



DIALOGUE SNAPSHOT

U.S.-Iraq Relations: Interests, Expectations, Ways Forward

APRIL 2022



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

U.S.-Iraq Relations: Interests, Expectations, Ways Forward

During the past 18 years, the U.S.-Iraq relationship has endured many difficulties. On one side, some experts believe that the United States only sees Iraq as a medium to deal with Iran. On the other side, some say that Iraq must clearly define what it wants from the U.S. Both

“We can’t forget that the relationship is bounded by history.”

Participant from Iraq

sides tend to still see the relationship through the lens of the 2003 invasion even though two decades have passed. The December 2021 U.S. shift from a combat mission in Iraq to an “advise, assist, and enable” mission was seen as a big victory for the Iraqi government. It begs the question, what will the new phase of the relationship look like?

Iraq’s strategic importance to the U.S. is evident. The stability of Iraq and its relationship with the United States safeguards stability in the Gulf, ensures the flow of the global oil economy, and helps to limit tensions with Iran. However, looking beyond the security relationship lies a need to explore avenues for partnership in other areas such as economic development, environment, trade and finance, energy and education.

To this end, the Center brought together select participants from a 2013 dialogue with Americans and Iraqis to discuss where the country stands now, in light of the crises it has endured over the past decade. Discussions continued to determine what new approaches can be made to ensure a lasting strategic relationship between the U.S. and Iraq, one where interests of both sides are served. Held virtually in April 2022, participants from both countries reached the following conclusions:

- The bilateral relationship is rooted in a long and complex history that has been more negative than positive. To evolve the relationship, participants concurred that recognizing those complexities will be important, particularly when it comes to the next generation of Iraqis with high expectations. Yet, both parties will need to move on from that history if a mature, normalized bilateral relationship is to occur.

- Expectations of both countries need to be realistically assessed and communicated. Iraqis need to understand that American attention has turned inward to address domestic issues. Furthermore, U.S. international attention has shifted away from the Middle East toward great power competition. On the other hand, Americans need to exhibit greater patience with Iraq. The nation is changing for the better, albeit slowly.
- Security will always be a focal point of the relationship, but should not be the only topic for collaboration. Participants proposed greater cooperation on climate change and education exchange as avenues toward a more sophisticated relationship.

Long History and Complicated Involvement

Said one Iraqi participant, “We can’t forget that the relationship is bounded by history.” During the dialogue conference, participants from both Iraq and the United States outlined the long, complicated history of the bilateral relationship. Although many discussions focused on recent developments and the near-term future, policymakers in



Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi meets with President Joe Biden at the White House in July 2021. Source: [The White House](#).

the United States typically forget about the full scope of four decades of substantial American involvement with Iraq. It is a relationship oscillating between distrust or partnership, mutual need or adversarial goals, peace and war.

Deep involvement began in 1980 with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, which the United States saw as an opportunity to counter a mutual adversary through military assistance and weapons. The relationship took a turn for the worse during the 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent 1991 Gulf War, which led to more than a decade of tense confrontation. That culminated with the U.S. invasion in 2003, which ended the Baathist regime. U.S. combat troops were withdrawn from the country in 2011 under the Obama administration, only to return due to the threats posed by the Daesh (ISIS/ISIL) in 2014–2015. Throughout those decades, the relationship focused primarily on security concerns. As an Iraqi participant commented, "The problem I have with the U.S. military presence in Iraq is that [security] has become the relationship, rather than being the anchor or just an aspect of the relationship."

This post-2003 security-focused period of the relationship now appears to be coming to a close with a new, uncertain era ahead. In December 2021, the Biden administration formally ended the U.S. combat mission, shifting to an "advise, assist, and enable"¹ posture. However, as one Iraqi participant noted, popular and political pressure has risen significantly within Iraq for the removal of the remaining 2,500 U.S. troops, particularly among Shia political groups. It is unlikely in the near term that the U.S. may make other political concessions to satisfy Iraqi politics. As one participant noted, security concerns remain, such as the possible resurgence of Daesh. An American participant noted that only a major crisis could change the U.S. troop posture. "Typically the U.S. is in reactive mode in foreign policy. Until there is a crisis, and until there is a top-level consensus that [something] needs to be dealt with, Iraq will not be on the radar." With the status of forces unlikely to change, an opportunity exists to transition the U.S.–Iraq relationship to a more routine bilateral engagement via other mutual needs.

Managing Expectations

"The main problem in the U.S.–Iraq relationship is the expectations," said one participant familiar with both the American and Iraqi perspectives. He continued, "All expectations

¹Jane Arraf, "U.S. Announces End to Combat Mission in Iraq, but Troops Will Not Leave," The New York Times, December 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/world/middleeast/us-iraq-combat-mission.html>.



An oil drilling rig located south of Basra. While oil remains an important source of external revenue, participants agreed that oil may not be a path to an improved relationship between the US and Iraq. Image Source: [Mokhtar Alagha](#).

were geared toward what the U.S. can do for Iraqis. On the other hand, the U.S. expected Iraq to be the strong, stable ally in the Middle East that would support the [U.S.] policies in the region.” For two decades, participants reported that both sides had high expectations of the other, but slow progress, mismanagement, and diverted attention led to a slow, growing disappointment. As an Iraqi participant admitted, “The U.S. really needs a different approach to Iraq if it wants to keep its strategic interests. However, Iraq also has to change. The U.S. is no longer an occupier and Iraq has to take control and understand that it is a sovereign country.”

Participants posited that policymakers in both countries need to understand the following when pursuing a future path for the relationship:

- **Security will always be a major factor of the relationship.** Although many participants acknowledged that the relationship needs to evolve beyond just security, they also stated that this was one aspect the U.S. could positively influence. Security will likely remain a factor, due to Iraq’s geostrategic location and importance to global commerce. An American participant stressed, “There are many places around the world where the U.S. maintains troops and has maintained

good relations with the host government.” An Iraqi participant agreed, but highlighted that such a security arrangement needs to be based on “mutual respect” and permission of the Iraqi government. The participant further commented, “Senior leaders can coalesce on the idea, particularly if the U.S. promises not to use bases in Iraq for missions abroad.” Therefore, an opportunity does exist for a more mature security arrangement.

- **U.S. attention has shifted to domestic matters.** Domestic factors now dominate political discussions on the Federal level. Said one American, “If there’s a bipartisan consensus, it is that we need to focus on the U.S. itself rather than the outside.” Political focus shifted away from the threat of international terrorism to a slew of domestic priorities such as domestic extremism, infrastructure, the pandemic, and inflation. This shift occurred under both the current and two previous administrations, and is coupled with a tacit acknowledgment of the limits to U.S. international intervention.
- **U.S. international attention has shifted away from the Middle East and Iraq.** As one American participant noted, “Iraq is not the center of the universe and neither is the Middle East.” He continued, “There was a time when Iraqi prime ministers had weekly calls with the U.S. president.” That time is over. Attention in American foreign policy has shifted toward “big-power competition” and most recently to the war in Ukraine. This of course has also led to a realignment of both military and civilian aid, meaning that Iraq and the region can expect less in coming years.
- **The governments of Iraq and the U.S. both require more patience.** Participants from both countries stressed the need for greater patience in the relationship. “We need to see more rationality in the U.S. expectations from Iraqis,” specifically on its internal complexities. That comment was mirrored by another participant who stressed the importance of understanding the limits of American intervention and the changes in American attention and interests. A participant noted positively, “Iraqis are making change, yes. It is taking time, but it is happening.”



Parched central marshlands in Iraq in 2018. Climate change will have a severe impact on Iraq and dealing with its impacts could be a key point of cooperation with the U.S. Image source: [John Wreford](#).

- **Oil may not be a long-term pathway forward.** Iraq is currently the fifth largest oil producer in the world.²^[1] Especially given the high price of oil in 2022, oil sales will likely remain an important focal point in the near term. But participants from both countries questioned how long this would be sustainable. As an American noted, “Oil isn’t what it used to be,” meaning that the geostrategic importance of oil will decline as energy needs evolve. An Iraqi participant lamented that oil is keeping Iraq in the status of a “rentier state” leading to inequity in wealth and civil services. Another Iraqi participant warned that the drier climate being caused by climate change will decrease potential oil output. A substantial amount of water is required for oil extraction. All of these factors foretell a future that cannot focus solely on an oil economy.

Diversifying and Normalizing the Relationship

If the U.S.–Iraq relationship is to evolve to a more normalized posture, participants concurred that other areas of partnership will need to improve. To that end, participants

² U.S. Energy Information Administration, Independent Statistics and Analysis, “International: Petroleum and Other Liquids,” <https://www.eia.gov/international/data/world/petroleum-and-other-liquids/annual-petroleum-and-other-liquids-production>.

made several suggestions to open alternate pathways to partnership, ones that would evolve the relationship beyond just security and toward a more routine bilateral relationship.

- **Climate change is a mutual concern.** Addressing climate change is a major priority for the current American administration and also a critical concern for Iraq. Agriculture continues to be “very key to stability” in the country’s economic diversification, already accounting for 18 percent of output. Another participant concurred arguing for improvements, “The agriculture is using old methods. We are seeing a major decline in wheat production and other food production.” This is an economic sector in which the United States can provide material and instructional support. This could include development of better agricultural methods, exchanges with Americans in other climate-stressed environments, expertise in water management, and other forms of assistance.
- **Education exchanges.** Multiple participants called for improving and increasing the number of educational exchanges. In the 2019–2020 academic year, nearly 31,000 Saudi Arabian students were enrolled in American institutions compared to Iraq’s 965 students.³ The number of American students studying in Iraq in contrast was two.⁴ Reasons for this dichotomy are complex, but risk aversion in both countries is a major factor. American students and scholars are reluctant to go to Iraq, and Iraqis find it difficult to procure visas to come to the U.S. “We need to be less risk-averse with exchanges,” said one American participant. Another called for additional Fulbright opportunities and continued support of the American universities in Iraq. Cooperative efforts in educational exchange and development would be a significant long-term investment, one that has proven successful in other American bilateral relationships.
- **Speak directly to the new generation.** Participants called for more direct outreach to the younger generation of Iraqis. According to one, nearly 50 percent of Iraqis today were born after the U.S. invasion in 2003 and are therefore not personally aware of the relationship before that time, nor of life under the Saddam

³ IIE Open Doors, “All Places of Origin,” November 15, 2021, <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/all-places-of-origin/>.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, USA Study Abroad “Iraq.” December 23, 2021, <https://studyabroad.state.gov/countries/iraq>.

regime. Many of them did, however, grow up with high expectations of the United States. “After 19 years, a new generation has different expectations: jobs, services, and seeing good government.” There is not much that the U.S. can do for many of those issues. As one noted, “Dependency is not forever.” But, engaging this new generation could spawn collaborative efforts in politics, religion, media, art, and sports—gradually improving the state of the relationship. A participant further noted that the U.S. needs to do a better job promoting the positive activities being conducted in the country.



The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations around the world. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Türkiye.

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