



The Evgeniy Primakov
Center for International
Cooperation

Policy brief

Russia and Iraq: Resilience amid Regional Instability

Ruslan Mamedov
Grigory Lukyanov

No. 1, 2024



Evgeniy Primakov Center for International Cooperation

Policy brief

Russia and Iraq: Resilience amid Regional Instability

Authors:

Ruslan Mamedov, Ph.D. in History, Scientific Advisor at the Evgeniy Primakov Center for International Cooperation, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

Grigory Lukyanov, Research Fellow at the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

Editorial group: Alena Isakova (executive editor), Ivan Reshetnyak, Victoria Karslieva

Ruslan Mamedov, Grigory Lukyanov. Russia and Iraq: Resilience amid Regional Instability: Policy brief No. 1 / 2024. – Moscow: Primakov Center, 2024. – 13 p.

ISBN 978-5-6051936-6-1

No. 1, 2024

The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Evgeniy Primakov Center for International Cooperation

© Ruslan Mamedov, 2024

© Grigory Lukyanov, 2024

© Composition, arrangement, cover design: Anna Gorokhova, 2024

Contents

Summary.....	4
1. Russia, Iraq and the principle of positive diplomacy	6
2. Oil & gas industry and logistics – at the heart of the prospects for cooperation?	9
3. Old–new regional dynamics	11

Summary

- In 2024, Russia and Iraq celebrate 80 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Despite political risks, regional instability and sanctions pressure, cooperation between the countries demonstrates positive dynamics and is developing in various areas.
- The place and role of Iraq in the regional system of international relations and security in West Asia is consistently changing both under the influence of the transformations of the global and regional order and due to the peculiarities of the dynamics of domestic political processes. After two decades of armed conflicts, foreign interventions and the fight against terrorism, Iraq is becoming increasingly active in peacebuilding processes in the region.
- Moscow supports the actions of the Iraqi authorities aimed at restoring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. Prompt and decisive actions to provide comprehensive assistance to Iraq in repelling the threat of ISIS (banned in Russia) in 2014-2017 have strengthened the foundation of confidence of the Iraqi military and political leadership in Russia as a reliable, effective and promising security partner.
- In its relations with international partners, Iraq is endeavoring to make the transition from the model of an aid-recipient country to a model of equal partnership in joint mutually beneficial projects with all interested actors. The Government sees the principles of positive diplomacy, equal partnership and non-interference by foreign States in the country's internal affairs as the basis of Iraq's current foreign policy. Nevertheless, the risks of destabilization in Iraq remain due to the US-Iranian confrontation, the influence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and regional competition.
- With the growing domestic demand for sovereignty in foreign affairs, Baghdad is seeking to build partnerships not only with neighboring countries in the region, but also with external actors, such as Russia and China, for the purpose of technological development, the formation of new economic zones in the country, the attraction of foreign investment and the development of transport corridors.
- Russian companies have gained an important place in Iraq's oil industry by signing major contracts with the Iraqi authorities. The total amount of Russian investment in Iraq by 2023 is believed to be around \$19bn. Investments of this kind, as well as cooperation within the OPEC+ framework, make Iraq a highly significant regional partner for Russia.

- The development and strengthening of cooperation in the economic and security fields needs to be reinforced by expanding cooperation in scientific and social ties and education, including training in public administration, as well as the formation of a common information space between the media and expert and analytical communities of the two countries.

1. Russia, Iraq and the principle of positive diplomacy

In 2003, Russia and a number of international players opposed the US invasion of Iraq. Despite the endeavor to prevent the conflict in the early 2000s, it seemed that the world was already entering a brief era of PaxAmericana. Such a thing could be assessed not as a setback on the way to a just world order, but as a strategy of the world hegemon. The US withdrawal from a number of international security treaties and American actions for regime change in a number of states led to reactions and rethinking of Washington's role in world politics by international actors. This led to the transformation of the system of international relations with the general rise of the world's developing economies.

◆ **In the already post-Saddam Iraq, Russian diplomacy tried to maintain neutrality by establishing mutual understanding and trusting relations with the new political forces.**

Given the role played by Russian oil and gas companies in the country until 2003 and Iraq's debt to Russia, this made Moscow an important extra-regional player for Baghdad. Baghdad could see Moscow as a pole of influence in regional issues to promote its interests not only in Iraqi-American relations, but also in a wide range of areas in its relations with other West Asian states, including Syria, Turkey, Iran and the Arab states of the Gulf. Although Iran has remained the main US balancer in Iraq for two decades, it is clear that the political elites in Baghdad are keen to stop being hostage to the US-Iran confrontation and find new opportunities in cooperation with other countries.

◆ **In its relations with international partners, Iraq seeks to make the transition from the model of a recipient country of foreign aid to the model of equal partnership in joint mutually beneficial projects.**

Iraq's current foreign policy is based on the principles of positive diplomacy, equal partnership and non-interference by foreign states in the country's internal affairs¹. Baghdad emphasizes its role as a convenient and effective platform for dialogue, designating its mediatory participation in the diplomatic rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt, Turkey

¹ Alaaldin F. Building a Strong, Capable Iraq Will Shape Its Foreign Policy / Asharq Al-Awsat. 04.07.2023. URL: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4415056/building-strong-capable-iraq-will-shape-its-foreign-policy>

and the Gulf States. Iraq is already an OPEC+ partner and is pursuing an oil policy in line with its commitments.

Russian companies have gained an important place in Iraq's oil industry by signing major contracts with the new Iraqi authorities. It is believed that by 2023, the total amount of Russian investments in Iraq amounted to about \$19 billion². Investments of this kind, military and technical cooperation, and OPEC+ cooperation make Iraq an extremely significant and valuable partner for Russia in the region.

Despite pressure from third countries on Russian-Iraqi relations, Moscow and Baghdad manage to overcome such challenges. It is believed that the U.S.-Iraqi relations, which today are institutionally within the framework of the so-called "strategic partnership," have a negative impact on Baghdad's ability to build an independent foreign policy course. Today, U.S. activities are aimed at neutralizing Russia's policy in the region, reducing the interest of other countries in Iraq, and preventing Syrian-Iraqi interaction (the U.S. is creating a buffer zone controlled by it on the border territories of Syria and Iraq). In the latter case, it is important to note that Russia and Iraq have consistently confirmed the effective role of the Astana process, where Russia is a guarantor and Iraq is an observer³. Also U.S. sanctions, which have a destructive impact on regional trade and development, are becoming increasingly widespread.

◆ **Nevertheless, with the growing domestic demand for sovereignty in foreign affairs, Baghdad is seeking to build partnerships with both neighboring countries in the region and external actors such as Russia and China, pursuing technological development, the formation of new economic zones, attracting foreign investment and creating transport corridors.**

Positive diplomacy should also include humanitarian projects. In recent years, the growing interest of scientific and educational centers of the two states in cooperation has been particularly noticeable. Thus, as of 2023, the number of Iraqi students in Russian universities amounted to more than 4,200⁴. In addition, in an interview for RIA Novosti on March 2, 2024, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said, "I hope that in the future Russian tourists will come to Iraq to get acquainted with ancient monuments and sights⁵." This

² Russian President noted successful coordination between Moscow and Baghdad within OPEC+ // Interfax. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/925063>

³ On the meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov with the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Iraq Fuad Hussein // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. URL: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1908511/?lang=ru

⁴ Russia will increase the number of quota places for Iraqi students // TASS Agency. URL: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16971225>

⁵ Fuad Hussein: Iraq is ready to mediate between Russia and Ukraine // RIA Novosti. URL: <https://ria.ru/20240302/khuseyn-1930603826.html>

topic was also voiced at the meeting of the Russian Ambassador to Iraq Elbrus Kutrashev with the Minister of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities of Iraq Ahmed Al-Badrani⁶. For the Iraqi side, cultural and historical heritage is a central topic that unites the country despite sharp confessional differences. The Republic of Iraq rightfully considers itself the heir to the Mesopotamian civilization, and the attention of Russian diplomacy to the ancient Mesopotamia is regarded by Baghdad as a sign of deep understanding of Iraqi identity. The parties are even considering plans to sign an intergovernmental agreement on a Russian humanitarian (cultural and scientific) mission to Iraq, which would operate on the basis of a Iraqi-Russian archaeological expedition.

- ◆ **Permanent archaeological missions are an effective means of cultural diplomacy used in Iraq by other countries as well. Russia has every opportunity to put the ongoing work on a long-term basis. This requires the support of the governmental authorities of both countries.**

⁶ Based on the information from the “Tsentralnoe Boloto” Telegram channel of the Russian-Iraqi Complex Expedition. URL: https://t.me/iraq_rusproj/493

2. Oil & gas industry and logistics – at the heart of the prospects for cooperation?

For Russia, Iraq is important both in terms of trade and economic relations and in the context of its regional policy in West Asia. The main external players with direct influence in Iraq are Iran and the United States. Saudi Arabia comes after them, making many steps towards strengthening its position in Iraq over the past years,⁷ as well as Turkey, which has sufficient political will, weight and capabilities to pursue a flexible policy in Iraq. At the same time, all these countries take into account the splits within Iraqi society and the state, including the complex system of relations between Baghdad and Erbil, and seek to instrumentalize them as effectively as possible in the interests of their own foreign and security policy. Russia, on the other hand, has stable relations with the entire spectrum of Iraqi political forces.

Russia and Iraq see it as fundamentally important to secure economic cooperation from illegal sanctions.⁸ An important area of this effort is maintaining Russian investment in Iraq's energy sector. Three key projects are most important – Lukoil's investment in West Qurna-2, Gazprom's investment in Badr, and Rosneft's investment in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁹

◆ **Despite the fact that one of the key issues in the domestic political field has become the problem of energy policy coordination, Iraq is overcoming the existing differences. The issue of modernizing the oil infrastructure – upstream, downstream and transport – and developing new fields is becoming important for determining the country's position on the oil market.**

⁶ After the "Caliphate": prospects for Russian-Iraqi relations: workbook No. 46/2018 / [R. Sh. Mamedov]; [Editor-in-Chief I. S. Ivanov]; Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).- Moscow: RIAC Non-Profit Partnership, 2018. – 20 p.

⁸ Lavrov: It is important for Russia and Iraq to secure cooperation from illegal sanctions of the West // TASS Agency. URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/16970407>

⁹ Rusiya tazizu nufuzaha ash-sharqi lausatii abra talalata mahavir = Russia strengthens its influence in the Middle East through three axes // The New Arab. URL: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/economy/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B2-%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B0%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%AB%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AB%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1>

This is the focus of the authorities signing new contracts. Russia also has more than \$19bn. worth of investments accumulated in Iraq, mainly in the energy sector.

Many Iraqi officials believe it is important to shift the focus from oil to gas and renewables. There is room to increase gas production in Iraqi Kurdistan alone – about 85-90 percent of autonomous Kurdistan Region’s electricity comes from gas. If invested in developing all of Iraqi Kurdistan’s gas fields, the autonomous Kurdistan Region could produce 5 billion m³ of gas. This also affects the environmental agenda, as there is a plan by the al-Sudani government to plant 5 million trees to reduce the environmental impact of the gas sector. However, the need to avoid flaring associated gas is a key solution to the issue. The Garmian project, for instance, is considered a positive example.

In October 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin held talks with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ al-Sudani in Moscow, also taking part in the Russian Energy Week. During the plenary session, the Iraqi Prime Minister said that the parties are discussing the synchronization of infrastructure projects North-South and Development Road.¹⁰

◆ **Development Road, a presented by Baghdad in 2023 transportation and logistical system including railroads and highways, which will connect the southern regions of Iraq with Turkey. The route is envisioned as an alternative land corridor to the Suez Canal for goods from India and the Gulf to Europe.**

The project is supported by the Iraqi and Turkish governments at the highest level, but requires massive investment. According to the position of Russian officials, Moscow looks positively at the possibility of joining its launch.¹¹ It should be noted, however, that among the key risks of the project’s implementation are insecurity in the remote Iraqi areas, domestic political instability, as well as regional competition.

¹⁰ Iraq and the Russian Federation discussed the integration of infrastructure projects “Development Road” // Gazeta.ru. URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2023/10/11/21481627.shtml>

¹¹ “Russia ranks first among foreign investors in Iraq” // Izvestia. URL: <https://iz.ru/1595738/prokhor-dorenko/rossiia-zanimaet-pervoe-mesto-sredi-inostrannykh-investorov-v-irake>

3. Old–new regional dynamics

In 2014, Iraq, deprived of an effective sovereign national security system as a result of the actions of the U.S. occupiers, found itself vulnerable to the threat posed by the international terrorist organization ISIS (banned in Russia). In the conditions of non-fulfillment by the U.S. and its allies of the entire set of assumed obligations to ensure military security, the Iraqi government managed to reorganize its own armed forces, build a system of counter-terrorism and liberate the territories and population seized by extremists thanks to the prompt and timely assistance of Iran and Russia¹². Moscow and Baghdad have become participants in a quadripartite information and coordination center to combat terrorism in Iraq and Syria.

◆ **Baghdad and the autonomous Kurdistan Region’s government at the regional level do not support the interference of regional actors in the internal politics of Iraq, but take their interests into account.**

Thus, the representatives of the autonomous Kurdistan Region emphasize that they will take all necessary measures not to pose a threat to their neighbors. It is meant that Iraqi Kurdistan, in cooperation with Baghdad, seeks to neutralize the influence of anti-government groups of Turkish and Iranian Kurds in order to maintain balance and working relations with Ankara and Tehran.

◆ **Despite the persistence of negative trends, especially in the security sector, the overall situation in the country is currently the most stable in the last 20 years (paradoxical stabilization).**

Three critical factors can be emphasized in the positive post-conflict dynamics.

Firstly, the sharp decline in the level of violence in the country.

Secondly, the evolution of Iraq’s security system.

◆ **In the course of the war against ISIS (banned in Russia), Iraq’s armed forces have evolved, and deliveries of modern weapons, including from Russia, have played a major role.**

Thirdly, the growth of international and regional investment (a key factor). There is an inflow of investments from European states, Gulf countries, China and Russia. Today, the country is trying to find its political identity and devel-

¹² Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies. – M.: Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2022. – 11 p.

op distinctive diplomatic approaches, guided primarily by national interests. Modern Iraq seeks to increase contacts at the official level with its closest neighbors, countries of the Middle East and North Africa region and beyond.

Iraq is an integral part of the Gulf sub-region. In this sense, Russia and Iraq could more actively promote the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Gulf (since all countries are members of the NPT). Such an approach has been proposed in a number of international initiatives, including the Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf.

Russian-Iraqi relations are characterized by sustained positive cooperation and growing mutual interest in various areas. Nevertheless, risks of destabilization in Iraq remain due to the U.S.-Iranian confrontation, the influence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and regional competition.

Russia supports the actions of the Iraqi authorities aimed at restoring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. In addition, Russia and Iraq have serious potential in the humanitarian sphere, science and education. One of the areas of cooperation could be the promotion of scientific diplomacy and cooperation between the analytical structures of the two states in order to work out programs for the development of bilateral relations. Due to the historical ties of the Iraqi people with Russia, the need to preserve the existing heritage and the need to form a positive image for the new generation, it also seems appropriate to establish Russian language rooms or Russian centers in Iraq, including in Iraqi Kurdistan, on the basis of local universities. The support of initiatives in this area by Russian giant companies, given its strong presence in Iraq, could also be very useful. Another positive development in bilateral relations could be the deepening of Russian-Iraqi archaeological cooperation with the support of the Foundations and the relevant ministries of Russia and Iraq.

Despite political risks and sanctions pressure, relations between Moscow and Baghdad are resilient and able to withstand external challenges. The place and role of Iraq in the regional system of international relations and security in West Asia is consistently changing under the influence of transformations in the global and regional order and due to the peculiarities of domestic political processes. New issues of synchronization of logistic projects arise. In this regard, for Iraq, Russia can become an effective political partner for sovereign development, and Iraq can become an important partner for Russia in economic and oil policy issues.



**The Evgeniy Primakov
Center for International
Cooperation**

The Primakov Center is an expert and analytical platform established in memory of an outstanding diplomat Evgeniy Primakov in 2015.

The mission of the Center is to preserve and develop the intellectual legacy of Evgeniy Primakov's, strengthen international cooperation at the expert and scientific level, and involve civil society institutions in the foreign policy process.

The Center has three key areas of focus: Middle East region, Nuclear non-proliferation, nuclear disarmament, peaceful uses of atomic energy and Evgeniy Primakov's Legacy.

ISBN 978-5-6051936-9-2



9 785605 193692 >



primakovcenter.ru