

**مركز البيدر للدراسات والتخطيط**

**Al-Baidar Center For Studies And Planning**



# Strategic Dialogue between the United States and Iraq during the Biden era

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## About Center

Baidar Center for Studies and Planning is a non-governmental and non-profit organization established in 2015 and registered with the NGO Directorate in the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers in Baghdad.

The Center seeks to contribute to developing the state and its institutions, by proposing ideas and practical solutions to the main problems and challenges facing the state, including improving public sector management, policies and strategic planning, using reliable data and best practices. The Center engages the relevant authorities in the state with regular meetings to support this objective and utilises the support of international organizations dedicated to assisting Iraq's development. The Center also seeks to support economic reforms, sustainable development and provide technical assistance to the public and private sectors. The Center also seeks to support development of the private sector to provide job opportunities for citizens through training and upskilling, in a way that reduces dependence on government institutions and contributes to supporting and diversifying the country's economy.

The Center aims to utilise the vast amount of potential in Iraq's human resources by organizing programs to prepare and develop promising young people, including leaders capable of proposing, adopting and implementing visions and future plans that advance society and preserve its value system based on the commitment to a high moral standard and rejection of all types of corruption.

## Strategic Dialogue between the United States and Iraq during the Biden era

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The Iraqi side, represented by the Iraqi government, held a new negotiating dialogue with the United States of America through electronic platforms in early April. The first rounds of strategic dialogue between Baghdad and Washington were held last June, while the second was held during August 2020. These dialogues come in an attempt to complete the agreement of what is known as the strategic framework that was signed by the American and Iraqi side, and this tour was led by the Iraqi Foreign Minister Fouad Hussein, while the United States was represented by Anthony Blinken, Minister of Foreign Affairs in the administration of President Biden. The Iraqi delegation included representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government. After the dialogue concluded, the two sides issued a joint statement, the most important characteristic of which is that it was written in a diplomatic manner, and was concerned with the general agreed upon issues. Among the most important paths referred to in the statement was the following:

### **First: Emphasis on their close bilateral relationship**

The two sides reaffirmed their close bilateral relationship, which benefits the American and Iraqi peoples. The two countries reiterated the importance of the strategic relationship between them and affirmed their determination to continue to take further steps to strengthen this relationship, in a manner that serves the interests of both countries and achieves security, stability and prosperity in the region. The United States welcomed the opportunity to reaffirm and strengthen its partnership with Iraq. The two governments look forward to further discussions on the above-mentioned issues at the meeting of the Higher Coordination Committee for Strategic Dialogue to be held at a later date.

### **Second: security and economic cooperation**

Discussions covered issues of security, counterterrorism, economy, energy, and the environment. The United States commended Iraq for recent steps, including accession to the New York Convention on the Recognition of Foreign Arbitral

Awards and the introduction of a visa-on-arrival system to promote international trade and foreign investment. Both countries intend to work closely together, as Iraq is committed to implementing economic reforms in order to diversify its economy, improve the business climate and help create a more vibrant private sector. In this regard, the US delegation reiterated that the US companies can assist in this diversification by investing in projects that would create jobs, improve public services and help develop energy resources for the country. The United States expressed its support for Iraq's efforts to reform the energy sector so that its citizens can obtain electricity at cheaper and more reliable rates, thus reducing power outages. The two countries affirmed their support for diversifying Iraq's energy sources by building closer relations with its neighbors in Jordan and in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, and by moving forward with electrical grid interconnection projects.

### **Third: Emphasis on the principles in the Strategic Framework Agreement**

The two delegations reaffirmed the principles agreed upon by the two countries in the Strategic Framework Agreement. The United States renewed its respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq and the relevant decisions issued by the Iraqi legislative and executive authorities.

### **Fourth: Cooperation in the sanitary-epidemiological field**

Recognizing the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting global economic recession, the two delegations reaffirmed their strong economic partnership, the statement said. The two countries also discussed increasing cooperation to combat the Covid-19 pandemic and manage water resources. The US government has contributed by providing the necessary funding to renovate and equip Iraqi public health laboratories, and donated Covid testing equipment and personal protective equipment such as masks, and condoms, among others; It has also trained Iraqi epidemiologists to identify and respond to current and future outbreaks.

### **Fifth: Addressing the climate emergency Case**

Iraq and the United States pointed to their common intention to address the climate emergency and work together to promote clean energy and combat climate change, by working with the private sector in the United States, and

by implementing projects that promote clean energy development and improve solar electricity generation and energy savings, and benefit from the burning Iraqi gas. These projects should play a role in improving Iraq's Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Climate Agreement, a development that is warmly welcomed by the United States. The United States and Iraq discussed cooperation with the American scientific agencies in managing and protecting Iraq's environment and natural resources, including water. The United States welcomed progress between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government in reaching agreements on budget, energy, and other strategic issues.

#### **Sixth: The issue of the sovereignty of the Iraqi state**

The sovereignty of the Iraqi state has witnessed a significant deterioration since the early years of political change, as major and regional countries struggle over territory to try to influence and impose agendas. In these recent negotiations, the United States reaffirmed respect for Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity and respect for freedom of expression guaranteed by the Iraqi constitution.

#### **Seventh: Protecting the popular protest movement**

The two delegations discussed how the United States could best support the Iraqi government to provide protection for peaceful protesters and civil society activists and follow-up judicial accountability.

#### **Eighth: Supporting the upcoming parliamentary elections**

Iraq welcomed the United States' support for the parliamentary elections by funding the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq in the parliamentary elections, issued by a republican decree to be held on 10/10/2021.

#### **Ninth: Finding solutions for the return of internally displaced people**

The United States reaffirmed its continued determination to support Iraq in providing sustainable solutions for voluntary, safe, and dignified return of internally displaced people, and to assist those communities that have been made targets of genocide by ISIS.

#### **Tenth: Judicial Cooperation to Combat Corruption**

The two countries discussed their intention to make further progress in the field of judicial cooperation, the recovery of stolen assets, combating corruption and prosecuting its perpetrators .

### **Eleven: Security and the fight against terrorism**

In the field of discussing the security and counterterrorism, the United States and Iraq reaffirmed their mutual determination to continue bilateral security coordination and cooperation. The two countries reiterated that the presence of US forces in Iraq is at the invitation of the Iraqi government and to provide support to the Iraqi security forces in their fight against the Islamic State. And based on the increasing capacity of the Iraqi security forces, the two parties confirmed that the mission of the American forces and the coalition forces; a topic that always raises controversy inside Iraq and occupies a complex place in any negotiations; as stressed by both parties, that the security conservation now has moved to focus on training and advisory tasks allowing the redeployment of any remaining combat forces in Iraq, and determine the timing of this during the upcoming technical talks. The transition of U.S. and other international forces from combat operations to training, equipping, and assisting the ISF reflects the success of their strategic partnership and ensures support for the ISF's ongoing efforts to ensure that ISIS cannot once again threaten the stability of Iraq.

### **Twelve: Protection of diplomatic facilities and embassies**

The Government of Iraq reaffirmed its commitment to protect the personnel of the international coalition, its convoys and diplomatic facilities, while the two countries stressed that the bases in which the members of the American forces and the coalition are located are Iraqi bases and their presence is only to support Iraq's efforts to combat ISIS. The two countries intend to continue talks through the Joint Military Committee to ensure that the activities of the international coalition are aligned with the needs of the Internal Security Forces and are appropriately supported, including the Peshmerga.

### **Thirteen: the field of education and culture**

With regard to higher education, science, and culture, the two governments discussed the United States' support for Iraq's efforts to strengthen the higher education sector in cooperation with American universities through, among other things, the Fulbright Program, the US Embassy's Higher Education Partnership Initiative, and expanded US support for the Liberated Universities Initiative. The United States and Iraq intend to identify additional ways to support Iraq's plans for higher education reform and to strengthen U.S.-Iraq university partnerships. The

two delegations also reviewed progress in their joint efforts to preserve Iraq's rich cultural heritage and religious diversity, and affirmed their intent to cooperate to return Iraqi cultural property illegally transferred to the United States to its rightful place in Iraq. There is news that, last August, the Iraqi government recovered the Baath Party archives from temporary preventive detention at the Hoover Institution. The State Department helped arrange this transfer, and the Defense Department transferred 6.5 million documents to Baghdad. There is no doubt that these work files of the Baath Party are part of the history of the Iraqi people, and their return to Iraq can be considered as a tangible outcome of the recent US-Iraqi strategic dialogue. The two countries also discussed the progress of a US grant to the Smithsonian Institution to continue and expand the Nimrud Antiquities Rescue Project, which supports Iraq's goals preserving cultural heritage. Finally, the two delegations pointed the ways to share the cultural and historical achievements of the Iraqi people with the rest of the world through online exhibitions.

### **The American withdrawal from Afghanistan and its repercussions on Iraq according to the American vision**

As we indicated that the issue of the US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan dates back to the era of the former US President Barack Obama, and this was actually implemented in 2011 by withdrawing from Iraq. This withdrawal had major and dangerous repercussions on the local national security of Iraq as well as the region and the world due to the control of ISIS, which included Extremists of the world over large areas of the west and north of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. In a study written by the American writer Mark N. Katz for a newspaper website Katz said that whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the former US President Barack Obama's strategy towards the «war on terror», one aspect of it is clear now. The US president decided to withdraw his country's forces at that time from Afghanistan and Iraq. US combat troops have already left Iraq. Although Obama agreed to send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan in that time, he has stated firmly that he intended to begin reducing the presence of US forces there in mid-2011 despite the fact that the generals he himself appointed were opposed to doing so. After ISIS invaded Iraq, many American forces returned to Iraq at specific bases in western Iraq and the Kurdistan region, in addition to the presence of a large number of American advisors at the American embassy in Baghdad in the framework of the so-called international coalition in the war on terrorism. After the rise of Donald Trump as a Republican president with a utilitarian orientation

to power in the administration of the White House, he also decided to withdraw his forces from Afghanistan and reach understandings with the Taliban for the purpose of facilitating the withdrawal task, while Trump did not resolve the issue of withdrawal from Iraq, and with the arrival of Biden he already decided to withdraw from Afghanistan, which raised many questions about the repercussions of that withdrawal, especially on Iraq, including what are the repercussions of the American decision in Afghanistan, and may it be like that for Iraq?

Reports indicate that Washington will have less influence in these two countries as its withdrawal from them continues. If the United States comes under heavy pressure to control events in them even with a large number of forces, it will obviously be less able to do so with fewer or none. Specifically, withdrawing its forces from Iraq means that the United States will not be able to prevent the outbreak of renewed sectarian violence there. Withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan means that the United States will not be able to prevent the re-emergence of the Taliban on a larger scale than it did while American forces were there.

Another possible consequence of the US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan would be (indeed) the growth of the perception that US power and influence is waning in the greater Middle East (and perhaps elsewhere), Katz writes. Just as when the United States withdrew its forces from Indochina at the beginning of 1973, the United States will be seen—internationally and domestically—as entering a period when it is less willing or able to intervene militarily. This, of course, would be welcomed by some, chiefly America's opponents, but also by some of its resentful «friends», and unwelcomed by others chiefly the beneficiaries of interventions ending, as well as those who now fear that the United States does not protect them from their opponents.

A third outcome likely stems from the two previous ones: American withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the growing perception that the United States is now less likely to intervene, or to re-intervene, may convince America's adversaries that they have succeeded in getting the United States out of these two countries, and that they might succeed in getting it out of the others as well. The parties that may be able to convince themselves of this include Iran on the one hand, which sees the policies of the United States against the political system in the Islamic Republic, and on the other hand, Al-Qaeda, and the various branches of Al-Qaeda in different countries. And America's withdrawal from Iraq and



Afghanistan may encourage other countries to increase their participation in them, especially Pakistan in Afghanistan, and Iran in Iraq (and perhaps Afghanistan as well).

Ironically, the fourth conclusion, according to Katz, may be that some of America's allies in the region have become less susceptible to US influence. If they see the United States as less willing and unable to defend them, they may decide that they need to make alternative security arrangements. These can range from preemptively attacking their opponents, trying to reach an interim settlement with them, or seeking other allies either in addition to or instead of the United States. It remains to be seen whether any of these alternative security arrangements will prove successful if, of course, an attempt is made. However, just trying to implement any of them can increase volatility in an already volatile region. So a US withdrawal from Afghanistan may do nothing to alleviate many other problems in the region, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Indo-Pakistani hostility, or the rise of Islamic extremism in Pakistan, Somalia and elsewhere.

Of course, the presence of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan has done nothing to mitigate them either. In other words, there are many problems in the region that are likely to persist no matter what happens in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As for the repercussions of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's control of power, which may have effects on the rise of jihadist Islam, according to the American writer Aaron Zelin, four main elements will play their role in shaping the features of jihadist activity related to the withdrawal from Afghanistan, which are the mobilization of foreign fighters, and the method of the interaction of the other extremist groups with the control of the «Taliban», the identity of the released prisoners, and to which extent the main figures in Al-Qaeda may return to the Afghan arena. With regard to the first component, jihadist demographics in Afghanistan have changed dramatically since al-Qaeda first began attracting public attention in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike its initial composition of an Arab majority, its members today are composed mostly of local Afghans and individuals from the Indian subcontinent, neighboring countries, and Southeast Asia. As for ISIS, it has kept a group of foreign fighters in Afghanistan since 2015, albeit much smaller than al-Qaeda. ISIS, the historical enemy of the Taliban, may now try to take advantage of its opponent's gains, so ISIS seeks to intensify its recruitment campaign by introducing itself in the image of the legitimate Afghan

Islamic State, which has the right. In other words, a jihadist mobilization campaign is inevitable for takfiri jihadist movements.

On the other hand, there is a question that was the subject of many analyzes, programs and public opinion, that is, whether the Afghan scenario will be repeated in Iraq? People watched the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan last week with the withdrawal of US forces from the country, and watching the unusual images of desperate Afghans clinging to an American plane during takeoff raised serious questions about the recurrence of the same scenario!

I imagine that the scenario of the repercussions of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan is not possible in Iraq if we look at it as a coherent social and political unit. There are factors that are not likely to repeat the same scenario starting from the issue of sudden US withdrawal as evident with Afghanistan, which has surprised American public before others. Secondly, the multiplicity of power centers and the presence of a balance of forces gives strength to Iraq in any challenge that the country may face, especially after the experience of the US withdrawal in 2011 and ISIS's invasion of Iraqi cities in 2014, but soon the joint Iraqi forces managed to defeat ISIS. The third factor is that some environments are still incubating members of the terrorist organization ISIS, but most of the social and tribal forces and activities in the areas west and north of the capital Baghdad, do not allow any security chaos that exposes their cities again to terrorist, security or even political danger as the rise of the Baath party with its political and personal address with the development in the reconstruction of infrastructure and the provision of services in those cities, and the escalation of the Iraqi government in imposing its control and laws on those cities. The fourth factor is the presence of religious authorities in the city of Najaf and Karbala which have a great influence on the hearts of people in Iraq and a great response to them do not allow terrorist organizations and even the banned Baath Party to think of repeating the scenario of the rise of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. Finally, the fifth factor is that the United States of America realizes the geostrategic and geoeconomic importance of Iraq, so it will not leave Iraq as easy as it left Afghanistan.

### **Summary and conclusions:**

From the foregoing, the mentioned principles between the American and Iraqi sides seem very important, in achieving openness, cooperation, and progress for the Iraqi side, whose political, economic and service system is suffering a significant deterioration, and there is an increasing popular discontent for mismanagement and the fragility of the political system and the overall political process, but the problem is that these principles and the points that were mentioned by the joint statement between the Iraqi and American side, as we mentioned above were almost similar to what was stated in previous pledges and dialogues between the two sides, and are usually not binding the two parties, especially the stronger party, which is the United States, and remain only ink on paper. Hence, what is important for the United States which has already been credited with the liberation of Iraq from the tyrannical regime and sacrificed hundreds of soldiers killed in Iraq, is to preserve its existence, its economic, political and even geostrategic interests, and the interests and security of its allies, and to seek to achieve pressures on its opponents through the countries of the region itself. As for Iraq, it has more than one orientation. There are different directions for political community components in their acceptance of the US military presence in Iraq, while most Shiite political forces are reticent of a US military presence in Iraq for various reasons, including the fear that this presence may turn into a threat to their political presence or their allies from some countries of the region, while most Kurdish forces in the region and some Sunni forces welcome the American military presence. It is mentioned that the American military forces, after reducing their presence, spread in Iraq about 3 thousands of international coalition troops, among which 2,500 US troops are to fight State organization ISIS in the country. The US Department of Defense has tried since months to replace them in a tactical operation with troops of NATO (NATO) from some regions, while formally kept troops in the region and other rules, Including Ain al-Assad's base in Anbar province, along with a large number of consultants and trainers in Baghdad and other provinces. As democratic departments in the White House want, either under President Obama or under the Current President Joe Biden, to

reduce their military presence in Iraq and countries as Afghanistan. In return, political forces in Iraq are trying to pressure for a complete withdrawal of the military forces for various reasons, as we have indicated, and electoral propaganda may also have a push in it as well , but in return, there is an official political orientation and

it may be under a US pressure to achieve a balance in Iraq's foreign relationship in order to pull the rug out from the US opponents in Iraq. This maybe represented by Iraq's tendency to join in what is known as the new Levantine Alliance, which includes Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan, and the development of the relationship between the Iraqi government and a number of Gulf countries for the same reasons. Thus, the United States does not end its military presence in Iraq unless there is a balance that restores its regional allies to Iraq, therefore, it will continue to monitor the situation in densely, especially since the country is heading towards parliamentary elections that determine the shape of the three presidencies. As for the issue of repeating the Afghan scenario after the American withdrawal from it and the Taliban movement's control of the country, it is unlikely that Iraq will share the fate of Afghanistan because of the great difference between the two countries, and this is evidenced by the terms of the principles in the rounds of the strategic dialogue between the United States and Iraq.