

## IRAQ'S TANGLED FOREIGN INTERESTS AND RELATIONS

PAUL SALEM

A decade after Saddam Hussein's fall, Iraq still lacks a centralized foreign policy that advances its national interests. Internal divisions, such as those between the Shia-dominated regime in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil, have given rise to alternative power centers with their own policy priorities. Iraqi foreign policy will remain disjointed and incoherent until Baghdad resolves the issues polarizing the country.

### Key Themes

- Iraq's national interests in building military capacity, reviving the energy sector, meeting domestic water and energy demand, and increasing trade and investment have prompted Baghdad to rebuild relations with regional and global partners.
- Iraq's rapidly growing economy is emerging as an engine of growth in the Middle East and a key player in international energy markets.
- Counterterrorism cooperation with Washington and multibillion-dollar arms deals with Russia and the United States have become cornerstones of Iraq's international security posture.
- Contracts with Western, Chinese, and Russian energy companies have revitalized its oil sector, and Baghdad has built relations with Iran, Turkey, several Gulf countries, Jordan, and Syria to help meet its energy-transport, water, and electricity needs.
- Erbil and many Sunni Arab opposition leaders have pursued their own foreign relations and international priorities that often conflict with Baghdad's official foreign policies.
- Baghdad has moderately supported the Syrian regime while Erbil and Iraqi Sunnis have sided with the rebels in the ongoing civil war. This has exacerbated Iraq's fragmentation by pushing Baghdad closer to Iran, another Damascus supporter, while driving Iraqi Kurds and Sunnis closer to Turkey and the Gulf countries backing the Syrian opposition.

### Implications for Iraq's Future

- Despite its significant economic growth, Iraq will not regain significant political or strategic influence in the Middle East for some time.
- Until Iraq resolves domestic disagreements over energy, internal borders, and power sharing, Erbil and the Sunnis will continue advancing their own international agendas and Iraq will lack a coherent foreign policy.
- Developments in Damascus will affect Iraq's foreign relations. A resurgent Syrian regime will strengthen Baghdad and its ties to Iran, while opposition victories will empower Iraq's alternative power centers and force Baghdad to reconsider its regional alignments.
- Any thaw in Iran's relations with the West—like the recent nuclear deal between Tehran and several world powers—will reduce the tensions in Iraq's foreign policy.
- Iraq's interests are best served by a centrist foreign policy, not a narrow regional alliance with Iran. Baghdad should continue pursuing strategic and economic relations with various Middle Eastern and international powers.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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