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Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

France's Approach in Iraq

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Since 2014

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In general, the history of the relations between Mesopotamia and ancient France should be searched in the civilizational connections of the two regions in the previous millennium. However, the roots of diplomatic relations between Iraq and France go back to Christian missionaries in Basra in 1623 AD.¹ As French interest in the region grew, the clergy performed consular duties in Paris between 1674 and 1739. During this period, Iraq's geopolitical, military-political, and commercial importance increased for the French rulers and their naval forces in the Indian Ocean. In the 20th century, France played a major role in separating Iraq from the Ottoman Empire. Later, with the complete independence of Iraq as the Kingdom of Iraq in 1932,² France maintained its relations with the Kingdom of Iraq.

The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the two countries was signed in 1968.³ Saddam Hussein's first visit to Paris in 1972 led to the consolidation of oil relations between the two countries.⁴ However, with the visit of Jacques Chirac to Iraq in 1974, the start of the cooperation between France and Iraq in the field of nuclear energy, and then the signing of the agreement to supply French military equipment, the construction of the nuclear reactor began. The golden era of Iraq-France relations became more apparent in the second half of the 1970s.

These friendly and "exceptional" relations of the leaders, from the

1. https://al-akhbar.com/Literature_Arts/28449

2. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/iraq/iraqs-new-independence-day-reclaiming-a-nations-lost-identity/>

3. <https://tinyurl.com/2huqqqv>

4. <https://tinyurl.com/2e4v2p8z>

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establishment and operation of the nuclear power plant to France's extensive military support for Iraq in the Iraq-Iran war, continued. Although the hostage-taking of the Iraqi embassy in Paris created some ambiguity, the Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988 intensified bilateral trade, military, and nuclear technology ties, in addition to Iraq's debt to France.

In fact, the relationship turned into a true alliance⁵ in the mid-eighties. Although France became one of the most important actors in Iraq, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 damaged this relationship; Therefore, relations began to deteriorate.⁶ In 1991, France sided with the United States in the international military coalition against Iraq.

Because of French opposition to the intervention in Iraq, Operation Desert Storm,⁷ and Baghdad's efforts to rebuild relations, some relations between Paris and Baghdad were reopened in the mid-1990s. But with various crises in Iraq's relations with the West, numerous sanctions, and the WMDs case; All ties and forms of cooperation were severed, until 1998.

In the meantime, despite the desire of France to lift the sanctions and the opposition of French President Jacques Chirac to the occupation of Iraq by the United States in 2003, France was placed on the sidelines of Iraqi affairs after a long period of close relations. Therefore, the stagnation of relations continued until the time of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁸

5. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Franco-Iraqi-relations-and-Fifth-Republic-foreign-Styan/ccca6f34243bdf5dd5996e15693d1a4dbc362d1d>

6. <https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/11007657>

7. <https://www.prcprague.cz/fcdataset/france-iraq>

8. <https://tinyurl.com/2huqqvqb>

Diplomatic Relations in The New Era

With the overthrow of Saddam and the beginning of a new era in Iraq, France decided to establish diplomatic relations with the country's interim government. Therefore, in January 2005, the former president of Iraq, Ghazi Mashal Ajil al-Yawer, went to Paris. France also reduced Iraq's debt by 4 billion euros at the Paris Club (in December 2005).⁹ Since 2004, Iraq has had an embassy in Paris. In contrast, France had an embassy in Baghdad and then a consulate general was added in Erbil. Also, in the past decade, the economic departments, the cultural cooperation liaison, the defense department, and the business center of the French diplomatic mission¹⁰ in Iraq have been strengthened. The French community in Iraq is limited and very small, but the Iraqi community in France is about 3900.¹¹

In fact, in the last two decades, especially since 2007, we witnessed various and numerous visits of high French officials such as the president, prime minister, and various ministers such as the minister of foreign affairs, foreign trade, defense,¹² etc., to Iraq. These visits are seen as steps by Paris to revive France's role in Iraq. In this regard, France recently congratulated¹³ the election of Abdul Latif Rashid as the new president of Iraq and the appointment of Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani¹⁴ as the prime minister.

9. <https://tinyurl.com/2f847nfv>

10. <https://tinyurl.com/2qbkjbhu>

11. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/irak/rerelations-bilaterales/>

12. <https://iq.ambafrance.org/-Visites-bilaterales->

13. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/irak/>

14. <https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q3700793>

Economic Approach and Relations

France is among the top seven economies in the world, with a gross domestic product of 2937 billion dollars in 2021, and constitutes 2.20% of the world economy. As in the past decades, this country has adjusted an important part of its foreign policy based on economic priorities, including in the Middle East. In fact, in line with the major plans of the French government since 2017, such as turning France into an industrial power competing with Germany, high economic growth, reducing the budget deficit, reducing the public debt of the government, reducing the unemployment rate, etc., it needs to pay more attention to the OPEC countries and Iraq as well. Therefore, many goals and approaches of this country in the field of foreign policy with Iraq are tied to important economic interests.

As the second OPEC oil producer and one of the world's largest oil reserves, Iraq will continue to be of strategic importance to France.¹⁵ France was one of the main partners of Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s,¹⁶ the high volume of relations until the 1990s was somehow in competition with the similar relations between Iraq and the Soviet Union. But economic sanctions in the 1990s and the occurrence of multiple wars reduced the level of relations.

After the overthrow of Saddam, apart from canceling Iraq's debts, France granted a loan of 430 million¹⁷ euros to Iraq in 2017, Although this superior position of France in Iraq has disappeared, Paris is trying to strengthen bilateral economic relations with joint agreements and treaties; such as the promotion and support of joint investments in October 2010,¹⁸ tourism cooperation, and economic and technical cooperation between the two governments.

15. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/secret-behind-french-interest-iraq-geostrategic-analysis>

16. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iraq/>

17. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iraq/>

18. <https://tinyurl.com/2fcmg5s4>

In addition, France hopes to win contracts for the reconstruction of Iraq. For example, Haider al-Abadi's (Iraq's former PM) trip to France increased the participation of French companies in reconstruction and increased investments,¹⁹ especially in the field of oil, agriculture, industry, development, and supply of energy resources.

In the past years, French companies²⁰ have been active in various sectors such as hydrocarbons (Total), electricity (Schneider Electric, GE France), transportation (Alstom, CMA-CGM, Renault Trucks, Thales), environment, and construction (Lafarge).

In another dimension, Paris in the past years with economic support for Iraq, attention to the decisions of the Kuwait conference on reconstruction, support for the reconstruction of the Iraqi economy,²¹ and investment in the field of construction in projects; such as the Baghdad subway project, the construction of Iraq's peaceful nuclear reactor²² (similar to 1970s), etc... France has sought to achieve economic influence in Iraq and gain privileges.

France is willing to actively participate in the reconstruction of Iraq. A funding line of one billion euros²³ over four years was signed in November 2019 to promote the reconstruction of Iraq. Bilateral visits at a high level have also made significant progress in economic cooperation. Following French President Emmanuel Macron attending the Baghdad conference on September 5, 2021, Total (the largest French oil company) signed a contract worth 27 billion dollars²⁴ to

19. <https://iq.ambafrance.org/Visite-de-l-Ambassadeur-a-Karbala-pendant-le-pelerinage-d-ArAbain-16-17>

20. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/irak/rerelations-bilaterales/>

21. <https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/the-french-tendency-towards-iraq-protection-of-sovereignty-in-exchange-for-investments>

22. <https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/the-french-tendency-towards-iraq-protection-of-sovereignty-in-exchange-for-investments>

23. <https://tinyurl.com/2ofplrf7>

24. <https://thenewkhalij.news/article/266582/alaarak-yaaln-tokyaa-atafak-mtaathr-maa-total-alfin-sy-ltnfyth-msharyaa-nfty-balbsr>

invest in Iraq's oil and gas facilities (including four projects).

Although disagreements over the terms of the contract and financial details were challenging to this contract,²⁵ it seems that Paris is making more efforts to maintain and revive the contract. Trade between France and Iraq reached 1.31 billion euros in 2019, the highest level since 2013. Despite this, France accounted for less than 1% of Iraq's foreign trade. Also, according to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade, France's import from Iraq in 2021 was \$1.07 billion, and the country's export to Iraq was \$348.25 million in 2021.²⁶

Geopolitical And Political Approach

The Middle East region, with its geopolitical and geostrategic importance, plays an important role in increasing the role and position of France in the world power pyramid. Fundamental changes in the geopolitical situation of Europe and the world, the crisis in Ukraine, etc., have strengthened the idea of strengthening the strategic independence of Europe.

The preservation of France's strategic independence, the idea of "greatness" France, and the legacy of "**Gaullism**" still influence French foreign policy. With the reduction of America's desire to directly intervene in the affairs of the Middle East, the field has opened up for France to play the role of a great power. The further withdrawal of America from the region, the recent developments, and the move towards multipolarity in the international system, have led regional countries such as Iraq to reconsider their diplomatic relations and expand their partners.

After America's withdrawal from some military positions in the Middle East and Iraq, Paris sought to use this opportunity to fill the

25. <https://tinyurl.com/2nxh63un>

26. <https://tradingeconomics.com/france/imports/iraq>

voids that resulted from it. Therefore, the struggle to return to the Middle East can be seen in the current policies of France in protecting interests and establishing a balance against Iran's influence in Iraq and the region²⁷. It seems that this approach of Paris is also supported by America, and the presence of France in the Baghdad conference is seen as an attempt to replace the role of America as a strategic ally.

On the other hand, regional interests and competition are increasingly prominent in the Paris policy calculations and formulation. The danger of putting Iraq in the middle of the Iran-China-Russia axis is an important motivation for France to be more present in Iraq. France is trying to prevent China's growing influence in Iraq. Of Iraq's 26 oil fields, 13 oil fields²⁸ are managed by Chinese companies, so the French share is very low, while France wants to balance China's leading influence.

It also seems that France considers it important to "support Iraqi sovereignty" and create "regional balance" alongside Iraq. On the one hand, by emphasizing the normalization of all armed forces, military cooperation to deal with Daesh (ISIS), and participation in the reconstruction of Iraq, it seeks to reduce the position of Iran in Iraq.

On the other hand, one of France's goals is to counter Turkish influence in Iraq. In this regard, in the past years, France has considered approaches such as providing financial and military aid to help Baghdad in providing security of the country and its borders²⁹ and preventing Turkish interventions in Iraq. In fact, Iraq is close to Turkey, and France is looking for cards to put Turkey under pressure and strengthen its position against Ankara.

27. <https://tinyurl.com/2ghfznev>

28. <https://iramcenter.org/en/frances-multifaceted-approach-in-iraq/>

29. <https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/the-french-tendency-towards-iraq-protection-of-sovereignty-in-exchange-for-investments>

In another dimension, the cooperation roadmap between the two countries was signed in May 2019. It seems that the project “supporting the sovereignty of Iraq”³⁰ on increasing the number of bilateral visits, supporting the sovereignty of Iraq and Baghdad’s regional mediation strategy, is in line with France’s desire to have active participation and strengthen bilateral relations in all fields.

In this regard, we see the increase in the diplomatic activity of agencies, such as the development of the French Consulate General in Mosul,³¹ and the increase in the performance of French cooperation and development agencies based on the 2019 strategic roadmap. It also seems that Paris, with its past approaches such as supporting Iraq’s balanced diplomacy,³² tripartite cooperation between Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan, etc., also defends the return of Iraq to the Arab countries.

In addition to the above, France tries to respect the unity, diversity, and sovereignty of Iraq, by using approaches such as visiting holy places and meeting with Shia, Sunni, Kurdish, Yazidi, and Christian⁶ officials and religious leaders.

In this framework, despite supporting the integrity of Iraq, France emphasizes the participation of all national factions in the management of governance and good relations through the Iraqi government.³³ However, the axis of French friendship with the Kurds is also important. In 1995, Paris hosted³⁴ the negotiations between the two Iraqi Kurdistan parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

30. <https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/the-french-tendency-towards-iraq-protection-of-sovereignty-in-exchange-for-investments>

31. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/analyses/les-opportunités-d'une-nouvelle-approche-française-en-irak>

32. <https://tinyurl.com/2gvkg25c>

33. <https://iq.ambafrance.org/Visite-de-l-Ambassadeur-a-Karbala-pendant-le-pelerinage-d-ArAbain-16-17>

34. <https://tinyurl.com/2e4v2p8z>

Then French President François Mitterrand and his wife played³⁵ a key role in imposing the no-fly zone and taking care of Iraqi Kurdistan. Also, France has a consulate in Erbil, and the Kurdistan Region has a representative in Paris. This approach has been strengthened³⁶ with bilateral visits to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Security And Defense – The Military Approach

The opportunity for anti-terrorism cooperation is one of the most important opportunities for bilateral cooperation between Iraq and France. One of the basic problems of Iraq is terrorism, and Paris has also helped by emphasizing France's commitment to fighting ISIS³⁵ in Iraq.

France has the largest Muslim community in Europe, and the conversion of many French citizens to terrorist groups that operate in Iraq has caused French leaders to pay serious attention to solving the terrorist challenge and eliminating these groups. In this regard, France, as the second member of NATO³⁷ in terms of the strength of the coalition against ISIS, has participated in NATO's NM-I mission, and by training Iraqi special forces and anti-terrorism missions³⁸, in line with the international coalition, on supporting and advising Iraqi forces,³⁹ has helped the acceleration of cooperation on May 2, 2019.⁴⁰

In another dimension, the French defense mission in Baghdad was reopened in the summer of 2009. Technical assistance through training Iraqi soldiers in France and Iraq and sending Iraqi officers for higher

35. <https://tinyurl.com/2nxh63un>

36. <https://www.parliament.krd/english/parliament-activities/latest-news/posts/2022/june/speaker-dr-rewaz-faiq-welcomes-french-senates-france-iraq-friendship-group/>

37. <https://iramcenter.org/en/frances-multifaceted-approach-in-iraq/>

38. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/analyses/les-opportunités-dune-nouvelle-approche-française-en-irak>

39. <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/actualites/chammal-relations-bilaterales-france-irak-inauguration-dune-salle-cours-equipee-france-au-tc>

40. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/irak/rerelations-bilaterales/>

military education in France⁴¹ has been part of France's military and security approach in Iraq. Also, France, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and the main ally of the United States and Britain, is trying to mobilize the international, political, diplomatic, and military support needed by Iraq for security arrangements.

In the past years, Paris, through institutions such as the French Development Agency, has helped to provide the basic needs of stabilizing the areas liberated from ISIS, building hospitals, supporting the resilience of the host population, refugees and displaced people, post-war recovery, and restoring public services for the Iraqi people.⁴² In fact, Paris does not want the security instability in Iraq and the endless waves of religious and ethnic violence to lead to the displacement and migration of millions of people and a direct threat to the security of Europe.

Also, the joint fight against terrorism, control of drug trafficking and illegal immigration, consultation and management, and trial of French extremists living in Iraq are still under consideration by Paris. In 2017, France ranked third as the best exporter of military weapons and is currently one of the top exporters of military weapons in the world. Now, considering the November 2009⁴³ defense cooperation agreement, the provision of Iraqi arms purchases, and the activation of arms contracts with Iraq, Paris is trying to revive its past role as an exporter in Iraq. In this framework, the consultation for the purchase of Dassault Rafale fighter jets is also under consideration by the two countries.

41. <https://tinyurl.com/2gfr8hjx>

<https://tinyurl.com/2l3p6huw>

42. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/irak/relations-bilaterales/>

43. <https://tinyurl.com/2fcmg5s4>

Cultural, Scientific, and Technical Approach

Partnership agreement for cultural, scientific, and technical cooperation in November 2009, awarding scholarships in 2019, development of Iraq's research capacities, the presence of France 24 Academy in Iraq, encouraging the position of French as a foreign language in Iraqi private and public institutions (to strengthen the position and role of the French language in the world and Iraq) are parts of the goals of cultural activities.

The French Institute in Iraq (IFI)⁴⁴ has once again become an important foreign cultural institution in Iraq with a wide range of programs. France's support for Iraqi Christians⁴⁵ and small minorities such as Yazidis, helping French-speaking Christian schools in the region, highlighting the problems of Christians in the Middle East,⁴⁶ and training and rebuilding schools are other parts of its approach in Iraq. In addition, emphasizing the unity of Iraq, paying attention to the victims of violence, supporting a fund for the reconstruction of the Sinjar region of Iraq, and promoting the return of the Yazidi displaced population⁴⁷ are other parts of France's soft and cultural approach in Iraq.

Also, France by providing food aid, basic health care, and basic needs, humanitarian aid, and stabilization measures to stabilize the city of Mosul, helped the voluntary return of displaced people to liberated areas,⁴⁸ and cleaned up through the institutions and agencies of the United Nations, and has taken important steps to strengthen its position and soft power in Iraq. It also seems that bilateral collaborations based on the fight against smuggling, and the protection of Iraqi heritage in

44. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/irak/rerelations-bilaterales/>

45. <https://tinyurl.com/2n9e272d>

46. <https://theArabweekly.com/doubts-surround-macrons-attempts-restoring-french-influence-iraq>

47. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/irak/>

48. <https://atalayar.com/en/content/france-new-key-player-iraq>

conflict areas (ALIPH)⁴⁹ with the participation of French archaeological institutions and groups are important steps to strengthen and revive their scientific and technical presence in Iraq.

Vision

Despite the economic complementarity and the existence of nuclear, military, and security opportunities for the development of relations in the medium and long term, France faces many challenges to returning to its former position in Iraq. France still has a lower position in Iraq in competition with the United States, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Some of France's approaches in Iraq are considered unacceptable interference⁵⁰ that affects Iraqi sovereignty. It also seems that apart from the acceptance of most of the Kurdish groups for the expansion of France's role in Iraq, the Sunni parties, and especially the Shia parties, are not willing to let Paris play the previous superior role in Iraq's foreign relations. Although it seems that in the absence and reduction of America's role, France can relatively develop its economic, political, cultural, and military position in Iraq.

49. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/irak/>

50. <https://tinyurl.com/2k7h7739>