



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

# Russia's goals and approach to Iraq

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Al-Bayan Center Studies Series

## **About**

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

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**Since 2014**

# Russia's goals and approach to Iraq

**Farzad Ramezani Bonesh \***

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## History of the relationship

Soviet-Iraqi relations were established on September 9, 1944, severed in 1955, and rebuilt in July 1958<sup>1</sup>. Cooperation between the two countries, despite some ups and downs, was generally positive, and Baghdad was considered one of the most important Soviet partners in the Arab world. The signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviet Union and Iraq in April 1972 was a strong legal basis for relations between the two countries.

The occupation of Kuwait by Iraq in August 1990, Soviet support for UN Security Council resolutions against Iraq, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and international sanctions on Iraq negatively affected strong bilateral relations. But the US invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime in 2003 marked the end of Russian-Iraqi unity.

Despite Russian opposition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Moscow adjusted to its previous position and cooperated with the new Iraqi government. The Russian Consulate General in Erbil (Iraqi Kurdistan) in November 2007, and the Russian Consulate General in the southern Iraqi city of Basra in August 2011, were opened.<sup>2</sup>

From 2003 to 2011, we saw Russia play a minimal role<sup>3</sup> in post-Saddam Iraq. The \$ 4 billion arms deal with the Iraqi government in 2012 made Iraq the second largest buyer of Russian weapons. Russia-Iraq relations are affected by important variables of geopolitical and

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1. <http://www.rirbc.ru/ob-irake/sotrudnichestvo-s-rf.html>

2. <http://www.rirbc.ru/ob-irake/sotrudnichestvo-s-rf.html>

3. <http://ensani.ir/file/download/article/1608543803-10054-99-1-4.pdf><https://warsawinstitute.org/oil-tanks-russians-strengthen>

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economic competition.

The agreement on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation on August 1993, The Cooperation Agreement on the Construction of Facilities in the Oil and Gas Industry on April 1995 and Debt Settlement Agreement on Previous Loans on February 2008<sup>4</sup> all have been Part of the Joint Bilateral Agreements in diplomatic Relations.

### **Political and geopolitical approach and goals**

Russia, which has long dreamed of returning to the position of great power, has been pursuing its role as a counterweight to the United States, exploiting the shortcomings of Western policies in the Middle East. Part of Russia's policy toward Iraq has always been defined by how it relates to the West and its return as an important geopolitical player.

Russia is also seeking a position in accordance with its capabilities in the Middle East, given its historical, territorial, military power, and permanent membership in the UN Security Council. It pursues this approach by insisting on maintaining red lines, striking a balance between all actors, and emphasizing commonalities rather than differences.

In 2018, Putin noted that “he would reverse the collapse of the Soviet Union if he had a chance to alter modern Russian history. <sup>5</sup>In this regard, nostalgic supporters of the Soviet era want to completely” restore “Russian influence in Iraq. They support a pragmatic alliance with Iran as a balance against the United States and opposition to the partition of Iraq into smaller states .<sup>6</sup>Russia is now seeking to restore the balance of power in the face of the expansion of NATO and the

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4. <http://www.rirbc.ru/ob-irake/sotrudnichestvo-s-rf.html>

5. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-election-putin-idUSKCN1GE2TF>

6. <https://rg.ru/2022/03/20/zhirinovskij-plany-ssha-po-razdeleniiu-iraka-na-malenkie-gosudarstva-provalilis.html>

European Union and the United States in the region.

US policy and the reduction of the presence in the Middle East is an opportunity to expand Moscow's role in the region (regardless of the US replacement). Russia has no major ideological component to its foreign policy toward the Middle East. Therefore, Russia has maintained implicit (and semi-formal) contact with all parties and, by emphasizing Iraq's territorial integrity, has developed good relations with the Kurdish region. Even the Kremlin does not miss the opportunity to intervention, whenever tensions rise between Baghdad or Erbil and Washington<sup>7</sup> . Also, with the continuation of good relations, exchanges<sup>8</sup> of views with Kurdish leaders, or approaches such as preventing a Turkish invasion of northeastern Syria<sup>9</sup>, special attention has been paid to expanding relations with the Iraqi Kurdish region.

In the diplomatic dimension, Moscow supports the actions of the Iraqi authorities aimed at restoring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. In 2015, at the invitation of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar Al-Ebadi paid a visit and discussed issues of bilateral cooperation and the international agenda.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, the presence of various delegations and officials in Iraq, the meeting of Bogdanov, the special envoy of the President of Russia, with Barham Salih , the President and Prime Minister of Iraq, inviting of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi to visit Moscow<sup>11</sup> by Putin, and the invitation of Russian President Vladimir Putin to visit Baghdad have been other results of Moscow's focus on Iraq.

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7. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-russias-great-power-game-iraq-matters>

8. <https://tinyurl.com/285dzg6s>

9. [https://www-rudawarabia-net.translate.google.com/arabic/interview/03112021?\\_x\\_tr\\_sl=ar&\\_x\\_tr\\_tl=fa&\\_x\\_tr\\_hl=fa&\\_x\\_tr\\_pto=sc](https://www-rudawarabia-net.translate.google.com/arabic/interview/03112021?_x_tr_sl=ar&_x_tr_tl=fa&_x_tr_hl=fa&_x_tr_pto=sc)

10. <https://ria.ru/20170723/1498945524.html>

11. <https://tinyurl.com/2c2u968r>

## **Security and defense approach**

Having 30–50 million Muslims, one of the perspectives of the Russian national document is the fighting against terrorism. The new Russia has faced separatism since the 1990s, financial support from some countries for the spread of Salafi Islam, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the recruitment of Russian volunteers to ISIS and other extremist groups.

It is important to understand the security threat in determining Russian alliances. Therefore, with the cooperation of Russia with the Iraqi government and the quadripartite intelligence center, including Moscow, Baghdad, Damascus and Tehran, a command center in Baghdad<sup>12</sup> was established in accordance with the intelligence sharing agreement.<sup>13</sup>

The role of Iraq to following up the news of the terrorist group of ISIS<sup>14</sup> and the importance of the quadripartite security headquarters were further highlighted by the neutralization of terrorist operations against the Orthodox Church in the Crimean Peninsula<sup>15</sup>.

This approach, along with the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI)<sup>16</sup> in Baghdad in October 2018, could prevent ISIS from returning to Iraq. Russia is also trying to limit the US unilateral role in Iraq by entering into Iraqi political and security relations<sup>17</sup>, and this will affect the strategic structure of the Middle East.

The previous Iraqi regime supplied all of the Iraqi army's main

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12. <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-importance-of-russia-s-growing-footprint-in-iraq-40054>

13. <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/125648>

14. <https://tinyurl.com/296w5bxv>

15. <https://tinyurl.com/29c7f8et>

16. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_166936.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166936.htm)

17. <https://democraticac.de/?p=75336>

weapons from Russia, and many are still in use. Russia's efforts have accelerated since 2014, when Iraq needed immediate assistance to fight ISIS, and delaying the military aid by Washington<sup>18</sup>.

The agreement to supply more than 10 Su-25 attack aircraft in 2014, the delivery of modern air defense systems to Baghdad, the military-technical cooperation agreement in 2015, the contract for the supply of T-90 tanks in 2017 are part of the preparations to answer Iraq's need for Russian-made<sup>19</sup> military products.

In addition, Iraqis are interested in acquiring the services of Russian fifth-generation Su-57<sup>20</sup> fighter jets, purchasing defense systems such as the S-400, But diversifying their military supply chains and the risk of US reaction through sanctions<sup>21</sup> (CAATSA) are a barrier to the growing of military and weapons relations.

### **Nuclear approach**

The former reactors in Iraq were Soviet-made. The Iraqi Radioactive Regulatory Authority had previously stated its intention to build eight nuclear reactors to generate about 11 gigawatts of electricity.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, Russia-Atom's cooperation with Iraq in the field of nuclear, construction of 8 reactors to supply the country with electricity to supply 25% of its energy needs in 2030 is part of Moscow's plan in Iraq.

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18. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-russias-great-power-game-iraq-matters>

19. <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-and-iraq-deepen-energy-military-ties/>

20. <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/125648>

21. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/russias-influence-iraq-challenge-us>

22. <https://tinyurl.com/236ov6vp>

## **Cultural and social approach**

Russia has used soft power as part of its strategic goals. In fact, its Muslim population of 30–50 million is a source of soft power and has an active role in Russia’s foreign policy in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Moscow emphasizes the support of a common Islamic heritage through people-to-people diplomacy, the creation of favorable conditions for cooperation, exchange in all cultural and artistic fields<sup>24</sup>, and the annual increase in scholarships for Iraqi students<sup>25</sup>.

## **Economic and energy approach**

With the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003, Russia lost a powerful client. Exports to Iraq by that year accounted for more than 50 percent of Russia’s total exports to the region, and Russia was Iraq’s first trading partner. Trade between the two countries declined in 2003; eight times lower than in 1989<sup>26</sup>. Russia’s losses in Iraq is estimated at billions of dollars. In 2008, Vladimir Putin wrote off \$ 12.9 billion in Soviet-era Iraqi debt,<sup>27</sup> For the past two decades, Russia has focused on areas of interest in Iraq: nuclear energy, oil and gas, petrochemicals, weapons and grain. Russia intends to expand its economic opportunities.

On the one hand, having discovered gas and oil reserves, its oil extraction rate, significant underdeveloped oil and gas reserves, and low extraction costs, Iraq is very attractive.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Russia

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23. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-have-russias-policies-middle-east-changed-arab-uprisings-0>

24. <https://ria.ru/20170723/1498945524.html>

25. <https://tinyurl.com/2447ncko>

26. <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/125648>

27. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/lmadha-tutbr-lbt-qlqwt-alzmy-lrwsya-fy-araq-dhat-ahmwyt>

28. <https://www.scfr.ir/en/economy/134250/future-cooperation-of-iraq-russia-on-energy-sector/>



intends to work closely with Iraq in the OPEC+ agreement in order to maintain stability in the global energy market.

Energy is a key part of the Kremlin's influence in Iraq, and Moscow's energy contracts became more strategic in early 2017.<sup>29</sup> In recent years, the departure of major Western oil companies from the region has also been an opportunity for Russian companies<sup>30</sup> to take their place. In this regard, supporting the activities of Russian oil and gas companies (such as Lukoil and Gazprom) in Iraq, strengthening its position by buying shares in the Iraqi oil sector<sup>31</sup>, advancing Russian companies' interactions with the Kurdistan region, investing \$ 13 billion in companies Russia in Iraq, Russia plans to expand \$ 45 billion in investment in Iraq by 2035<sup>32</sup>.

On the other hand, Russian officials are seeking the implementation of 'economic diplomacy and the meeting of the government commission with Iraq to strengthen economic cooperation, the signing of 16 agreements and memoranda of understanding in the field of telecommunications, trade, energy, electricity, production, information technology, transportation and banking, facilitating visa issuance to enter Iraq and entry visas for investors and diplomats from the two countries.

Russia is also paying attention to considering the diversification of Russian-Iraqi economic relations, regarding the possibility of investing in road and railway projects, as well as the extraction of metals and hydrocarbons in Iraq<sup>33</sup>, significant reserves of sulfur, phosphorite, salt

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29. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-russias-great-power-game-iraq-matters>

30. <https://tinyurl.com/27su3rbk>

31. <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-and-iraq-deepen-energy-military-ties/>

32. [https://oilcapital.ru/article/general/01-11-2019/novyy-neftyanoy-pohod-v-irak?\\_x\\_tr\\_sl=ru&\\_x\\_tr\\_tl=fa&\\_x\\_tr\\_hl=fa&\\_x\\_tr\\_pto=sc](https://oilcapital.ru/article/general/01-11-2019/novyy-neftyanoy-pohod-v-irak?_x_tr_sl=ru&_x_tr_tl=fa&_x_tr_hl=fa&_x_tr_pto=sc)

33. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4364117>

rock and geological<sup>34</sup> exploration of Iraqi soil.

The main parts of Russian exports to Iraq in 2016 were machinery, equipment and vehicles. And the major parts of Russian imports from Iraq in 2016, were products of the chemical industry.<sup>35</sup> The volume of trade between Baghdad and Moscow is about one and a half billion dollars. In addition, ongoing arms deals are worth more than \$ 4 billion.<sup>36</sup> Although, some other sources<sup>37</sup> have underestimated it in recent years, but Russia's exports to Iraq in 2020 were \$ 127 million.

### **Vision**

The existing trade and economic potential has not been fully used and in practice the volume of relations between the two countries and the ranking of the two countries among the major economic partners of them is much less than previous periods. Although Moscow's desire is to maintain and expand its \$14 billion portfolio in Iraq (mostly in the oil and gas sector), given the potential for long-term sanctions on Moscow, Iraq is likely to make efforts to diversify and reduce Gradually rely on Russian investment.

Iraq is also wary<sup>38</sup> toward the deepening economic ties with Russia, Russian investment, remittances to Russia, and passing Western sanctions.

Russia has its own interpretation of the Iraqi constitution and does not pay attention to the pressures of the Iraqi central government, The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has already signed contracts with major Russian oil and gas companies.<sup>39</sup> But new Russian investment will also be affected by sanctions. Also, despite Russia's greater flexibility and lower conditions<sup>40</sup> for arms purchases or

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34. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4364117>

35. <https://ria.ru/20170723/1498945524.html>

36. <https://elaph.com/Web/News/2022/03/1467140.html>

37. <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/exports/iraq>

38. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-does-russias-war-ukraine-mean-iraq>

39. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/010320221>

40. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russia-in-the-middle-east-a-source-of-stability-or-a-pot-stirrer/>

military capability, the deterrent effect of sanctions on Iraq's arms purchases by Iraq may become more apparent, and Countering the US Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) <sup>41</sup> could prevent arms purchases. However, the lower efficiency of Russian weapons in the Ukraine war compared to other versions may reduce Iraq's willingness to buy Russian weapons.

Politically and geopolitic ally, despite Iraq's abstention<sup>42</sup> from the UN General Assembly resolution on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, if tensions worsen and tensions between Russia and the West escalate, Iraq is unlikely to be in a more proactive position with Russia. This can prevent the expansion of bilateral political and diplomatic relations.

What is clear is that the outlook for relations between the two countries is tied to Russia's view of Iraq and various bilateral and international geopolitical, political, security, military and economic variables. In the short term, any outcome of the Ukraine crisis and Russian sanctions could have a significant negative or positive impact on Russia-Iraq relations. In fact, the continuation of the current situation and the war will increase the challenges in the relations, and any ceasefire and peace in the crisis in Ukraine can draw the attention of Moscow and Baghdad to the increase of relations.

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41. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-does-russias-war-ukraine-mean-iraq>

42. <https://tinyurl.com/y685vt3c>

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-resolution-ukraine-how-did-middle-east-vote>