



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

# How India views Iraq and important areas of cooperation between the two countries

Farzad Ramezani Bonesh



Translation and Editing Al-Bayan Center Studies Series

## **About**

Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies is an independent, nonprofit think tank based in Baghdad, Iraq. Its primary mission is to offer an authentic perspective on public and foreign policy issues related to Iraq and the region.

Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

**Copyright © 2022**

---

**[www.bayancenter.org](http://www.bayancenter.org)  
[info@bayancenter.org](mailto:info@bayancenter.org)**

**Since 2014**

# How India views Iraq and important areas of cooperation between the two countries

**Farzad Ramezani Bonesh \***

---

**Past Iraq–India relations:** India has had relations with West Asia since prehistoric times. In ancient times, Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley Civilization had thriving trade relations, and the Islamic period expanded civilizational, cultural, and historical ties. The connection of Indian Muslims with Iraq increased from the late eighteenth century. After India’s independence in 1947, Iraq was one of the countries that began its relations with India; the two countries signed a friendship agreement in 1952.<sup>1</sup> However, relations between the two countries fluctuated in the following decades.

In the 1970s, Iraqi–Indian relations witnessed an important stage in bilateral cooperation in the political, economic and scientific fields<sup>2</sup>, such as the visit of former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to Baghdad. Bilateral relations in the 1980s and 1990s were negatively affected by the Iran–Iraq War, the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq, the Gulf War in 1991, the imposition of sanctions, the war in Iraq, and even India’s interests were harmed. Indian Foreign Minister Suleiman Khurshid’s visit to Iraq in June 2013 was a major step after years of strained relations between the two sides (after 2003).

## Important areas of cooperation between the two countries

**Geopolitics and Politics:** New Delhi’s foreign policy has changed since India’s independence, and its view of its strategic position, energy resources, and areas of economic cooperation has become important.

---

1. [http://www.owlapps.net/owlapps\\_apps/articles?id=1986666&lang=ar](http://www.owlapps.net/owlapps_apps/articles?id=1986666&lang=ar)

2. <https://tinyurl.com/yct4mf4x>

---

\* Senior researcher and analyst of international affairs.

In general, one can see a kind of realism in the policies and ideology of the BJP against Nehru's idealism in the field of foreign policy. They pursue foreign policy apart from any idealism and value-orientation, with goals based on national interests, becoming a world power, economic growth and development, nuclear and military power, and membership in the Security Council, and so on.

In recent years, we have practically witnessed the expansion of economic relations and the deepening and development of the strategic partnership between the US and India.<sup>3</sup> But with the United States's significant decline in the international arena and the rise of emerging powers<sup>4</sup>, India is trying to ensure that the balance of power in the Middle East is not to the detriment of New Delhi. Therefore, according to the 'balance strategy', India has to communicate and interact with various actors in the Middle East.

On the other hand, India, as one of China's main rivals and a key ally of the United States, sees the expanding of China's strategic partnership with Iraq<sup>5</sup>, Quantum mutation<sup>6</sup> of relation between China and Iraq, Iraq's joining to the China's 'One Road-One Belt'<sup>7</sup> initiative, and China's becoming the biggest investor in Iraq<sup>9</sup>, as a threat to the spreading of political and geopolitical role of India in Iraq.

On the other hand, variables such as India not entering into regional conflicts, adopting a policy of neutrality, increasing India's economic

---

3 . <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-india-relations>

4. <https://democraticac.de/?p=67874>

5. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-08/18/c\\_1310135063.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-08/18/c_1310135063.htm)

6. <http://www.xinhuanet.com/webSkipping.htm>

7. [https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/projects/story/Iraq\\_signs\\_eight\\_agreements\\_with\\_China-ZAWYA20190930052019/](https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/projects/story/Iraq_signs_eight_agreements_with_China-ZAWYA20190930052019/)

8. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/a-quantum-leap-forward-chinese-influence-grows-in-iraqs-oil-market/>

9. <https://english.alarabiya.net/views/2013/03/16/China-in-Iraq-Winning-Without-a-War>

power, and playing a global role in international developments have made Iraq to pay attention to its relations with India. The increasing of India's position and gain key components of power, such as size, population and military and nuclear power, membership in the BRICS, and participation in international forums are so important for Iraq. Iraqis are also seeking a balance in relations with the world's major powers and actors as the world moves toward a multipolar model. Therefore, the expansion of relations with India is seen as necessary.

**Economic and trade variables:** India attaches importance to expanding economic diplomacy with Iraq based on its foreign policy interests. Following the defeat of ISIS in late 2017, the opportunity arose to begin Iraq's reconstruction<sup>10</sup> and reduce the country's economic needs and problems. Despite a rebuilding plan of Iraq's central government, Iraqi politicians have also focused on India, to meet their needs. India declared its interest in the reconstruction of Iraq, at the Kuwait International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq in February 2018.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the Iraqi government is trying to create an economic revolution. Iraq is also a consumer country. Therefore, using various geopolitical factors; India can take full advantage of the Iraqi market and strengthen its place in the country with its huge and long-term investments.

The economic structure of the two countries is complementary and can help the two countries to cooperate in various fields. Direct foreign investment by Middle Eastern countries has jumped significantly in India. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have pledged more than \$170 billion in investment in India in recent years. There are many opportunities for Iraq to invest in India in health and pharmaceutical industries (the

---

10. <https://tinyurl.com/yct4mf4x>

11. <https://www.eoibaghdad.gov.in/page/india-iraq-relations/>

center of pharmaceutical production in the world), production of health and medical products, technology, etc.

Baghdad, on the other hand, needs India's broader willingness in Iraq to diversify economic partnerships, meet domestic demand, rehabilitate dilapidated infrastructure<sup>12</sup>, the \$88 billion rebuilding plan<sup>13</sup> after the ISIS, and so on. Indian companies can make a significant contribution to the development of technology, electricity generation, agriculture, a profitable technical engineering market, and Iraqi projects.<sup>14</sup>

Bilateral trade has steadily increased since 2010.<sup>15</sup> Bilateral trade in the fiscal year 2020–21 amounted to \$15.78 billion, accounting for about 2.31% of India's total foreign trade (which makes Iraq, India's 11th largest trading partner).<sup>16</sup> India also imports goods such as raw wool, sulfur, etc. from Iraq. India exports to Iraq are also wider and include pharmaceuticals, agricultural chemicals, cosmetics, machine tools, machinery and electrical tools, etc.<sup>17</sup>

The opening of the Indian Consulate in Erbil in 2016,<sup>18</sup> easing the conditions for the Indian citizens to travel to Iraq in 2019, increasing Iraq Airways and Air India flights, facilitating citizens' air travel, playing a greater role in the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), the Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO)<sup>19</sup> Trade Promotion

---

12. <https://democraticac.de/?p=75344>

13. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/mpoam18iraqirqks-913fin.pdf>

14. <https://tinyurl.com/y75uss5f>

15. <https://democraticac.de/?p=75347>

16. <https://www.eoibaghdad.gov.in/page/india-iraq-relations/>

17. <https://www.eoibaghdad.gov.in/page/india-iraq-relations/>

18. <https://www.eoibaghdad.gov.in/page/india-iraq-relations/>

19. <https://www.fieo.org/Offrings-from-Indian-Exporters.php>

Council of India (TPCI)<sup>20</sup> etc. can expand economic relations between the two sides.

Global remittances of India's diaspora to the country have increased to about \$ 79 billion<sup>21</sup>. Previously, more than 80,000 Indians lived in Iraq. But with the deteriorating security situation, they left the country. The number of Indian workers increased with the revision of the Indian government's recommendation for a trip to Iraq in 2019. Although the total number of Indians in Iraq is estimated at 10,000<sup>22</sup> to 17,000<sup>23</sup>, they seem to be rapidly expanding the Indian community by increasing India's role in Iraq.

**Energy and India–Iraqi relations** :The main part of the Iraq's export revenue and central government revenue comes from oil. Iraq, with its damaged infrastructure, is eager to expand its oil industry by gaining India's support. India will become the largest importer of oil by 2050. India's 2025 Hydrocarbon Vision Document emphasizes the diversification of energy import sources, and energy security is crucial to that. <sup>24</sup>Therefore, geographical location, oil and gas resources (Iraqi oil is about 150 billion barrels of total world oil) are of interest to India.

In contrast, while Chinese companies (\$ 20 billion) are Iraq's largest investor in energy, <sup>25</sup> India does not want to be a complete loser in the competition with China. India is one of the major importers and

---

20. <https://www.tpci.in/about-us/about-tpci/>

21. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/indias-look-west-policy-middle-east-under-modi>

22. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral\\_Brief\\_iraq.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral_Brief_iraq.pdf)

23. <https://www.eoibaghdad.gov.in/page/india-iraq-relations/>

24. <https://democraticac.de/?p=67874>

25. [http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctarabic/2018/wmdslzdf/201807/t20180731\\_800137002.html](http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctarabic/2018/wmdslzdf/201807/t20180731_800137002.html)

consumers of oil in the world. Iraq's oil exports to India in 2020 met 25% of India's oil needs. .<sup>26</sup> Iraq became India's largest supplier of crude oil in 2018 and has maintained its position in fiscal year 2020–21.<sup>27</sup>

Iraq's invitation to India to invest in the energy sector,<sup>28</sup> Baghdad's plan to achieve higher oil production, and Iraq's plan to build Iraqi oil reservoirs in Asian countries could be a good opportunity for India to invest and increase the role of energy in relations between the two countries.

**The role of soft power in relationships:** India enjoys its well-known capital and soft power in the Middle East compared to some other actors, The country's neutrality has made it a mediator and safe country. Cultural nationalism has increased in India in recent years. Indian cultural products, Indian and Bollywood films, yoga education, the policy of expanding "medical tourism", the world's most powerful higher education sector (after China and the United States), etc. can increase India's attractiveness in Iraq. In contrast, Sheikh Sayyid Abdullah Qadir Al Gilani<sup>29</sup> has a large fan base in India. Also, about 30,000–4,000 Indian<sup>30</sup> Muslims visit Iraq annually to visit Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf and Samarra.

**Platforms for defense–security cooperation:** Since independence, India has also faced the challenge of extremist Islamism and confrontation with separatism, terrorism, and transnational organized crime. The BJP also has a security-oriented look. It is

---

26. <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Iraq-Is-Losing-Market-Share-In-European-Oil-Markets.html>. <https://tinyurl.com/y8yxywln>

27. <https://www.coibaghdad.gov.in/page/india-iraq-relations/>

28. <https://tinyurl.com/yadw6ljh>

29. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral\\_Brief\\_iraq.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral_Brief_iraq.pdf)

30. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral\\_Brief\\_iraq.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral_Brief_iraq.pdf)



important for India's national security to prevent the growth of radical groups such as ISIS. The challenges of terrorism in Iraq affected the presence of India in the country from 2005 to 2011<sup>31</sup> and after the rise of ISIS.

India is concerned about joining of its nationals to the extremist groups abroad, such as ISIS, Pakistan supporting jihadist groups, cooperating with Pakistani and Arab nationals, and expanding communication networks by Indian terrorists. Therefore, efforts to combat this threat include the areas of terrorist financing, individuals and travel routes. New Delhi wants to prevent the country from being targeted by Iraqi terrorist groups.<sup>32</sup>

ISIS in Iraq is a clear threat to India's security. Therefore, India supported Iraq's efforts to get rid of terrorism (ISIS) at the United Nations.<sup>33</sup> The Indian Ministry of Defense official's three visits to Iraq after the liberation of Mosul in July 2017, October 2017 and January 2018<sup>34</sup> reflect India's focus on security cooperation.

---

31. <https://democraticac.de/?p=75347>

32. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/456695/amp>

33. <https://democraticac.de/?p=75347>

34. <https://www.eoibaghdad.gov.in/page/india-iraq-relations/>

## **Factors affecting the perspective of relationships**

\*\*\*\*\*The United States, Europe, and many other actors seem to want India to play a “more active role in the Middle East<sup>35</sup>”. India is moving in the direction of cooperation with the United States, and assessments of the regional power balance could lead India to deeper strategic cooperation with Baghdad.

\*\*\*\*\*Indian diplomacy under the Narendra Modi government will be more pragmatic, more active in the Middle East. Countries’ lack of confidence in the US commitment and the loss of Pakistan as a credible security provider <sup>36</sup> could add to India’s role in the region and relations with Iraq.

\*\*\*\*\*The current level of relations between India and Iraq is not favorable and efforts are being made to increase cooperation to the highest level.

\*\*\*\*\*The consequences of the crisis in the Middle East could be significant for India’s energy security, rising global prices and secure access to India’s energy resources.

\*\*\*\*\*The slump in Iraq’s economic growth will lead to lower demand for Indian migrant labor.

\*\*\*\*\*On the other hand, Iraq emphasizes its peaceful foreign policy with the aim of normalizing its relations with the international community on the basis of cooperation, respect for mutual interests and caring for them in accordance with international law, and so on<sup>37</sup>. The

---

35. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/think-west-go-west-origins-and-implications-indias-west-asia-policy-under-modi-part-i>

36. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/think-west-go-west-origins-and-implications-indias-west-asia-policy-under-modi-part-i>

37. [https://web.archive.org/web/20191211001758/https://www.mofa.gov.iq/delhi/?page\\_id=346](https://web.archive.org/web/20191211001758/https://www.mofa.gov.iq/delhi/?page_id=346)

development of relations between Iraq and India will help to establish balanced foreign relations of Iraq.<sup>38</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*India can play a positive role in the priorities and goals of Iraq's foreign policy, maintaining Iraq's security and stability, and maintaining its territorial integrity.

\*\*\*\*\*High-level meetings between the two countries' leaders in recent years, such as the visit of the Indian Foreign Minister to Iraq in September 2019<sup>39</sup>, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April 2018, along with parliamentary exchanges and a parliamentary friendship group, could be under consideration more.

\*\*\*\*\*India is an advanced country in the field of technology, space, nuclear energy, etc. Iraq needs India to rebuild and gain international and Asian influence. There are many areas of mutual interest. These areas need serious efforts to strengthen and develop relationships in the coming years.

\*\*\*\*\*Military training, joint research, co-operation and co-ordination in the fight against terrorism and the exchange of views between Iraq and India could be on the focus of both sides' security and strategic policies. The two countries can pay attention to a 21 Articles Joint Declaration about the exchange of counter-terrorism information and to achieve to a strategic partnership<sup>40</sup>, to increase their cooperation. Baghdad can help India by working with New Delhi on extremist groups such as ISIS.

\*\*\*\*\*If Baghdad is to pay attention to the expansion of relations with New Delhi, it should not look at Kashmir and India's internal

---

38. <https://www.amazon.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA->

39. <https://www.eoibaghdad.gov.in/page/india-iraq-relations/>

40. <https://tinyurl.com/yct4mf4x>

developments in the form of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation or bilateral relations through the lens of Islamabad.

\*\*\*\*\*Baghdad's relationship with India is not destructive, and the most important joint security issue with India is the issue of religious extremism. Despite the killing of Indian citizens after ISIS attacks, relations between Iraq and India have not been strained. India is now looking forward to the early formation of a government in Iraq<sup>41</sup> and greater stability in the Middle Eastern country to increase cooperation.

---

41. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/looking-forward-to-early-formation-of-govt-in-iraq-india-at-unsco-briefing-101637717300015.html>