



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

# The Strategic Dialogue between Iraq and the US: Inevitable Questions

By Ahmad Matar



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# The Strategic Dialogue between Iraq and the US: Inevitable Questions

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By Ahmad Matar\*

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## Summary

On June 10, 2020, the strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States began at the level of technicians and experts, and it will end in August at a summit between the Iraqi Prime Minister and the US President.

The strategic dialogue between the two nations is essential for several reasons: timing, the economic crisis caused by the corona pandemic, the drop of oil prices, and the formation of a new Iraqi government after the popular demonstrations in November of last year against corruption, bad economic conditions, poor services, and the rise of unemployment. The strategic dialogue will lay the foundation for the shape and the nature of Iraq-US relations for the coming years.

Therefore, the Iraqi decision-maker must recall the fall of Mosul and its effects when building an alliance with the US. Mosul is still waiting for its reconstruction, and its people still live in camps under miserable circumstances. Iraqi politicians must put in mind the blood and sacrifices accompanied by the fall and liberation of Mosul and the money spent on the war against ISIS. They must think of this incident because it may happen again.

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The strategic dialogue may be the last opportunity to save and restore Iraq-US relations after more than two years of deterioration between the two countries<sup>1</sup>, which caused Iraq to emerge as a former ungrateful and unworthy ally in Washington.

When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill welcomed an alliance with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, which astonished those familiar with Churchill's aggression and his hatred toward the Soviet Union. He responded, "I'd form an alliance with the devil himself if it helped defeat Hitler."

The most significant obstacle facing this dialogue is the relations between Iraq and Iran and the American Iranian conflict<sup>2</sup>. Thus, once the strategic dialogue begins, we may turn into Americans in the eyes of the Iranians. The Americans may call us Iranians based on the latter influence in Iraq. Then, the dialogue between Baghdad and Washington may turn into a conversation between Tehran and Washington over Iraq.

Therefore, the Iraqi decision-maker (especially after the formation of Mr. Al-Kazemi's government without significant external influence, if not any, for the first time after 2003) will have to persuade the Iranians and the Americans we are Iraqis. We have our interests, and the two nations must respect Iraqi sovereignty and accept that Iraq's interests do not necessarily coincide along the line with the Iranian's or the American's interests.

1. John Hannah , Maseh Zarif : The U.S.-Iraqi Relationship is coming to a head – and that's a good thing, foreign policy, may 4, 2020.

2. Vanda Felbab-Brown: Stuck in the middle: Iraq and the enduring conflict between United States and Iran, BROOKINGS Institute January 29 2020. Read also, <https://www.bayancenter.org/2020/06/6111/>

## **First: Brainstorming for the Iraqi Decision-Makers**

The Iraqi decision-makers must realize three facts:

**First:** Most of the American alliances in the region dated back to the Cold War era and were built on the foundations and necessities of that era. After three decades have passed since the end of the Cold War, the foundations of these connections have eroded, which leaves the United States in need of a network of alliances to match the new geopolitical realities in the Middle East<sup>3</sup>.

**Second:** Iraq lives among strong neighbors, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, which are powerful countries competing for regional influence. The Iraqi decision-maker must settle his mind to make Iraq a match for these powers. Otherwise, Iraq will be an arena and a tool for competition between these three forces<sup>4</sup>.

**Third:** We are in a dialogue with a high power possessing many keys to war and peace in the region and the world. It is necessary to know how these great powers think and how they negotiate<sup>5</sup>.

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3. Shifting Alliances in the middle east, 1918. FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION, 2016. [www.fpa.org/great-decision-2016](http://www.fpa.org/great-decision-2016) .

4. Kevin Newton: An awkward triangle: Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Middle East Institute, Washington 23 may 2019, [www.mei.edu](http://www.mei.edu).

5. Dr. Karrar Anwar Al-Badiri: How do the Americans Negotiate? Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, Baghdad, June 9, 2020. <https://www.bayancenter.org/2020/06/6107/>

After taking these three facts into account, a question must be asked: Is Iraq, with its current political status, and economic and military capabilities able to withstand the ongoing changes that may lead to the formation of a new Middle East? If the answer is yes, we do not need to ally with the US, and we will have to ask another question: How will the American response if Iraq demands the withdrawal of all American forces from the country? To build a preliminary vision of the American intervention considering this scenario, we must ask: What does the United States want from Iraq?

### **Second: Whoever is not with Me is Against Me!**

We will start answering these questions from the last: What does the United States want from Iraq? We must point out that the American alliances in the region are going through a crisis due to the cracks of the foundations of alliances which dated back to the Cold War era. The Soviet threat no longer exists, and the interests of the allies are no longer consistent. For example, Turkey, the second-largest military force in NATO, has found itself on more than one occasion in confrontation with the United States because it interfered in Syria<sup>6</sup> or purchased Russian weapons. The US-Saudi alliance is no better. The US Congress has, on several occasions, enacted harsh and strict laws against Saudi Arabia in response to what it sees as Saudi behaviors that have harmed the interests of the United States. The recent phone call between President Trump and the Saudi Crown

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6. Adam Taylor :uncomfortable facts at the heart of U.S- Turkish relationship, The Washington Post, October 15, 2019. [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) .

Prince Muhammad bin Salman is an example of the crack in the relationship between them. Trump threatened the Prince to withdraw the patriot system if the kingdom does not end its policy of flooding the markets with its oil, which caused many US shale oil companies to go bankrupt<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, the strategic dialogue may be a prelude to formulating an Iraqi–American strategic alliance in the region to cope with the new changes in the Middle East and the world. In the Middle East, the rationale for the zero games is still prevalent<sup>8</sup> (what my opponent wins is a loss for me). Thus, the rule of the regional and international politics in the Middle East will be (whoever is not with me is against me).

Based on this realization, Iraq will have to choose between being an ally of the United States, taking advantage of the alliance and performing the duties of a partner, or being an opponent and bearing the consequences.

### **Third: The Most Promising Ally!**

In the light of the changes that has afflicted the American alliances' system in the region, and given Iraq's vital geographical position and its economic potential and human capabilities, the United States seeks to transform Iraq into a secure and reliable ally in the face of the changes taking place in the region. Especially after the Russian military penetration of the Middle East region

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7. Josie Ensor : US removes patriot antimissile system from Saudi Arabia amid oil dispute, The Telegraph , 7 may 2020. [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk)

8. Micaela Hudson : Middle East Policy: A zero–sum game , Aljazeera, 17 August, 2011. [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com) .

for the first time since the Tsarist era and its establishment of a long-term military presence (for 49 years subject to extension) in Syria<sup>9</sup>. Also, China has penetrated the region economically, and it is just around the corner from dominating it economically.

If the United States aims to turn Iraq into a strategically, why did it destroy it? The United States in World War II struck Japan with two atomic bombs. It approved the Allied plan to adopt strategic bombing against Germany to the point that Dresden's German city burned for seven days from the severity of the bombing. The United States was unsure of the direction these two countries would take after the end of the war. It was not confident with which superpower, the United States, or the Soviet Union, would Japan and Germany ally, especially when the sign of conflict between the two emerging powers started to appear in the last two years of the war.

After the United States confirmed that Japan and Western Germany were willing to start an alliance with the United States, the latter began to help the two countries to rise after the war. The United States went further to rearm Germany and made it a member of NATO in 1955. In two decades, Japan and Germany became two of the strongest global economic centers.

The Iraqi decision-makers should send clear confirmation signals, with no room for interpretation, that Iraq will be in alliance with the United States and will take steps to remove any doubts on the American side regarding Iraq's credibility. Then,

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9. Russia establishing permanent presence at its Syrian bases, Reuters, December 26,2017. [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com) .

the United States will be required to fulfill its promises to provide all forms of support that it has promised before the start of the strategic dialogue, turning Iraq into a strong and reliable ally.

Of course, this support will not be free of charge, nor will it be a matter of altruism by the United States. Instead, American interest relies on making Iraq a reliable partner for the United States in maintaining stability in the Middle East<sup>10</sup>.

#### **Fourth: The Dark Scenario**

We can imagine how the US would react if Iraq asked the United States to leave its land. First, the United States will deprive Iraq of economic and military support, and Iraq will turn to Iran. The US imposing sanctions on Iraq will be very likely<sup>11</sup>, and then the financial and security problems of Iraq will be exacerbated. The Kurds and the Sunnis will want to keep the presence of the US forces<sup>12</sup>. This will threaten the unity and stability of Iraq. As a result, Sunnis may demand the establishment of a Sunni region (to host American troops), with the possibility of a conflict if the central government refuses or prolongs the establishment of a Sunni region. The terrorist challenge is still severe and ongoing, and attacks by ISIS here and there from time to time are clear evidence<sup>13</sup>.

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10. John Hannah , Maseh Zarif, *ibid*.

11. خير الدين المخزومي: العواقب الوخيمة للانسحاب الأمريكي من العراق، معهد واشنطن لسياسات الشرق الأدنى، 3 شباط 2020.

12. On January 5, 2020, the Iraqi parliament voted for the end of US forces presence in Iraq in the absence of Sunnis and Kurds.

13. ديفيد بولوك: ثمانية أسباب لماذا ما تزال الولايات المتحدة والعراق بحاجة إلى بعضهما البعض، معهد واشنطن لسياسات الشرق الأدنى، 9 كانون الثاني 2020.

The Iraqi armed forces gained tremendous experience during the war to liberate the provinces that ISIS had controlled. Still, we cannot deny the support of the international coalition led by the United States was an essential factor in winning the war against ISIS. Military operations and their progress depended on the international coalition in which the United States assisted extensively. Arming the Iraqi army with the American weapons will make the United States' need in the areas of maintenance and training a foregone conclusion<sup>14</sup>.

### **Fifth: Alternatives**

Will Iraq survive in the face of the scenario mentioned above? Iraq's rentier economy is so weak that it cannot secure the salaries of its employees if oil prices fall below \$ 45 per barrel. We all have felt the repercussions of low oil prices and the corona's pandemic on the Iraqi economy. Alternative solutions<sup>15</sup> are either long-term, such as diversifying sources of income and reducing dependence on oil. These are important in all cases, but they will not reduce the scenario above because we need to accomplish this goal. Short-term solutions such as external borrowing will add new burdens to the Iraqi economy. Taking sever measures to cut spending will lead to people's dissatisfaction.

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14. ديفيد بولوك: ثمانية أسباب لماذا ما تزال الولايات المتحدة والعراق بحاجة إلى بعضهما البعض، معهد واشنطن لسياسات الشرق الأدنى، 9 كانون الثاني 2020.

15 أحمد السهيل، معضلات اقتصادية تواجه العراق وأجور الموظفين على حافة الهاوية،  
[www.independantarabia.com](http://www.independantarabia.com)

Some of them will say: Going to China is a great, logical, and irreversible move, and we will diversify alliance options. China differs from the United States because it does not seek a military presence on the lands of its allies – at least for the time being – except that borrowing from them calls for caution, as its record in Africa and West Asia does not bode well. It lends you and floods you with loans until it's sure that you will not be able to repay (and will not be able to), then seize the country's strategic assets for its outstanding debts, and for those who want to make sure, read about the Chinese debt-trap diplomacy<sup>16</sup>. Even China has slowed its economic growth because of the economic sanctions and tariffs the United States imposed on them. China is affected by the US decision and the dollar's hegemony, which is no less influential than the US military hegemony.

Suppose China has good intentions, and we will be careful when borrowing from it. However, what about the security challenges and the need for logistical and air support if Mosul's scenario was repeated? China is concerned at least for the time being with building its trade empire, and it has not ventured, nor will it venture to send a single soldier to any conflict zone even where it has interests. That is why it was able to extend its commercial goods to the hottest regions in the world by preserving the neutral trader's image who does not enter any conflict to protect his trade.

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16. Jonathan W. Rosen: China must be stopped, Zambia Debates the Threat of Debt-Trap Diplomacy, world politics review, December 18, 2018.

<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/27027/china-must-be-stopped-zambia-debates-the-threat-of-debt-trap-diplomacy>

Moreover, the tendency towards China will activate the zero game rules in the region<sup>17</sup>, especially in light of the tension between the United States and China. This would double the risk of venturing into the United States and will threaten the future of the international coalition to fight ISIS in Iraq. The survival of this alliance depends on the United States remaining at its head, as it is the most significant participant. Its withdrawal will mean Iraq will be alone in the face of terrorism. Also, Iraq will have a weak economy in the face of a severe economic crisis.

### **Sixth: Iranian Fears!**

What about Iran's fears of the American presence in Iraq and the US intentions to change the regime in Iran or to destabilize it at the least? First, we should not exaggerate the dangers of the American presence on Iranian national security for several reasons. The American presence in Iraq will not be the only one in the region, as the United States has deployed militarily in Iran's regional surroundings starting from Afghanistan and ending with the Gulf. If we say that we are allies of Iran, the matter will differ from the Iranian point of view. The ally must respect the decision of its ally, and we also have security concerns that push us to ally with the United States. The experience of Mosul's fall alone can persuade the Iranian side of the motives for our decision to ally with the United States. Moreover, Qatar – for example – one of Iran's allies, hosts the largest American base in the Middle East. Qatar is not geographically distant from Iran, so why turn a

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17. أما معنا أو ضدنا: بشأن الصين .. دول الخليج في خطر وأمريكا لن تتهاون، تقرير مترجم مجلة ناشونال إنترست، الحرة

blind eye to the American presence in Qatar, and suspicions and concerns arise from the American presence in Iraq?

Moreover, our choice to ally with the United States does not necessarily mean sacrificing relations with Iran unless Iran chooses to do so. I do not think it will, even if it is in a state of conflict with the United States. Iraq is not the only cause of the Iranian-American conflict. The Iranian-American conflict is due to the outbreak of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and events after that<sup>18</sup>. Suppose the American presence in Iraq is portrayed as the main reason that ignited the Iran-US conflict. In that case, this conflict will end as soon as the American forces exit Iraq, which is very simplistic and not the real cause of the Iranian-American conflict, not our topic in this paper.

Moreover, our alliance with the United States will test the strength of Iraqi-Iranian relations. Iran will understand our motives and our need to ally with the United States, and it is assumed that it will respect our choice and sovereign decision.

Public agreements will organize the outputs of the strategic dialogue (the nature of Iraqi-American relations, the size of the American military presence, and the tasks of the American forces in Iraq). These agreements will be sent to the Iraqi parliament to study, amend its provisions, and then vote to reject it. There is no need to raise any concerns in this regard. Nothing will happen in the dark rooms.

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18. تريتنا بارزي، حلف المصالح المشتركة، التعاملات السرية بين إسرائيل، وإيران، والولايات المتحدة، ترجمة: أمين الأيوبي، الدار العربية للعلوم ناشرون (بيروت 2007).

## **Seventh: What do We Want from the Americans?**

Now that we have begun to negotiate with the Americans and have framed these perceptions, the essential question must be: What does Iraq want from the Americans? It should be noted that an alliance with a superpower with the capabilities of the United States is an opportunity that we must use. The examples of countries that have benefited from their alliance with the United States are obvious.

One of the most important things we should focus on in the strategic dialogue is the following:

**First:** Respecting the sovereignty of Iraq.

**Second:** Helping Iraq to build a diversified economy by rebuilding the sectors of agriculture, industry, and services, as well as the information economy, which helps in diversifying sources of income and reducing the Iraqi economy's dependence on oil. Without a substantial and diversified economy, Iraq will be held hostage to the global oil markets' vagaries. Without a strong and diversified economy, we will not be able to build a modern army, education, health system, and other foundations of a stable state.

**Third:** Helping in build the Iraqi army and support it with modern strategic armament systems.

**Fourth:** Helping in the development of education, research, and development sector, through the exchange of experiences and giving Iraq seats in American universities.

**Fifth:** Supporting Iraq in international organizations and international financial institutions.

## Conclusion

### **The last chance and the must-have alliance.**

The alliance with the United States is a necessity dictated by Iraq's political, economic, and security conditions and its regional environment. Therefore, the strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States is an opportunity we must take advantage of. We have to be aware of the nature of the changes the region and the world are going through that ally and the dialogue with the United States a golden opportunity that may not be repeated. If it is repeated, it may be under worse circumstances than the ones accompanied the fall and liberation of Mosul.

To respond to those who reject the United States (while acknowledging its merits), we have to point out that countries are competing to have good relations with the United States and hosting American forces. In Germany, Poland was quick to announce its willingness to host them. Germany has expressed its dismay and about President Trump's plans to withdraw 9,500 American troops<sup>19</sup> from Germany as Polish concerns over Russian politics escalated<sup>20</sup>.

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19. U.S decision to withdraw troops from Germany unacceptable, Reuters, June 8 2020. [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com) .

20. Alexandra Brozowski: Warsaw hopes to host some of the US troops withdrawn from Germany, euractive June 8 2020. [www.euractive.com](http://www.euractive.com) .

Finally, when calculating the two parties' gains from the alliance, and their need for each other, it must be said that partnerships are means used by countries to maximize their power. According to international alliance theory and history, an alliance of a small state with a superpower will be more beneficial for the small country than for the great one. In return, what will the United States add to the power of Iraq? I imagine the answer is clear. Being in an alliance with the United States is better than considering it as an enemy.