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TUMULTUOUS YET PROMISING: THE EVOLUTION OF GCC-IRAQ RELATIONS



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Tumultuous yet Promising: The Evolution of GCC-Iraq Relations

Iraq's relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has been tumultuous over the past decades, marked by highs and lows. Several factors such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the emergence of political blocs promoting foreign agendas in the aftermath of the invasion led to the deterioration of ties between the GCC and Iraq.

While the GCC countries certainly share many threat perceptions, albeit to differing extents, it is important to also consider their individual experiences, as they do not harbor identical relationships with Iraq. The GCC should not be considered a monolithic entity. Today, however, there is an evident shift in the Gulf's general approach toward Iraq: departing from conventional hard power attempts at influencing the domestic political scene within Iraq, which are neither cost-effective nor successful, the region has recently exhibited a greater reliance on medium-to-long term soft power techniques (Alkinani 2022). This comprises an inclusion of economic interests, focusing on energy, trade and infrastructure as well as media, culture, entertainment and diplomacy. The shift was prompted by the realization that the Iranian influence in Iraq cannot be effectively countered overnight, and that GCC countries should not isolate Iraq, as this would only further isolate Baghdad from the Arab world and allow Iran to consolidate its influence.

The current political stalemate within Iraq following the elections in 2021 is creating another unstable and uncertain situation within Iraq. Under the current situation, it is difficult to assess how GCC-Iraq relations will progress further, given the fact that this is heavily dependent on the next Iraqi regime.

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Historical Background and Contextual Analysis

Under Saddam Hussein's rule, Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, marking the beginning of an eight-year costly, and bloody war. The impact of this war was felt far beyond the borders of Iraq: the GCC countries would come to perceive Iran's role within the war as a major security threat which, in turn,



shaped not only these countries' stance toward Iraq in particular, but also their broader foreign policy and threat perception analysis of the region as a whole. More specifically, many Gulf Arabs — and not only the Saudis — perceived Iran's continuation of the war and their stated intention to “export the revolution” as malicious and a threat to the Gulf monarchies (Harvey 2021, 46). For instance, a Kuwaiti editorial published in 1985 proclaimed that Iran's continued offensives into Iraq during the war solidified the notion that the Iranian campaign was “not aimed at Iraq alone, but that Iran looks with greed toward all the GCC countries in order to control them” (Harvey 2021, 46). Similarly, in 2008 a Saudi political analyst, Al-Utaibi, asserted that Iran pursued the war to “weaken the biggest Arab power in the Gulf region” and consequently “threaten the rest of the regional states” (Harvey 2021, 46). Thus, the Iran-Iraq war essentially set the tone of the Gulf's securitized perception of Iran, and their subsequent relations with Iraq.

GCC-Iraq relations took a turn for the worse in August 1990 when Saddam Hussein invaded and attempted to annex Kuwait (Hurst 2012). This act was a direct attack on Kuwait's security and sovereignty, and heavily impacted Kuwaiti-Iraqi relations for the next thirty years (Alkinani 2022). By extension, it also threatened the regimes of the other Gulf countries. The primary motive for the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 involved a common political narrative and quest to mutually combat regional security threats. Thus, it is no shock that the invasion of Kuwait also strained Gulf-Iraq relations more generally (Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 65). Indeed, the Gulf countries proceeded to sever diplomatic ties with Iraq following the invasion, and these ties remained strained for another eighteen years until Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain nominated ambassadors to Iraq in 2008 (Aljazeera 2008).

Other Gulf countries took even longer to re-engage with Iraq, as Saudi Arabia and Qatar did not reopen an embassy in Baghdad until 2015, and Oman did not follow suit until 2019 (Aljazeera 2004; Al-Arabiya 2015; Bayoumy 2015; Halligan 2019; Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 54). In addition, having previously considered Iran to be the bigger threat in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia shifted gears and perceived Saddam Hussein's regime as their more immediate enemy following the invasion of Kuwait, which caused the Saudi regime to seek Saddam's removal from power (Harvey 2021, 32).

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 may have succeeded in overthrowing Saddam Hussein, but it also allowed for the significant growth of Iranian influence within Iraq (Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 42). Saudi political leaders frequently argued that the U.S. essentially handed Iraq to Iran "on a golden platter," as following the overthrow of Saddam, Iran began to wield significant influence within Iraq (Harvey 2021, 83). The drafting of a new constitution within the country, officially presented in August 2005, did not allay GCC concerns, as Iraq's Sunni Arabs felt marginalized in the new political system (Harvey 2021, 103). The GCC Secretary-General, Abd al-Rahman bin Hamad al-Attiyah, referred to the draft constitution as "catastrophic" for its failure to label Iraq as an Arab state (Harvey 2021, 104). This development only partially depicts the consequences of the US invasion of the country. More generally, the US military involvement sparked Iraq's transition from a "buffer state" to "a state at the crossroads" that pushed Arab and regional powers into direct and indirect racial, ethnic, and sectarian conflicts (Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 42).



Immediately following the US invasion, the Gulf countries isolated Iraq, and relations deteriorated even further under the leadership of Nouri Al-Maliki, a longstanding member of the Da'wa Party who first assumed the premiership in the spring of 2006. The Gulf countries, however, lacked a unified, consistent, and strategic approach towards Iraq, and this can most evidently be seen in their divergent attitudes



toward Al-Maliki's regime (Alkinani 2022). For instance, certain Gulf countries were more receptive to the idea of re-engaging with the Iraqi regime following Al-Maliki's campaign against Iranian-backed Shia militias in the spring of 2008 (Harvey 2021, 143-144). Although the Saudi regime was adamantly against re-engaging with Iraq due to its perception of Al-Maliki as an "Arab Shia loyal to Iran," other Gulf countries such as the UAE expressed willingness to re-engage with Iraq. For instance, the Emirati Foreign Minister Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan traveled to Baghdad on June 5, 2008 and declared that "Iraq has suffered because its brothers failed to back it over these past years" (Harvey 2021, 167). In the subsequent months, the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait re-established diplomatic ties with Iraq.

Despite this step forward, Gulf-Iraq relations turned sour as Al-Maliki began pursuing a closer relationship with Iran starting in 2010. Harvey argues that Iraq's gravitation toward Iran was largely a "self-fulfilling prophecy" due to Saudi Arabia's hostility toward the Al-Maliki regime. Regardless of this argument, the fact remains that Iraq's relationship with the Gulf during Al-Maliki's premiership eventually deteriorated. Not only did Maliki publicly accuse Saudi Arabia and Qatar of declaring "war on Iraq" and providing "unlimited" aid to Al-Qaida in a televised interview, but by the end of his term in 2014, Iraq was in open alliance with Iran (Harvey 2021, 207).

Al-Maliki was succeeded by Haider al-Abadi in August 2014. He was perceived to be more neutral than his predecessor, and consequently Gulf-Iraq relations appeared to steadily improve (Taylor 2014). Saudi Arabia invited Al-Abadi to visit the kingdom, signifying a dramatic shift in their previously hostile attitude toward the country. Saudi-Iraq relations, and by extension Gulf-Iraq relations, continued to thaw during 2015 and 2016. During his premiership from October 2018 to May 2020, Al-Abadi's successor, Adel Abd al-Mahdi, carried on this policy of balance and undertook trips to Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in April 2019. Al-Mahdi specifically expressed a desire to "boost cooperation with all neighboring countries and avoid involvement in any regional alliances" (Harvey 2021, 232).

GCC-Iraq relations have continued to improve under the premiership of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who assumed office in May 2020 (Rubin 2020). Like his two predecessors, al-Kadhimi's regime appeared willing to balance relations with the surrounding region (Alkinani 2022). This is exemplified in Iraq's mediation of direct talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran beginning in April 2021, which is the first time Saudi and Iranian officials held a significant in-person meeting since the two states severed relations in 2016. In addition, Al-Kadhimi's public pledge to curb Iranian influence in Iraq has amplified his popularity with the GCC states (Alaca and Baycar 2021).

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Source: [GCC Summit 41 Press Center](#)

This warming of relations between the GCC countries and Iraq is also evident in the discussion that took place during the 41st GCC Summit in January 2021, during which the Qatar crisis was resolved. At the Summit, the GCC Supreme Council welcomed the formation of Al-Kadhimi's government and praised the efforts made by the GCC member states to enhance cooperation with Iraq. More specifically, they applauded the implementation of a memorandum of understanding and a joint action plan for strategic dialogue and the development of relations between the GCC states and the Republic of Iraq (Aljazeera 2021). Yet, it must be mentioned that GCC-Iraq ties continue to be heavily contingent upon the specific Iraqi regime. As illustrated in the tumultuous relationship between the Gulf and Iraq under various Iraqi regimes, the future of the relations profoundly relies on the next Iraqi leader.

GCC Concerns and Key Threat Perceptions vis à vis Iraq

Regarding threat perceptions, Al-Ubaydli and Plebani (2014, 54) assert that the Gulf countries do not want a strong Iraq, like it used to be in the past, nor a weak one, which could be entrapped in the regional and international conflicts in the Gulf region. Although this was articulated in 2014, this view remains valid, as it accurately depicts GCC perspectives about Iraq today. The GCC countries still want a well-balanced Iraq. The political instability within Iraq sparked during the Arab Spring, for instance, posed a grave threat to the Gulf, and particularly to Shi'a-majority countries such as Bahrain, who feared a spillover of the issues faced by the affected neighboring countries (Quamar, 2014, 141). If Iraq were headed in the direction of civil war or partition, for example, this would be considered a major challenge to the security of the Gulf. The wider the ensuing instability, the greater the risk that Iraq would become a battleground for proxy wars between regional actors (Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 38). Similarly, the domestic instability within Iraq instigated after the US troops' withdrawal under the Obama administration allowed for power vacuums that were quickly filled by terrorist organizations such as Da'esh, who pose a threat to regional stability, and as such to the Gulf countries. Thus, any form of instability within Iraq is unfavorable for the Gulf and perceived as a potential security threat.



Another key threat perception among GCC states regarding Iraq is the Iranian presence within the country. Although a shared culture, religion, and economic resources played a role in the unification of the GCC states in 1981, these motivations remained secondary and the primary reason for unification was the shared security threat perception vis a vis Iran (Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 65). This perception can help account for why Gulf states have chosen to warm up to Iraq in recent years. Their main aim is to reduce the Iranian influence in Iraq by adopting appropriate policies and taking measures to counter Tehran's strategy in Iraq (Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 57). As such, GCC-Iraq relations could be witnessing a new turn. Rather than isolate Iraq, the GCC countries, albeit to differing extents, have realized that the only way to curb Iranian influence in Iraq is to re-engage diplomatically and increase cooperation in different fields.

The GCC's broad strategy toward Iraq entails adopting more of a medium-to-long term outlook to GCC-Iraq relations by engaging diplomatically with the Iraqi regime and containing Iranian influence (Alaaldin 2020). The GCC states understand that they cannot overturn Iranian influence within Iraq overnight; their new strategy of re-engaging with Iraq, however, allows them to reposition themselves as a viable alternative to Iran in the long term. Economically, the Gulf has illustrated its interest and willingness to invest in Iraq and collaborate on various initiatives. Kuwait, for instance, hosted the Iraq Reconstruction Conference in 2018, during which 74 participating nations pledged a lump-sum of \$30 billion in loans or investments to help Iraq financially rebuild following fifteen years of war (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

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In a similar vein, the GCC General Secretariat and the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign affairs signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in April 2019, and a joint work plan (2019-2024) to strengthen cooperation between the nations and enhance economic development, security, and investment (Middle East Monitor 2020; Alhamawi 2021). The results reaped from the joint work plan became evident in March and April of 2021, during Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's official visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, respectively. The two countries, which already have many investments in Iraq, each committed to investing an additional \$3 billion in Iraq, partly targeting renewable energy (Alaca and Baycar 2021). Qatar also made an effort to strengthen economic ties with Iraq, as demonstrated by Qatari Foreign Minister, Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdulrahman Al Thani's, visit to Baghdad in March 2021. During the visit, Al-Thani discussed the possibility of activating a joint committee for economic cooperation between the two countries with his Iraqi counterpart, Fuad Hussein (The Arab Weekly 2021). Furthermore, Qatar's energy minister, Saad al-Kaabi, and Iraq's electricity minister, Adel Karim, discussed the possibility of Qatar supplying gas to Iraq to address its power shortages in February 2022 (Iraqi News Agency 2022).

GCC-Iraq relations have also progressed on the diplomatic front. The Baghdad Summit for Cooperation and Partnership held in August 2021 was significant because it not only exemplified the GCC's willingness to re-engage with Iraq, but it also marked the beginning of a new level of readiness to engage (should Iraq continue its balancing act in the region). The attendance of Iraq's Foreign Minister, Fuad Hussein, at the GCC Ministerial Council meeting in Riyadh in September 2021 was another key development (Al-Taher 2021). Bahrain's Foreign Minister, Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, welcomed the Iraqi delegation in his opening statement, emphasizing that the GCC is eager to "reinforce strategic cooperation between the GCC and Iraq due to the close historic ties" between the nations. He also mentioned that the GCC supports Iraq's endeavors to maintain its sovereignty, security, and stability and "to fight extremism, violence and terrorism in all its forms" (Al-Taher 2021).

The improved framework for better ties was accompanied by concrete steps. In November 2020, the Arar border between Saudi Arabia and Iraq was re-opened, following thirty years of closure (Al-Arabiya 2020). In October 2021, Iraq was the distinguished guest of honor at the Riyadh International Book Fair, sending over thirteen Iraqi publishing houses and multiple Iraqi poets and authors, exemplifying the newfound Iraqi-Saudi cultural exchange (Saudi Gazette 2021). On January 12, 2022, the Iraqi Ambassador to Oman, Qais Sa'ad Al Amiri, met the Omani Minister of Health, Dr Ahmed bin Muhammed Al Sa'edy, and the two officials discussed means of bilateral cooperation in the medical field (Iraq Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022).



Source: [Iraqi News Agency](#)


In contrast to previous and failed attempts by the GCC to garner political influence by funding Sunni Arab organizations and politicians in Iraq, these cultural, diplomatic, and economic exchanges between the Gulf and Iraq symbolize a new era in Gulf-Iraq relations (International Crisis Group, 2018). Although more widespread concrete results of these exchanges have yet to emerge, their mere existence represents a more promising outlook for Iraq-GCC ties, so long as the next Iraqi prime minister is perceived positively among Gulf rulers (Alkinani 2022).



While the Gulf countries share a general interest in fostering cooperation with Iraq, nuances exist between each GCC state and their relationship with Iraq. Historically, the Gulf states exhibited divergent stances toward the notion of Iraq potentially joining the GCC bloc. In June 2008, UAE Foreign Minister, Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed, for instance, articulated that the UAE looks “forward to Iraq becoming a full partner in the GCC” (Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 51). In contrast, the Kuwaiti foreign minister asserted that “Kuwait does not want the GCC to become an alternative to the Council of the League of Arab States,” indicating its unwillingness to allow Iraq to join the GCC. Later in May 2012, Kuwait changed its stance and voiced its inclination for a “partnership with Iraq within a regional group of northern Gulf countries in order to diversify Kuwait’s economy” (Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 51). This change of stance exemplifies the complexity and dynamic nature of GCC-Iraq relations; not only are there nuances between each GCC state’s relationship with Iraq, but there are also changes in each GCC state’s individual attitude towards Iraq.

In addition, while all GCC states are threatened by the growing Iranian presence within the region, some are more threatened than others. Saudi Arabia, for example, is extremely concerned about potential political instability, security issues, and the Iranian presence within Iraq because of its implications for its own security, particularly as the two countries share a common border that is 812 kilometers long (Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 53). A similar argument could be given about Kuwait, whose main concerns have centered around an ominous territorial disintegration of Iraq or a potential civil war that will constitute a threat to Kuwaiti national security. In addition, Kuwait remained focused on the Iraqi compensation payments for the 1990 invasion, which were finalized in February 2022, amounting to \$52.4 billion in total. While Qatar has switched from a





Sunni-centric to a more pragmatic outlook, other Gulf states are concerned about the consequences of the growing sectarianism in Iraq. This concern is felt most visibly in Bahrain (Alkinani 2022; Al-Ubaydli and Plebani 2014, 53). Thus, while Gulf states have recently adopted a general strategy in strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with Iraq, there are nuances among their various approaches and the specific issues that concern them the most.

Looking Forward

Following a series of national protests in Iraq throughout 2019 and once again in the summer of 2021, the Iraqi government hosted parliamentary elections six months ahead of schedule, on October 10, 2021 (BBC 2021). The elections decide the 329 members of the Council of Representatives, who will in turn elect the Iraqi President and confirm the Prime Minister (Arraf 2021). The Sadrist Bloc, led by Shi'ite Muslim cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, successfully increased its seat tally from 54 in 2018 to 73 while the Taqaddum (Progress) alliance, led by Mohamed al-Halbousi, gained 40 seats. Fateh, meanwhile, decreased its seat tally from 48 to only 16 (Laipson and Hamasaeed 2021). In the aftermath, Iraqi political groups have failed to form a majority parliamentary coalition to name a new prime minister to succeed Mustafa Al-Kadhimi. Rather, Iraq's parliament indefinitely postponed a scheduled vote for the republic's president, after most major political blocs boycotted the session on February 7, 2022 (VOA News 2022). As of June 2022, there is not indication that the deadlock will soon be overcome. This political bypass could threaten Iraq's short-term and long-term security and stability, thus impacting the wider region, particularly the Gulf. It is especially worrisome because it is stalling urgently needed reforms and creating a dangerous political and security vacuum that could potentially be exploited by extremist groups such as Da'esh.

Nevertheless, it is likely that the relations between Iraq and the GCC countries will continue to improve under future Iraqi administrations. Bilateral relations could still worsen if the current Iraqi prime minister is replaced, a plausible scenario, given the uncertainty produced by the recent election, the legal limit on the prime minister's term in office, not to mention the political unrest and internal challenges Iraq is currently facing. GCC states remain wary to extend their ties within Iraq unless this clearly impacts the Iranian influence inside the country. Yet, the overall shift in approach to a more medium- to long-term strategy by the GCC that seeks to rebuild ties with Baghdad piece by piece increased the prospects for better relations.

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