the 2026 crisis. Renouncing this channel would mean renouncing one of Islamabad's main diplomatic assets in the new regional geopolitics. It is in this space of tension, between the alliance with Riyadh and Ankara on one side and the link with Tehran on the other, that Iraq becomes indispensable for Pakistan. Iraq is the only regional actor that can simultaneously serve as a channel towards Iran and as a credible interlocutor for the partners of the Mecca Agreement. It has deep ties with Tehran through Shia factions and the PMF, but is not formally aligned with the axis of resistance; it has relations with the Gulf countries through Sunni communities and financial flows; it is Turkey's partner in the region's most ambitious infrastructure project. For a Pakistan that has just assumed the weight of a new regional responsibility without wishing to lose the Iranian channel, having Baghdad as a privileged interlocutor means having a diplomatic

buffer, a space for conversation and mediation that no other country in the region can offer with the same credibility. Iraq is not powerful enough to impose solutions, but it is sufficiently connected to facilitate dialogue between parties that do not speak to each other directly.

The Development Road: the economic geometry that changes everything

The dimension that transforms this analysis from geopolitical to geoeconomic and that could give the Iraq–Pakistan relationship a material basis that has hitherto been lacking is the Development Road. This is a megaproject worth 17 billion dollars, with realistic estimates exceeding 24 billion, that Iraq is constructing to connect the Grand Faw Port of Basra to the Turkish border through 1,200 kilometres of motorways and high-speed railways, with trains designed to reach 300 kilometres per hour. The route passes through ten Iraqi cities (Basra, Nasiriyya, Diwaniyya, Najaf, Karbala, Hilla, Baghdad, Samarra, Tikrit, Mosul) before reaching the border crossing with Turkey at Faysh Khabur and, from there, the Turkish railway network, the Mediterranean port of Mersin and, via Istanbul, the European Union’s customs system. The Grand Faw Port, the southern terminal of the project and destined to become the largest container port in the Middle East, with a capacity of 90 berths capable of surpassing Dubai’s Jebel Ali, is the logistical heart of an infrastructure that aspires to compete with the Suez Canal on Asia–Europe routes, offering shorter

transit times and potentially more competitive tariffs. In 2024, Iraq, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar signed a quadripartite agreement to develop the project, with the UAE and Qatar as strategic financiers and Turkey as the main driving force. In recent weeks, the Zaidi government has established a formal structure for financing and implementation, signalling that the project remains a priority despite the crisis: the first phase is scheduled for 2028. For Pakistan, this infrastructure opens a prospect that no other bilateral relationship in the region can offer. The port of Gwadar, the southern terminal of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and outlet on the Arabian Sea, and the Grand Faw Port of Basra are geographically adjacent and functionally complementary. If connected, these two logistical nodes would create an alternative corridor for Pakistani goods towards European and Mediterranean markets, bypassing traditional maritime routes and reducing dependence on the Suez Canal. Pakistani exports (construction materials, rice, cement, military equipment, textile products) could reach Europe through Iraqi and Turkish territory in significantly less time than routes via the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. At the same time, Iraq has a concrete interest in access to the Pakistani market for its own oil exports: Islamabad is energy–dependent, and the possibility of diversifying its oil supplies through a country with which it has no geopolitical conflicts represents a structural advantage. The Development Road could become the node at which the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, in which Pakistan participates

through CPEC, and the new Middle Eastern logistical architecture, in which Iraq participates through the infrastructure project with Turkey, the UAE and Qatar, are welded together, with Islamabad in the position of a hinge between the two systems.

The Shia dimension: religious infrastructure as a political resource

In this framework, the religious connection between Iraq and Pakistan ceases to be a decorative element and becomes an autonomous political variable that deserves analysis in its complexity. Every year, approximately 200,000 Pakistani pilgrims reach the shrines of Karbala, where Imam Hussein is venerated, and of Najaf, where the mausoleum of Imam Ali is located, bringing with them not only devotion, but also economic resources, relational networks and an affective bond with Iraqi territory that no diplomatic agreement could artificially produce. To these are added the followers of the Qadiriyya (one of the main Sufi brotherhoods, widespread in Pakistan) who each year reach Baghdad to visit the tomb of the order's founder, Abdul Qadir Gilani, with organised caravans that follow routes known for centuries. The presence of Ayatollah Bashir al-Najafi, a marja of Pakistani origin and a leading figure of the Hawza of Najaf, the most authoritative centre of religious studies in the Shia world, is the most eloquent symbol of a connection that crosses national borders and is rooted in religious authority itself. Al-Najafi is not merely a cleric of foreign origin who has taken root in Iraq: he is a living demonstration

of the permeability between the Pakistani Shia community and the structure of Shia religious power worldwide. His authority in Pakistan is not purely spiritual: it shapes political choices, influences networks of khums donation (the religious tithe), and helps define the Pakistani Shia community's position on regional conflicts. This religious geography acquired new political relevance in 2026. Sistani's declaration, rare for an authority that intervenes little in inter-state conflicts, condemning military attacks against Iran, reflects the long-term political doctrine of the Hawza of Najaf and sends signals to the global Shia world, including the Pakistani community. Najaf speaks to the Shia world with an authority that Tehran cannot claim in an equally universal manner: the Iraqi Hawza has historically maintained a position of relative independence from political power, in contrast to the Iranian Vilayat-e faqih, the doctrine of the guardianship of the jurist, which integrates religious and state authority into a single system. This difference is not theologically neutral: in the tradition of the Hawza of Najaf, as represented by Sistani, the highest religious authority need not necessarily govern politically, which allows it to enjoy a universal credibility that crosses national borders and belongs to no single State. For Pakistan, a signatory of the Mecca Agreement with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, but a country with the second largest Shia community in the world, having privileged access to Najaf through the Iraqi channel means being able to manage its own internal contradiction: being within the Sunni alliance without severing the link

with the Shia dimension of Islam. In this sense, Iraq is not only an economic or diplomatic partner: it is a space of identity mediation that Pakistan could not find elsewhere.

An asymmetric but not unbalanced partnership

The picture that emerges is that of an intrinsically asymmetric relationship: Iraq needs Pakistan more than Pakistan needs Iraq, but this does not make it irrecoverably unbalanced. The needs of the two countries intersect with sufficient precision to make the partnership advantageous for both, even without requiring the intensity of a formal alliance. Iraq needs a partner that will not force it to choose between Washington and Tehran, that has a voice in international forums without belonging to any antagonistic regional bloc, and that can open diplomatic spaces that it cannot reach alone. Pakistan meets all three conditions: it has mediated between the USA and Iran, it is a member of the OIC and other Islamic multilateral forums, and in 2026 it demonstrated a diplomatic capacity that no observer would have predicted a year ago. For Baghdad, having Islamabad as a privileged interlocutor means having access to a network of relations extending from Washington to Tehran, from Ankara to Beijing, that can be mobilised in moments of crisis without requiring Baghdad to expose itself directly. For Pakistan, the advantages are more distributed over time but no less real. On the energy level, Iraq is the second-largest OPEC exporter, and Pakistan is structurally dependent on hydrocarbon imports:

diversifying supplies through a country with no geopolitical conflicts with Islamabad is an advantage that needs no explanation. On the military level, the sale of JF-17 Thunder Block III aircraft to Iraq is already an accomplished fact, and contracts for training Iraqi military personnel at Pakistani academies open a relationship of technical dependence that tends to consolidate over time. On the diplomatic level, having Baghdad as an interlocutor in the Arab world, a world with which Islamabad has historically had more formal than substantial relations, represents a lever in multilateral forums. And on the level of the expansion of the Mecca Agreement, Iraq is one of the natural candidates for an enlargement of the alliance: it already has relations with two of the three signatories (Turkey through the Development Road, Saudi Arabia through historical ties and Sunni communities), and Pakistan could play the role of sponsor for Iraqi accession, further strengthening its own position as the pivot of the new regional architecture. Zaidi has inherited an office under siege: a still-incomplete government, militias to be disarmed by an improbable October deadline, relations with Washington to repair, and an economy devastated by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Whether he can transcend the structural constraints of the Iraqi system or become hostage to them will define the country's trajectory in the months to come. But the fragility of the moment does not cancel the solidity of the foundations on which an Iraq-Pakistan partnership could be built: two countries that seek not to choose, that wish to remain at all tables without sitting down

definitively at any of them, and that find in the very asymmetry of their relationship, one needs the other more, but both have something to offer, the most solid premise for a lasting understanding.

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