مركز البيدر للدراسات والتخطيط

Al-Baidar Center For Studies And Planning

Stability and Change in Iraqi Foreign Policy 1920–2020

A Group of Researchers

Abstract

Following its formation over the past century, modern Iraq has experienced three distinct types of political systems and undergone significant transformations both domestically and internationally. In terms of foreign policy, the key question is: how were the priorities of Iraq's foreign policy set with each change in its political system? In 1920, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq came under the mandate of the United Kingdom. In 1921, the constitutional monarchy was established under British tutelage, and in 1932, Iraq was withdrawn from British guardianship. During this period, maintaining stability and achieving independence were among the most critical components of Iraq's foreign policy. Subsequently, following three military coups in the 1950s and 1960s, the country's policy was shaped around establishing a socialist government and Arab unity. However, the pursuit of this goal was hindered by internal repression and external aggression from neighboring countries. In the next period, with the overthrow of the Baath Party government during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the political system changed once again. A new set of priorities emerged—ones that shifted away from identity and ideological readings, focusing solely on consolidating concepts of democracy and national interests.

Introduction

The establishment of foreign policy principles in any country aims to consolidate the foundations and rules for achieving national interests, reflecting the nature of the political system and the orientation of the political elite in the best interest of their society. When formulating foreign policy principles, local priorities are taken into account; based on these, the approach to foreign relations with other countries in the international system is determined. These principles create distinct circumstances, depending on the nature of political and legal systems, as

well as the differences among societies and states. Regardless of changes caused by international events, foreign policy principles may sometimes shift as a result of coups, revolutions, political movements, or social developments within the country, thereby imposing new conditions and requirements. At this stage, due to the preservation of constant national principles such as geography and population, significant changes occur in perspectives and the redefinition of social identity, which also leads to stability or change in foreign policy principles.

This research aims to examine the stability and changes in Iraq's foreign policy during the country's recent political transformations. Therefore, we begin by discussing how Iraq's political structure developed, and then examine the priorities and rules of foreign policy in all three political systems over the past century. [1][2]

Formation of the Political System in Iraq

Iraq, or Mesopotamia, is one of the oldest inhabited regions, having undergone numerous political and social changes throughout history. Control has shifted between small governments and dynasties, as well as large empires, ultimately forming the modern state of Iraq. Its official borders were defined after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I through the Sykes-Picot Agreement, with British and French intervention. The original structure of this new country consisted of three main ethnic and religious groups: Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds, alongside smaller minorities, including Turkmen, Jews, and Assyrian Christians.

At the start of internal Arab protests against the Ottoman government, despite British promises to King Faisal to support the formation of a government in Iraq and Syria, Britain's main intention was to turn Iraq into an Anglo-Indian territory and strip it of independence. In July 1920, a revolution broke out in Iraq protesting

the British presence. Some Shia clerics and tribal leaders attempted to establish an Arab government under one of Sharif Hussein's sons and create a National Consultative Council. Although this uprising was suppressed, it prevented Iraq from becoming a British colony like India. This revolution, known as the "1920 Revolution," led to Britain forming a provisional monarchy in Iraq, which the Iraqi Cabinet administered under British supervision. In 1921, Faisal I was elected king of Iraq in a popular referendum.

In 1925, Baghdad witnessed the signing of Iraq's first constitution during King Faisal I's reign, consisting of 123 articles. According to Article 19, the political system was defined as a "hereditary constitutional monarchy." In October 1932, after approval by the United Kingdom, Iraq became a member of the League of Nations, and British protection ended, granting the country official independence.

In the 1950s, several factors contributed to Iraq's growing inclination toward socialist thought, including dissatisfaction with Britain's performance, the creation of Israel, the Arab-Israeli wars, and opposition to the Baghdad Pact. Leftist and socialist organizations played a significant role, laying the groundwork for several coups in 1958, 1963, and 1968, all of which were centered on socialist ideas, opposition to the West, and efforts to join the Eastern Bloc.

On July 14, 1958, General Abd al-Karim Qasim led a coup against the monarchy, establishing a republican system. Upon taking power, the monarchy was abolished, and the previous constitution was replaced with a new law of 30 articles, defining Iraq as a "presidential state." After Qasim's assassination in a Baathist conspiracy and a bloody coup in 1963, Abd al-Salam Arif became head of government, but later opposed the Baath Party. After he died in a helicopter crash, his brother Abd al-Rahman Arif took power. In the Ba'athist coup of 1968, Hassan al-Bakr overthrew the Arif government and formed the Revolutionary Command

Council. Al-Bakr was forced to resign in 1979 under pressure from his deputy, Saddam Hussein, who then became president.

From 1968 to 2003, Iraq's government structure was primarily shaped by the Baath Party's influence. Until 2003, Iraq was governed by a constitution approved in 1969, defining Iraq as a "democratic popular republic." Iraq experienced violent dictatorial rule under Saddam Hussein, which led to internal suffocation and two wars against Iran and Kuwait, ultimately resulting in his overthrow by the United States due to his political conflict with the West. US forces captured Saddam in December 2003, tried him in a special court for crimes committed by Iraqi leaders, and sentenced him to death in 2006. With Saddam's fall, a new era began. Initially, General Garner managed Iraq's affairs, followed by Paul Bremer as the civil administrator. Bremer's most significant act was forming the Interim Governing Council in July 2003, with 25 representatives from various parties and political groups.

In January 2005, the interim government, established by the US and its allies as a caretaker government, was tasked with drafting the Iraqi constitution and holding National Assembly elections. In a popular referendum held in October of that year, despite differences among various Iraqi groups and parties, the new constitution was approved by 79% of the Iraqi population. Article 1 of the new constitution defined Iraq's system as a "democratic federal parliamentary republic." The process of nation-building in Iraq differed significantly from the assimilation or ideological representation policies of the Baath era, given the participation of all ethnic and sectarian groups in political and social life.

Iraq's Foreign Policy in the Constitutional Monarchy Period

As previously mentioned, on November 11, 1920, Iraq came under the League of Nations mandate, administered by the United Kingdom, and gained independence in 1932. After independence, Iraq's foreign policy faced three main issues that significantly affected its political relations:

- **First Issue:** The presence and strong role of Britain in Iraq since its inception. Due to the occupying government, Iraq was subject to British interventions, with its foreign relations managed through the British High Commission during the mandate period. After joining the international community in 1932, its foreign relations were managed by the British ambassador.

- **Second Issue:** Iraq's unique geographical situation has always imposed existential and vital challenges. The first point was the country's limited access to the Gulf coasts, which resulted in a climate similar to that of landlocked countries. The second was its location between two major regional powers, Iran and Turkey, a constant concern for Iraqi rulers. The third was the presence of oil-rich provinces in border areas. Iraqi policymakers considered these geographical factors and sometimes made political decisions influenced by psychological circumstances.

- **Third Issue:** Iraq was at the beginning of its nation-building process, facing significant ethnic and religious challenges. The lack of a national government had a substantial impact on foreign policy, with internal stability, territorial unity, security, and the continuity of the newly formed political system being the main concerns of foreign policy and the focus of the political elite. These factors reduced Iraq's level of political initiative and independent political role. Nevertheless, due to its geopolitical importance, Iraq played a significant role

in the region, most notably through the Baghdad Pact—a collective defense organization between Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and the UK, established after World War II, which gained increasing importance due to the bipolarity of the international system.

At this time, the US and the Soviet Union sought to establish regional defense alliances to expand their influence. In West Asia, due to the creation of Israel, the Arab-Israeli war, and opposition to British bilateral agreements in Egypt and Iraq, there was a wave of suspicion toward the West, making it difficult to establish a regional deal for the Western bloc.

The Baghdad Pact initially began as a military agreement between Turkey and Iraq following a visit by Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes to Iraq in 1955. The Iraqi government believed the pact secured its borders and supported it regarding the Palestinian issue. In February 1955, the Defense and Security Cooperation Agreement between Turkey and Iraq was signed, allowing other countries to join the agreement. The pact's institutions were formed by a council of ministers from the member governments. Subsequently, the UK, Pakistan, and Iran joined, with the US as an observer. Although the US provided much of the military funding, it did not participate for several reasons, including a desire to avoid open confrontation with the Soviet Union. The pact faced strong Soviet opposition, which saw it as a regional alliance against it. The Baghdad Pact played a significant role in the bipolar international system, ultimately leading to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement. After the 1958 military coup in Iraq, the country withdrew from the pact, which was renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).

The primary objectives of Iraq's foreign policy during this period were to pursue independence, demonstrate political stability within the international

system, and gain respect in the Arab world. Iraqi leaders believed that achieving these goals depended on greater interaction with the Western bloc, with regional agreements falling within this framework. With Abd al-Karim Qasim's 1958 coup, new perspectives emerged in Iraq's political arena, influencing foreign policy in various ways.

Iraq's Foreign Policy after the Monarchy

The end of the monarchy in Iraq changed the nature of the new government's foreign policy both regionally and internationally. According to Article 12 of the new constitution, two strategic goals were established: to establish a socialist system based on scientific and revolutionary foundations, and to achieve Arab economic unity. Efforts are focused on financial planning, guidance, and leadership to achieve these objectives. In this context, having an active role in the Arab world and the Gulf region became a key issue, especially during the Baath Party's rule after 1968.

Regardless of the nature of Iraq's political system, leaders in Baghdad have consistently faced challenges rooted in the country, including its landlocked geography, the strategic desire for a broader Gulf presence, influence over Arab policies, the Kurdish issue in the north, and the lack of harmony among political and ethnic groups. Under Ba'athist rule, especially during Saddam Hussein's era, dissatisfaction with political borders led to an adventurous foreign policy characterized by military solutions to disputes, exclusion of various population groups from political participation, and the imposition of the government's will on the people. This extended to foreign policy, leading to confrontational and adventurous actions, such as Saddam's military attacks on Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990.

Internationally, the emphasis on establishing a socialist system brought Iraq closer to the Soviet Union. After leaving the colonial base in the region, Iraq signed agreements with the Soviet Union in various fields, including the peaceful use of nuclear energy and access to modern weaponry. Previously, in July 1955, the Soviet government had criticized Iraq's decision to join the Baghdad Pact. After the 1958 coup, the young Republic of Iraq, led by Abd al-Karim Qasim, restored relations with the Soviet Union in March 1959. These relations peaked between 1969 and 1973, with the signing of a 15-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in April 1972. This strategic partnership encompassed oil field development and military cooperation until the late 1980s, when it began to evolve with the onset of Soviet political reforms. Despite purchasing weapons from France, China, Brazil, South Africa, and the US to maintain independence in foreign policy, the Soviet Union remained the primary arms supplier for the Iraqi army.

With Saddam's attack on Iran in 1980, Iraq received significant support from the West and the US to counter the Iranian revolution. However, after eight years, the bloody war ended with UN Resolution 598, without achieving Saddam's pan-Arab ambitions. By 1990, Iraq's official statistics showed debts of $42 billion, much of which had been provided as annual loans by Gulf states during the war. After the war, Kuwait refused to cancel Iraq's debts, and Saddam reignited the border dispute, invading and occupying Kuwait in 1990. This unilateral action destabilized the region, threatened global oil prices and the world economy, and provoked a strong US response, which expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait through a UN coalition.

During this period, the Soviet Union, in alignment with the US, criticized Saddam's occupation of Kuwait and supported UN arms embargoes on Iraq. Iraq's relations with the US remained tense during the 1990s. In 1998, the UK and US

accused Iraq of possessing illegal weapons, culminating in the 2002 US decision, led by George W. Bush, to remove Saddam Hussein after the US adopted a counterterrorism policy following the September 11, 2001, attacks. Although Iraq at the time prioritized establishing a socialist system and leading the Arab world, severe internal repression and military aggression against neighbors prevented these goals from being achieved, ultimately leading to the Baath Party's demise and Saddam's fall in 2003.

Iraq's Foreign Policy in the Federal Parliamentary Period

With the fall of Saddam and the Baath regime, Iraq's foreign policy frameworks changed both domestically and internationally, with new priorities emerging. The first issue was addressing the aftermath of the former regime, particularly Iraq's status under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and the establishment of diplomatic relations with other countries. During this period, Iraq's foreign policy axes shifted fundamentally, with efforts to escape UN sanctions and establish balanced diplomatic ties through the fulfillment of international obligations.

After 2003, Iraq sought to play its role as part of the Islamic and Arab world, adhering to the principle of good neighborliness, non-interference in other states' internal affairs, resolving disputes through official channels, and establishing international relations based on mutual interests. Relations with neighbors, which were severely damaged in the past, have become one of the biggest challenges, requiring significant efforts for reconstruction and development. The importance of these issues was reflected in the new Iraqi constitution, with Articles 7, 8, and 9 expressing Iraq's desire for non-interference and peaceful bilateral relations.

Article 7 prohibits any entity or approach that adopts racism, terrorism, takfir (excommunication), sectarian cleansing, or incites, prepares, glorifies, promotes,

or justifies them, especially the Baath Party and its symbols, under any name, and bans such entities from Iraq's political pluralism.

Article 8 states that Iraq shall observe the principle of good neighborliness, commit to non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, seek peaceful resolution of disputes, establish relations based on mutual interests and reciprocity, and respect its international obligations.

A clause in **Article 9** requires the Iraqi government to respect and implement Iraq's international commitments regarding the prevention of the proliferation, development, production, and use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, as well as related equipment, materials, technologies, and communication systems.

In the new period, especially after 2003, the Iraqi government sought mechanisms to overcome inherited obstacles such as combating terrorism, internal conflicts, and defining its position in international interactions. This required policies that would achieve these goals quickly, away from tension and confusion, with political decisions based on strategy rather than reaction. Diplomatic efforts aimed to end Iraq's relative isolation by leveraging opportunities and providing security guarantees to others, thereby enhancing Iraq's role in international and regional organizations, including the UN, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Due to the region's strategic environment, this period saw efforts to align Iraq's foreign policy with a balanced and neutral approach.

The announced foreign policy in the new period, as stated in the constitution, can be analyzed along four axes:

1. **Principle of Independent Foreign Policy Performance:**

Iraq's foreign policy after 2003 seeks autonomy and alignment with pure national interests, away from external pressures and regional or international conflicts, to act in a balanced manner.

2. **Avoidance of Hostile Regional Alliances and Conflicts:**

Iraq's foreign policy has avoided hostile alliances in the region, shifting from reactionary diplomacy to planned actions, thereby paving the way for a broader regional role. Having suffered greatly from the previous regime's erroneous war policies, Iraq now emphasizes constructive diplomatic dialogue and peaceful engagement, refusing to become a base for threatening any regional state.

3. **Combating Racism, Terrorism, and Extremism:**

Iraq has taken a stand against any racist, terrorist, or extremist approach, participating in the international coalition against ISIS and cross-border military operations in Syria against ISIS. Cooperation with NATO falls within this context.

4. **Strategic Openness within Peaceful Engagement:**

Iraq seeks cooperation with all regional and international powers, setting aside differences and playing a balancing role to bring perspectives closer together. Nevertheless, Iraq faces challenges in implementing its declared policies, including issues inherited from the previous regime, such as escaping UN resolutions and improving relations with neighbors, as well as the significant challenge of ending occupation and achieving complete political independence.

The presence of American forces and bases remains a concern for Iraqi foreign policy, with the US influencing Iraq's relations with other countries. For example, during this period, the US imposed restrictions on Iraq's political cooperation with Russia, rejecting Russian support proposals in the fight against ISIS.

Despite all obstacles, the new foreign policy after 2003 found a practical angle to secure national interests, without adhering to any specific model, humanitarian, global, or ideological mission. Even the focus on Arab nationalism, once a

constant in Iraq's foreign policy, no longer has a place in the new orientation. The official redefinition of Iraqi identity has prioritized values such as pluralism, peaceful coexistence, democracy, and Iraqi nationalism, as reflected in a neutral and peaceful foreign policy in the region.

The Autonomous Kurdistan Region and Its Foreign Relations

A notable aspect of Iraq's new structure following 2003 is the constitution's emphasis on federalism. On October 15, 2005, Iraq adopted a federal system, officially recognizing Kurdistan as the first federal region, comprising four provinces: Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja. This region enjoys relative autonomy in many areas, including political and economic relations. The constitution recognized the Kurds as a distinct nation from the Arabs and declared Kurdish as one of Iraq's official languages.

In federal systems, the division of powers between the central and regional governments is usually specified in the constitution, supporting the right to self-government for states. However, in matters such as foreign policy and national defense, the central authority retains control. Federalism in Iraq has also created challenges due to ambiguities in the constitution, resulting in legal and practical difficulties.

The idea of establishing a Kurdish state dates back to the Treaty of Sèvres after the Ottoman Empire's collapse, with Articles 62, 63, and 64 referring to Kurdish independence. However, when Atatürk came to power, the treaty was disregarded and replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, thereby canceling the formation of a Kurdish government. After Iraq's formation and during the monarchy, the issue was completely ignored. After the 1958 coup, Qasim also did not favor the problem, and tribal disputes were used as a significant factor in perpetuating the government's period.

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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 utilizes the support of international organizations dedicated to assisting Iraq's development. The center also seeks to support economic reforms, and sustainable development and provide technical assistance to the public and private sectors. The center also seeks to support the 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 utilize 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.

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