

The Position of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Toward Iraqi Governments After 2003

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Introduction

The Saudi-Iraqi relations have been a subject of increasing interest on both bilateral and regional/international levels due to the strategic importance of these two nations. This importance grants them added value and geopolitical strength, characterized by mutual influence on regional and international developments. The Saudi-Iraqi relations have gone through multiple phases, taken various paths, and been affected by local, regional, and international factors. These circumstances necessitated a transition from one phase to another based on the interests of both nations, their foreign policy objectives, and the factors influencing their mutual interaction. Iraq has experienced internal events that led to rapid reactions and counter-reactions in its relations with Saudi Arabia, marked by chaos and clashes amid shifting dynamics.

From this perspective, this study explores Saudi Arabia's stance toward successive Iraqi governments post-2003—a new political phase that witnessed instances of attraction and tension, severed ties, mutual accusations, and most recently, significant rapprochement over the past four years.

First: Saudi Arabia's Position on the U.S. War on Iraq in 2003

Shortly before the war began, Saudi Arabia's official and popular stance crystallized in rejecting the aggression on Iraq, aligning with the broader Arab and Islamic consensus formed before the conflict. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's position resonated with that of the Arab League, which issued a resolution rejecting any harm to Iraq's security and stability. Similarly, the Islamic nations within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) expressed their opposition to the idea of aggression.

This stance was officially reflected in the statements of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz on March 17, 2003, shortly before the war broke out. He declared that the Saudi government opposed the war on Iraq, even though it had no means to prevent its occurrence⁽¹⁾.

On April 4, 2003, Saudi Arabia proposed an initiative announced by its Foreign Minister, Saud Al-Faisal, which called for the resignation of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to spare the country from war. This initiative was, in fact, the first of its kind introduced by Saudi Arabia. It was later followed by several similar proposals from other countries, advocating for the deployment of Arab forces to Iraq following Saddam's resignation and the conduct of elections under United Nations supervision. However, all these initiatives were categorically rejected by the Iraqi regime at the time⁽²⁾.

1. Dr. Hisham Suwadi Hashim, "The Position of Saudi Arabia on New Developments in Iraq," Published Research, University of Mosul, College of Education, History Department, *Journal of Education and Science*, Vol. 19, Issue 3, 2012, p. 191.
2. Al-Inteqa Magazine, Beirut, Issue 2410, April 4, 2003.

Saudi Arabia also requested that the United States exhaust all diplomatic avenues before deciding to go to war. Publicly, the stance of Saudi religious scholars and the media, which opposed the aggression, exerted significant public pressure on the government to adopt an anti-war position. Based on these positions, Saudi Arabia ultimately managed to persuade the United States to designate Qatar as the launch point for the invasion of Iraq to avoid provoking Arab and Islamic public opinion.

Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia maintained logistical support for U.S. forces, providing substantial financial assistance during the war to preserve its strategic relationship with the United States. Riyadh feared that the invasion could result in the emergence of a pro-Western Iraqi regime that might reduce Washington's reliance on Saudi Arabia, particularly as the U.S. began discussing the importance of democratizing the region.

In the event that the new Iraqi regime was not aligned with Saudi interests, it would likely gravitate toward the Iranian-Syrian axis, a scenario deemed highly unfavorable for Saudi Arabia, which shares a 700-kilometer border with Iraq. Consequently, Saudi Arabia decided to increase its support for the U.S. to ensure the continuity of their strategic partnership. During the 2003 invasion, the Dhahran Airbase was among the facilities utilized for military operations in Iraq⁽¹⁾.

It can also be argued that Saudi Arabia feared the possibility of Iraq emerging victorious from the war, even though such an outcome seemed unlikely given the firm resolve of the United States. However, if it were to happen, Iraq would return stronger than before, shedding the political, economic, and military constraints that had previously weakened its regional political role. This, naturally, would pose a significant threat to Saudi Arabia.

As a result, Saudi strategic perception aimed for a change in Iraq's political system without direct intervention. This approach reflected Riyadh's interest in ensuring that Iraq would not regain its former strength, which could disrupt the balance of power in the region and undermine Saudi Arabia's security and influence⁽²⁾.

It also appears that the United States feared a potential rapprochement between Iran and Iraq, particularly as both parties sought to resolve their longstanding disputes from the eight-year war, in addition to their positions opposing the United States and Israel.

Second: Saudi Arabia's Position on Iraq and Shifts in Political Discourse After 2003

(From Cautious Openness to Delegitimization to Accelerated Openness)

3. Methaq Khairallah Julood, "Saudi-American Military Relations: Dhahran Base as a Model," Published Research, University of Mosul, Center for Regional Studies, May 15, 2007, pp. 65–66.

4. Ghazi Daham, "Regional Conflicts: Reality and Future," Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, Published Research, 2009, p. 52.

Following the occupation of Iraq on April 9, 2003, Saudi Arabia's stance shifted significantly. Riyadh began to worry about Iraq turning into a battleground for regional conflicts, particularly with key regional powers that Saudi Arabia viewed with suspicion, chief among them Iran.

It seems that curbing Iranian influence within Iraq became a growing Saudi priority, which strengthened the hypothesis that Saudi Arabia might have been willing to accept Iraq as a theater for regional power struggles. This reflected Saudi concerns over Iran's expanding foothold in Iraq⁽¹⁾. When Saudi Arabia evaluates Iraq, it identifies several strategic risks, which can be categorized as follows:

1. The Perception of Iran as a Regional Power:

Saudi Arabia views Iran as an influential regional force neighboring Iraq and a competitor to Saudi interests. It is believed that Iran would significantly intervene in shaping Iraq's political landscape. Therefore, Saudi Arabia might prefer Iraq to maintain relative independence with a capable military force that can safeguard its sovereignty and prevent Iranian interference. However, this preference is conditioned on Iraq not posing a threat to Saudi security through possessing such military capabilities, to avoid a recurrence of the "Saddam Hussein model"⁽²⁾.

2. Islam as the Official Religion:

While Islam is the official religion of both Iraq and Saudi Arabia, it was expected to serve as a unifying factor strengthening bilateral relations. However, post-2003, religious issues have been a primary obstacle to fostering such relations. This is largely due to sectarian differences, with Saudi Arabia adhering to Sunni Islam and the majority of Iraq's population being Shia. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's approach to leveraging religious tools for political objectives has further complicated these relations⁽³⁾.

3. Fear of the Iraqi Federal Model:

Saudi Arabia harbors concerns about Iraq's federal model, which could naturally encourage marginalized and impoverished regions—particularly the Shia-majority Eastern Province—to demand federalism. Within this context, Saudi Arabia remains wary of scenarios involving potential divisions, as previously hinted at by the United States following accusations of Saudi support for terrorism. Consequently, Saudi policy has

5. Asim Mohammed Omran, "The Saudi Political System in the American Perception," Published Research, *Journal of International Studies*, Center for International Studies, University of Baghdad, Issue 26, 2005, p. 75.

6. Mohammed Mujahid Al-Zayat, "Iran and the Situation in Iraq," *Middle East Papers*, National Center for Middle East Studies, Issue 36, 2007, p. 47.

7. Joseph McMillan, "Saudi Arabia and Iraq...", Previously Mentioned Source, p. 8.

leaned towards opposing federalist tendencies in Iraq and advocating for a centralized governance structure⁽¹⁾.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia structured its relations with Iraq post-2003 based on this vision, which can be outlined as follows:

Phase One: Saudi Arabia's Cautious Engagement with Iraq (2003–2014)

One of the significant paradoxes faced by the Iraqi political process post-2003 at the regional level was the clear contradiction between the orientations of Saudi Arabia and the United States, despite the existence of a deep strategic alliance between the two nations since the 1990s. This contradiction can be attributed to several key Saudi concerns, most notably, (Possibilities of Iraq's growing role and significance in the American strategic perspective, accompanied by a decline in Saudi Arabia's influence and standing; suspicions regarding the transfer of Iraq's democratic political experience and peaceful power transitions to Gulf political systems in general and Saudi Arabia in particular; concerns about the strengthening of Iranian influence in Iraq due to the dominance of Shiite political forces in the Iraqi political scene post-2003, which might contribute to enhancing Iran's regional role and status).

These factors led Saudi Arabia to structure its relationship with Iraq during this period based on the successive Iraqi governments in power, as follows:

1. Saudi Position on the Iraqi Governing Council:

After the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the United States initially sought to manage Iraq directly. However, due to internal and external circumstances, both regional and international, it decided to establish an Iraqi government to support its efforts. On July 13, 2003, the formation of the Iraqi Governing Council was announced, which would eventually lead to the establishment of a transitional government⁽²⁾.

The establishment of the Iraqi Governing Council had a notable impact on the regional, particularly Gulf, stance. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries welcomed and recognized the council, driven by the understanding that Iraq faced two potential scenarios: Stability and New Relations: Iraq could achieve stability, paving the way for establishing new relationships with Gulf states, Collapse and Internal Chaos: Alternatively, Iraq might descend

8. Haider Ali Hussein, "Iraq and Neighboring Countries: Goals and Interests," Published Research, Center for Arab and International Studies, Al-Mustansiriya University, Baghdad, Issue 33, 2011, p. 14.

9. Mohammed Kareem Kazem & Mustafa Farouq Majid, "Iraq and the Arabian Gulf Region: The Race for Status and Regional Role," *Journal of International Studies*, Center for International Studies, University of Baghdad, Issue 66, 2016, p. 68.

into internal chaos, potentially becoming a new source of exported terrorism, which would have adverse effects on Gulf states.

In response, these countries adopted a pragmatic approach, choosing to acknowledge the council despite any legal dilemmas, recognizing it as a representative authority in Iraq⁽¹⁾.

Accordingly, Saudi Arabia's position aligned with that of the Gulf states in welcoming and recognizing the Iraqi Governing Council. Saudi Arabia regarded this step as significant in enhancing Iraq's security and stability. Furthermore, it encouraged Iraq to participate in the meetings of the Arab League, as expressed by the former Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal. He stated that this occasion could be an opportunity to restore Saudi-Iraqi relations to their natural state⁽²⁾.

The Gulf states reiterated their support for this step, and Saudi Arabia also welcomed the formation of the transitional government led by Iyad Allawi. On July 28 of the same year, Allawi visited Saudi Arabia, signaling a clear development in bilateral relations following the political change. Subsequently, the Saudi government announced the resumption of its diplomatic relations with Iraq on July 30, 2004⁽³⁾.

In 2004, Saudi Arabia initiated a project aimed at uniting Iraqis and encouraging them to adopt a comprehensive national political program based on reconciliation among various factions and rebuilding the state. This initiative involved inviting all Iraqi political forces to meet in Cairo, with the goal of encouraging Arab Sunnis to participate in the political process. Representatives of most Shia political forces attended, along with delegates from the Iraqi Association of Muslim Scholars, headed by its Secretary-General Harith al-Dhari. The discussions focused on two key issues: the participation of Arab Sunnis in the political process, including drafting a constitution and conducting parliamentary elections, and reaching an agreement on defining the U.S. presence in Iraq and ceasing military operations by Sunni armed groups.

However, the initiative quickly failed, marking the onset of sectarian war between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq, which claimed thousands of lives due to armed conflicts. In 2006, Saudi Arabia attempted once more to bring the opposing sides together during the Hajj season in Mecca to calm tensions and prevent further conflict. Despite these efforts, the initiative failed due to a lack of engagement from Shia political forces. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia announced what became known as the "Mecca Declaration," which called for an end to sectarian violence⁽⁴⁾.

2. Saudi Position on the Ibrahim al-Jaafari Government:

10. Dr. Hisham Suwadi Hashim, "The Position of Saudi Arabia on New Developments in Iraq," Previously Mentioned Source, p. 193.

11. Al-Zaman London Newspaper, Issue 1708, January 12, 2004.

12. Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, Issue 7377, July 31, 2004.

13. Moayad Al-Wondawi, "Iraqi-Saudi Relations: Where to?" Published Research on the Arab News Agency Website, June 13, 2017, Available at: <http://arab-newz.org/archives/8609>.

Saudi Arabia praised the success of the January 2005 elections, considering them a significant step for the Iraqi people toward reclaiming their sovereignty and independence. In an official statement, the Kingdom declared, "We congratulate the government and people of brotherly Iraq on the success of the electoral process," adding, "We hope that the results of the Iraqi elections will lead to national reconciliation, ensuring the unity and independence of the country"⁽¹⁾.

However, the election results, in which the Shiite-dominated United Iraqi Alliance secured 143 parliamentary seats out of 275 members in the National Assembly, caused concern and posed a threat to Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom feared that Iran would extend its influence in Iraq through this coalition. Saudi Arabia was particularly apprehensive about the potential of this Shiite momentum to impact political leadership decisions and the selection of key officials, which could, in turn, inspire Shiites in Gulf countries, especially in Saudi Arabia, to awaken politically and demand their rights"⁽²⁾. This prompted the Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud Al-Faisal, to state, "The deteriorating situation in Iraq continues to pose a serious challenge to the security of the region, calling for an end to all forms of interference in Iraq." This was a clear reference to Iranian influence in Iraq and the threat it represented, according to the Saudi perspective"⁽³⁾.

These developments later had negative repercussions on the bilateral relations between the two countries. This became evident following the formation of the government on April 28, 2005, headed by Prime Minister Ibrahim Al-Jaafari. Despite his visit to Saudi Arabia on November 29 of the same year to initiate the activation of bilateral relations, the Kingdom refused to receive Iraqi pilgrims and engaged in media escalation against his government until the end of his term in December 2005"⁽⁴⁾.

3. Saudi Arabia's Stance Toward the Al-Maliki Governments (2006–2014):

After the Iraqi Council of Representatives elections on December 15, 2005, the United Iraqi Alliance, with its predominantly Shia political identity, again emerged victorious, this time securing 128 parliamentary seats out of 275 members. In contrast, the Iraqi Accord Front, representing the Sunni political faction, won 44 parliamentary seats, on which Saudi foreign policy heavily relied to introduce a semblance of balance"⁽⁵⁾.

14. Jassim Younis Al-Hariri, "Strategic Relations between Iraq and GCC Countries (Past, Present, and Future) 2003–2020," University of Basra, Center for Gulf Studies, 2012, p. 327.

15. Refer to: Independent High Electoral Commission in Iraq, "Names of Winners in the First Elections for the National Assembly and Provincial Councils," 2005.

16. Joseph McMillan, "Saudi Arabia and Iraq...", Previously Mentioned Source, pp. 10–11.

17. Dr. Lama Al-Imarah, "Security Implications for the Arabian Gulf Post-March 2003 Events," *Journal of Political Issues*, Vol. 4, Issue 13, 2008, p. 108.

18. Methaq Khairallah Julood, "The Future of Iraq's Relations with Gulf Countries in the Political Domain," Published Research, *Journal of Regional Studies*, University of Mosul, Center for Regional Studies, Issue 21, January 2011, pp. 350–351.

Political relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq began to strain, entering a phase of deterioration and decline. Shia political factions in Iraq directed explicit accusations at Saudi Arabia, alleging its support for terrorist groups in Iraq, such as al-Qaeda, Tawhid wa al-Jihad, and others. Despite this tension, several prominent political figures and leaders, both governmental and partisan, maintained positive relations with Saudi Arabia. Among these figures were Iyad Allawi, Muqtada al-Sadr, Sayyid Ammar al-Hakim, and the Secretary-General of the Association of Muslim Scholars, Harith al-Dhari, alongside many other leaders.

However, the indicators of worsening relations between the two countries significantly escalated. Saudi Arabia accused Iraq's Shia and Kurdish political factions of marginalizing the Sunni community from political participation, particularly during the first elections for the National Assembly in 2005 and the subsequent drafting and ratification of the Iraqi constitution in the same year. This development gave rise to a Saudi political perception opposing the new Iraqi constitution, which at the time posed a challenge for Saudi Arabia in terms of recognizing the legitimacy of Iraq's political system⁽¹⁾.

Saudi Arabia's hostile stance toward the Iraqi regime intensified following the ascension of Nouri al-Maliki, leader of the Shiite Islamic Dawa Party, to the Iraqi premiership. Developments in Iraq did not align with Saudi interests, as al-Maliki pursued policies that diverged from both Saudi and U.S. preferences. From Saudi Arabia's perspective, this represented an American leniency in applying pressure on Iraq.

Consequently, Saudi Arabia adopted a strategy of direct pressure, aiming to delegitimize Iraq's entire political process on both regional and international platforms. Through various slogans and pretexts, the kingdom sought to support Sunni political factions in their quest for greater political representation and access to power. Among the prominent justifications put forth by Saudi Arabia during this period were Claims of political marginalization of Sunni Arabs in favor of Shia and Kurdish factions, The Iraqi government's failure to foster national reconciliation among the country's diverse components⁽²⁾.

With the improved security situation in Iraq and the initiation of dialogue with the United States toward signing a strategic agreement, Saudi Arabia found itself faced with two potential courses of action. Reopening diplomatic relations with Iraq and discreetly working to replace the current government with one that would be more aligned and responsive to Saudi interests. Officially declaring its refusal to reestablish diplomatic ties with Iraq, which, however, was not the preferred option for the Saudi administration. As a result, Saudi Arabia opted to allow Iraq to reopen its diplomatic mission in Riyadh, appointing Ghanem Al-Gamili as the head of the Iraqi mission on April 25, 2009. It is notable that this step was taken only after American

19. Refer to: Final Report on the December 15, 2005, Iraqi Parliamentary Elections, International Electoral Mission in Iraq, Annex No. 4: Summary of Seats and Votes, 2005, p. 28.

20. Anwar Adel Mahdi, "Iraqi-Saudi Relations: Legacy of the Past and Future Prospects," Previously Mentioned Source, p. 203.

pressure, highlighting the U.S. influence on Saudi decisions during this period⁽¹⁾, On the other hand, Saudi Arabia appointed its ambassador to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Fahd Al-Zaid, as a non-resident ambassador to Iraq in 2012. This occurred three years after Iraq reestablished diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia⁽²⁾. It is worth noting that Saudi Arabia's alignment with U.S. policy is neither unusual nor new. Amid the Iraqi-Saudi crisis in 2007, Saudi Arabia, prompted by the United States, forgave 80% of Iraq's debts incurred during the Gulf War with Iran, which amounted to an estimated 15 billion U.S. dollars⁽³⁾.

Based on all the above, Saudi Arabia feared a series of challenges, risks, and repercussions arising from the post-2003 political situation in Iraq that could threaten its national security, as outlined below:

- a. The Return of a Strong Iraq Saudi Arabia might desire a moderately strong Iraq with a capable military that can deter external interventions and protect its sovereignty. However, it would not accept Iraq becoming as powerful as it was in the past. The legacy of Iraq's pre-2003 regime, with its military and political adventures in the region, remains deeply ingrained in Saudi perceptions⁽⁴⁾, Saudi Arabia has often likened Iraq to a "Russia in the Middle East"—a nation with significant military power, a robust technocratic system, and a strong industrial base, enabling it to play influential roles on the international stage.
- b. Tribal Empowerment: Saudi Arabia views the tribal councils it supported and funded in western Iraq, such as the model of Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha's efforts to combat the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, as a double-edged sword. On one hand, these councils contribute to extending security and political disputes into Saudi Arabia through their presence in Iraq. On the other hand, the growing role of these tribes and their involvement in Iraq's political, security, and social landscape could encourage Saudi tribes to pursue similar actions, thereby posing a potential threat to Saudi Arabia's internal security⁽⁵⁾, The fears of the Saudi royal family intensify, particularly regarding Arab tribes with shared affiliations with their Iraqi counterparts. These tribes could potentially merge and exert pressure on the Kingdom, compelling it to make concessions that would weaken its authority. As a countermeasure, Saudi Arabia actively encouraged the integration of these tribal councils into Iraqi security forces to isolate them from tribal influence and limit their autonomy⁽⁶⁾.

21. Mona Hussein Obeid, "Iraqi-Saudi Relations Post-2003," Published Research, Center for Strategic and International Studies, University of Baghdad, *Journal of the College of Education for Women*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, 2018, p. 7.

22. Mona Hussein Obeid, "Iraqi-Saudi Relations Post-2003," Previously Mentioned Source, p. 9.

23. Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, Issue 12139, February 22, 2012.

24. Hussein Hafidh Wahib, "Iraqi-Saudi Relations," *Journal of Political Studies*, Bayt Al-Hikma, Baghdad, Issue 13, 2008, p. 65.

25. Haider Ali Hussein, "Iraq and Neighboring Countries," Previously Mentioned Source, p. 17.

26. Same Source, p. 18.

- c. Saudi Arabia fears the resurgence of terrorism in Iraq, which could once again pose a threat to its national security, as it did during the years 2003 to 2007⁽¹⁾, However, some hardliners within the Kingdom believe that the resurgence of terrorism in Iraq could provide Saudi Arabia with an opportunity to send more fighters, thereby deflecting the threat away from its borders and redirecting it toward Iraq. Ultimately, this could serve the interests of the ruling family.

The Second Phase: Saudi Arabia's Accelerated Engagement with Iraq (2014–2022)

Following the formation of the Iraqi government under the leadership of Haider al-Abadi, Saudi Arabia adopted a different approach toward Iraq. The Kingdom decided to restore diplomatic relations and engage seriously with Iraq, particularly in combating terrorism and fighting ISIS. This shift aligned with Iraq's new strategy of opening up to its Arab neighbors in general and the Gulf states in particular, Saudi Arabia took the initiative to resume relations by reopening its embassy and appointing Thamer al-Sabhan as its ambassador to Baghdad on December 30, 2015, after a diplomatic break that lasted two decades⁽²⁾, This marked the beginning of a new phase, followed by a visit from Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir in February 2017. This visit paved the way for a series of significant exchanges between officials from both countries.

The trajectory of the relationship took a downturn during the tenure of Ambassador Thamer Al-Sabhan due to his controversial statements and sharp criticism of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)⁽³⁾. This prompted the Iraqi government to formally request the replacement of the ambassador, a request that was granted on October 16, 2016. Ambassador Abdulaziz Al-Shammari was appointed as his successor, continuing the mission of strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries. This development culminated in the establishment of a Joint Coordination Council aimed at elevating the relationship to a strategic level and opening new avenues of cooperation across various sectors, including economic, political, security, and intelligence domains⁽⁴⁾.

The year 2017 can be regarded as a turning point in Saudi Arabia's political approach toward Iraq, marking a shift from cautious engagement, skepticism, and attempts to delegitimize Iraq's political system to a new phase of consistent and positive relations between both parties. This transformation was facilitated by the presence of Haider al-Abadi as Prime Minister and the

27. Haider Ali Hussein, "Iraq and Neighboring Countries," Previously Mentioned Source, p. 19.

28. Reopening of the Saudi Embassy in Baghdad, News Report, Al-Arabiya, June 1, 2016, Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjluPeCFbxM>

29. Statements by Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim Al-Jaafari and Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir in Baghdad, February 25, 2017, Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjZuHUmp4uI>.

30. Saudi Ambassador Attacks Popular Mobilization Forces and Accuses Iran of Interfering in Iraqi Affairs, News Statement, Shafaqna News Agency, January 24, 2016, Available at:

<https://iraq.shafaqna.com/AR/23671>.

significant military victories Iraq achieved against the terrorist organization ISIS. These developments created a foundation for common interests and eased the previous tensions. This progressive openness was evident in a series of visits and agreements between the two nations, highlighting their growing cooperation⁽¹⁾.

One of the most significant visits during this period was the visit of Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir to Baghdad. The visit aimed to discuss several key strategic issues, most notably the fight against terrorism and enhancing cooperation between the two countries to eliminate terrorist organizations⁽²⁾.

Following the visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister to Iraq, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi met with the Saudi King in March 2017 during the Arab League Summit in Jordan. Subsequently, Saudi Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih visited Iraq in May 2017 to discuss oil-related matters and Iraq's relationship with OPEC. On June 12, Al-Abadi received an official invitation to visit Saudi Arabia and participate in the Arab Islamic American Summit.

This visit occurred at a highly sensitive time for Iraq, both domestically and internationally. Iraqi forces were on the brink of defeating ISIS, and attention was focused on how the government would manage a post-ISIS Iraq. The country was also preparing for general elections scheduled for April 2018, while tensions with the Kurdistan Region over potential independence were escalating.

Iraq's relations with its Arab neighbors were under constant scrutiny, with criticisms about its perceived alignment with Iran and its distance from its Arab identity. Furthermore, some parties were encouraging Iraq to deepen its involvement in the Syrian conflict, potentially placing it in confrontation with multiple regional and international actors.

Economically, Iraq was struggling due to low oil prices and faced urgent needs for funds to rebuild the country after the devastation caused by the war against ISIS. Saudi Arabia saw an opportunity to improve its relationship with Iraq for various reasons. The Kingdom could offer Iraq financial loans and open new avenues for trade with more favorable terms than those Iraq currently enjoyed.

This visit marked a pivotal moment, culminating in the establishment of the Iraqi-Saudi Joint Coordination Council. This council was designed to elevate bilateral relations to a strategic level and strengthen cooperation across various sectors⁽³⁾.

31. Iraq Officially Requests Saudi Arabia to Replace Its Ambassador for "Exceeding Diplomatic Duties," News Report, BBC Arabic, August 28, 2016.

32. Mona Lisa Freiha, "Saudi Arabia Extends a Hand to Iraq Post-ISIS with U.S. Encouragement," *Al-Nahar Newspaper*, February 27, 2017.

33. Moayad Al-Wondawi, "Iraqi-Saudi Relations: Where to?" Previously Mentioned Source.

In a strategic shift, Saudi Arabia moved from a policy of alienating Iraq's Shia population to a more indirect engagement approach. This shift was part of a long-term reassessment of its policies over 14 years, culminating in the realization that a significant portion of Iraqi Shia were willing to prioritize their national identity over their sectarian affiliation.

Building on this understanding, Saudi Arabia initiated efforts to penetrate Iraqi society through the Shia community and their southern provinces. In August 2017, the Kingdom took a symbolic step by partially reopening the Arar border crossing with the Shia-majority Najaf province to facilitate trade. This move was accompanied by plans to reduce customs tariffs on Saudi goods, paving the way for a broader economic engagement. The border crossing was officially inaugurated on November 19, 2020, marking a milestone in Saudi-Iraqi relations⁽¹⁾. Later, in October, direct flights between Baghdad and Riyadh resumed at a remarkable rate of 140 flights per month after a long historical hiatus. Saudi efforts were particularly focused on Basra, Iraq's wealthiest province and home to a Shia-majority population. This was highlighted by the Kingdom's announcement of plans to open a consulate in the province, coinciding with an unprecedented influx of Saudi-owned companies seeking investment opportunities.

Leading the charge was the Saudi petrochemical giant SABIC, which expressed its intention to revive Basra's dilapidated petrochemical plant. This initiative aimed to reduce the market dominance of Iranian products in the region. Additionally, Saudi Arabia expressed interest in investing in the fertile agricultural lands along the shared border, capitalizing on the availability of groundwater in the area.

On the other hand, Iraqi officials hoped to leverage these developments to persuade Saudi Arabia to reopen the pipeline that had been closed since 1990, enabling the transport of Iraqi oil via the Red Sea. This initiative symbolized a mutual interest in advancing strategic economic ties between the two nations⁽²⁾.

Following the Iraqi parliamentary elections held on May 12, 2018, the results revealed significant political shifts. The Al-Nasr Alliance, led by Saudi Arabia's primary Shia ally, Haider al-Abadi, secured third place among Shia groups, winning 42 parliamentary seats. This positioned it behind the Sairoon Alliance, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, which claimed 54 seats, and the Al-Fateh Alliance, led by Hadi al-Amiri, representing the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) with strong ties to Iran, which secured 48 seats.

In fourth place came the State of Law Coalition, led by Nouri al-Maliki, a traditional adversary of Saudi Arabia, with 25 seats. Following this was the National Wisdom Movement (Tayar Al-

34. Development of Saudi-Iraqi Relations: Motives and Challenges, Strategic Vision Center for Studies, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Available at:

<https://fikercenter.com/position-papers>.

35. Inauguration of Arar Border Crossing Between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, Russia Today, November 19, 2020, Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuYRevTc8rs>.

Hikma), led by Ammar al-Hakim, known for his moderate political stance and his openness to Arab countries, with 19 parliamentary seats⁽¹⁾. The political blocs began initiating steps to form alliances aimed at creating the largest parliamentary coalition responsible for forming the government⁽²⁾.

The consultations resulted in the formation of the government led by Adel Abdul Mahdi, marking the beginning of a new phase in Iraq-Saudi relations. This phase was characterized by cautious openness and apprehension on the part of Saudi Arabia toward the incoming Iraqi leadership, which had a historical record of serious understandings with Iran. Initially, the Kingdom welcomed Iraq's newly formed leadership, as the Saudi leadership congratulated the elected Iraqi President, the designated Prime Minister, and the Speaker of the Parliament on gaining the confidence of the Iraqi people⁽³⁾.

The Saudi political perspective anticipated the amplification and strengthening of the shared Iraqi-Saudi political orientations achieved during the tenure of Haider al-Abadi. It hoped to see the continuation of a framework for strategic bilateral relations between the two neighboring countries. This new Iraqi leadership structure was expected to consider Iraq's internal political balances and avoid leaning towards Iranian orientations⁽⁴⁾.

Subsequently, the Kingdom received a high-level Iraqi governmental delegation aimed at enhancing mutual cooperation and bilateral relations. The delegation was accorded a grand reception by Saudi officials at the highest levels. During this visit, several meetings and discussions were held, culminating in the signing of 13 new agreements covering economic and security sectors, as part of a plan for mutual openness and collaboration⁽⁵⁾.

On September 25, 2019, the Iraqi Prime Minister paid a brief visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, lasting only a few hours. During the visit, he met with King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the city of Jeddah. Ostensibly, the visit focused on discussing bilateral relations, regional developments, and efforts to ease tensions, emphasizing Iraq's firm commitment to playing a positive role in mitigating the risks of conflicts and disputes, and fostering strong relations with all neighboring, friendly, and fraternal countries⁽⁶⁾.

36. Mohammed Al-Saeed, "Can Saudi Arabia Sway Iraq's Shiites in the Power Game?" Political Report Published on Al-Jazeera, Available at:

<https://www.aljazeera.net/midan/reality/politics/2018/6/12/>.

37. Independent High Electoral Commission, "Results of the Fourth Term Iraqi Parliamentary Elections," July 2018, Available at: <http://www.ihec.iq/HOME/IconFiles/pageC3.aspx>.

38. Joseph McMillan, "Saudi Arabia and Iraq...", Previously Mentioned Source, pp. 10–11.

39. Hussam Al-Hasani, "Reform and Reconstruction Alliance: Origins and Formation," Unpublished Research for the General Secretariat of the Reform and Reconstruction Alliance, Baghdad, January 24, 2019, p. 2.

40. Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and His Crown Prince Congratulate Iraq's New Leadership, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper*, Saudi Arabia, Issue 14555, October 4, 2018.

41. Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed, "Welcome to Iraq's New Leaderships," *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper*, Saudi Arabia, Issue 14555, October 4, 2018.

However, the deeper objective of this visit was to distance Iraq from the ongoing tensions and to condemn and denounce the terrorist attack that targeted Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil facility on September 14, 2019. Additionally, the visit included the delivery of an Iranian message to the Saudi leadership, advocating for a return to political dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The message reportedly urged Saudi Arabia to exercise caution and avoid hasty retaliation for the Aramco incident, as Iran had denied any involvement in the attack, according to the content of the message⁽¹⁾.

Although the Iraqi government subsequently engaged in regional political efforts with Egypt and Jordan to express solidarity with Saudi Arabia during the United Nations General Assembly meetings in New York and to condemn the unjust aggression that impacted Saudi Arabia's oil production capacity, the suspicions of Iraq's involvement in the incident were not entirely dispelled within Saudi circles. These lingering doubts led Saudi Arabia to adopt a cautious and wary stance, reevaluating its bilateral relations with Iraq and contemplating the possibility of Iraq's alignment with Iran in its political orientations⁽²⁾.

Saudi apprehensions grew increasingly over Iran's influence within the Adil Abdul-Mahdi government, particularly due to the internal political dynamics in Iraq during the government formation process. These concerns were fueled by the expansion of Iranian influence, which extended to the prime minister's office through the assertive role played by the Al-Binaa Alliance, led by Hadi Al-Amiri, a figure widely regarded by Saudi Arabia as Iran's proxy in Iraq, exerting significant influence over the Iraqi government⁽³⁾. The relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq gradually regressed into a phase of apprehension and decline until the resignation of Adil Abdul-Mahdi. This was followed by the appointment of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, the head of Iraq's intelligence service, on April 9, 2020, to form a new government. Al-Kadhimi is known to have strong ties with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, marking a potential shift towards improved bilateral relations⁽⁴⁾.

Saudi Arabia's position on the October 2019 protests in Iraq and the subsequent resignation of the Iraqi government was clearly influenced by the strategic shift in Saudi attitudes towards Iran following the Aramco oil facility attack. This incident had a profound impact on Saudi-Iranian relations, indirectly affecting Iraq's internal dynamics.

42. Signing of 13 Agreements Between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, News Report, Al-Arabiya.net, April 16, 2019, Available at:

<http://ara.tv/nmpfn>.

43. Prime Minister Dr. Adel Abdul Mahdi Arrives in Saudi Arabia, Iraqi Embassy in Riyadh, September 25, 2019, Available at:

<https://www.mofa.gov.iq/riyadh/?p=1307>.

44. Exclusive Interview with Former Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, Baghdad, November 30, 2020.

45. Hamza Mustafa, "Iraqi-Egyptian-Jordanian Solidarity with Saudi Arabia in a Summit That Included Saleh, Sisi, and King Abdullah in New York," *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper,* Saudi Arabia, Issue 14910, September 24, 2019.

Saudi Arabia perceived that Iraq was rapidly aligning with the Iranian axis, leading to a disruption in strategic balance due to Iraq's government policies favoring Iran, both in the volume and nature of agreements between the two countries.

In response to the Aramco attack, Saudi Arabia acted swiftly—within approximately two weeks—to counterbalance the perceived alignment. Alongside the UAE, Saudi Arabia reportedly played provocative roles against the Iraqi government during the October 2019 protests. These roles included Extensive media support through Gulf-based outlets to amplify the protests. Political endorsements aimed at legitimizing the demonstrations and highlighting their demands. Allegations of financial and intelligence involvement, including claims of supporting attempts to destabilize or overthrow the Iraqi political system. This period marked a significant escalation in the tensions between Iraq's government and its Gulf neighbors, fueled by broader regional rivalries⁽¹⁾.

With the formation of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's government, Saudi Arabia's stance became increasingly clear in its support and endorsement of the new administration. This backing was rooted in the strong relationship between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, which had been established since 2015 when Al-Kadhimi oversaw political relations and economic agreements that eventually led to the establishment of the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council.

The early Saudi welcome of Al-Kadhimi's government was neither surprising nor unexpected. Both King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman sent congratulatory messages to the new prime minister. However, Saudi Arabia's support did not stop at formal gestures. On May 7, 2020, the Crown Prince made a direct phone call to Al-Kadhimi, expressing Saudi Arabia's support for Iraq's growth and security and emphasizing the kingdom's commitment to strengthening bilateral relations.

This was followed by an official announcement from the Iraqi Prime Minister's office, confirming that Al-Kadhimi had received an invitation to visit Saudi Arabia, highlighting the intent to deepen ties between the two countries⁽²⁾.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia hoped that Mustafa Al-Kadhimi would be capable of restoring the lost balance and bringing Iraq back to its Arab fold, curbing the influence of Iran-aligned factions, and reestablishing the state's authority while enforcing the rule of law⁽³⁾.

46. Fadel Al-Nashmi, "Debate in Iraq Over the Implications of Al-Sadr Appearing with Khamenei and Soleimani," *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper*, Issue 14898, September 12, 2019.

47. Mustafa Al-Kadhimi: Iraqi President Assigns Intelligence Chief to Form New Government, News Report, BBC Arabic, April 9, 2020.

48. Nour Ayoub, "Complete Security Narrative of Iraq's Protests: Retaliatory Plan Sponsored by Washington and Abu Dhabi, Funded by Riyadh!" Political Report, *Al-Akhbar Newspaper*, Lebanon, October 26, 2019.

In conclusion, it appears that the Iranian and Saudi stances towards Iraqi governments have remained divergent and polarized. If Iran's position was positive, Saudi Arabia's position would be negative, firmly opposing alignment with Tehran. This divergence likely stems from each side's fear of the other expanding its influence within Iraq since 2003.

After the 2021 elections, which saw significant disagreements between factions supporting Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's continuation and the Coordination Framework forces opposing it, the Coordination Framework's candidate Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani was ultimately selected as Prime Minister.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries actively engaged with developments in Iraq, particularly after Al-Sudani's government gained parliamentary approval. Both the GCC and Saudi Arabia congratulated Iraq on the formation of the new government. Following this broad Gulf reception, Iraq issued a statement affirming its commitment to regional dialogue with all neighboring countries to ensure security and stability in the region.

In an interview with Asharq Al-Awsat, Al-Sudani emphasized, "Iraq and Saudi Arabia can establish a regional axis that serves as a cornerstone in the region and globally. I had discussions with His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman and found him receptive, forward-thinking, and genuinely committed to achieving this goal. We have laid out an agenda for reciprocal visits during my participation in the Arab-Chinese Summit."

It can be concluded that predictions suggesting a potential deterioration in relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia under Al-Sudani's government were inaccurate. These predictions were largely based on Saudi Arabia's stance towards the Coordination Framework forces and failed to distinguish between the Kingdom's position on Iraqi political factions and its post-2017 approach of engaging directly with Iraqi governments rather than political parties. This shift is supported by the significant economic and diplomatic collaboration between Iraq and Saudi Arabia under the current government.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Iraqi-Saudi relations have been and continue to be influenced by various regional and international dynamics, leading to fluctuations between periods of stability and instability. Notably, Iraq, post-2003, struggled to achieve integration with Gulf states, a situation largely impacted by Saudi Arabia's stance on Iraq's political process. However, the approaches adopted by the governments of Haider Al-Abadi, Adel Abdul Mahdi, and Mustafa Al-Kadhimi significantly reshaped Iraq's relationships with both Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Based on these developments, Iraq has the potential to enhance and strengthen its ties with the Gulf region by leveraging several shared files and issues with the GCC, as outlined below:

1. Iraq's Utilization of Arab and Islamic Factors in its Relations with Saudi Arabia:

Arab nationalism and Islam form a shared foundation between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, providing a significant gateway for creating common ground rather than points of conflict. This highlights that nationalism and religion can serve as an effective entry point, if utilized appropriately, to strengthen relations and establish mutual interests within Iraq and the broader region. Achieving this requires Iraqi foreign policy decision-makers to grasp the potential of shifting the relationship from confrontation and discord to healthy competition, ultimately ensuring a relationship that safeguards the interests of both parties.

2. Iraq as an Economic Market, Not a Battleground for Regional Rivalries:

This premise stems from the Iraqi vision of transforming its territory into a thriving economic market, rather than a battleground for political disputes among regional powers. Achieving this goal requires creating objective conditions and preparing an enabling environment for Iraq to play its role as a promising economic hub. Iraq possesses significant economic resources and opportunities that, if strategically leveraged, can realize this vision effectively.

3. Leveraging Iraq-Saudi Economic Exchange:

Iraq can utilize its economic relations with Saudi Arabia as a diplomatic tool to encourage Saudi Arabia to take meaningful steps toward dialogue with Iran. This could be achieved by emphasizing the potential increase in trade volume between Iraq and Saudi Arabia and activating the agreements outlined in the Iraqi-Saudi Coordination Council. Notably, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a serious commitment to economic engagement with Iraq, especially after 2017, following Iraq's victory over the terrorist organization ISIS, along with Saudi Arabia's expressed interest in investing billions of dollars in Iraq across various sectors⁽¹⁾.

49. Hassan Al-Mustafa, "Saudi-Iraqi Cooperation: A Pillar for Gulf Stability," Political Report, Al-Arabiya News Network, May 15, 2020, p. 3.

4. Security and Military Balance and the War on Terrorism:

Given the security challenges that have affected both Iraq and Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi strategic outlook has the potential to capitalize on various factors to establish a joint security hypothesis. This could pave the way for alliances, agreements, or coordinated security and military efforts between the two nations to counter extremism and combat terrorism effectively.

Saudi Arabia's commitment to combating terrorism, especially under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, presents a critical opportunity for Iraq. The Crown Prince's initiatives, including combating extremist ideologies and dismantling radical networks within Saudi Arabia, have significantly weakened the financial, intellectual, and human resources that previously fueled such movements.

The threat of terrorism has had far-reaching political, security, and economic repercussions for Saudi Arabia, representing a direct and existential challenge to its standing in the region. Therefore, Iraq's collaboration with Saudi Arabia in this realm is of strategic importance, as it can strengthen both nations' efforts to maintain stability and eradicate terrorism. By engaging Saudi Arabia in joint anti-terrorism efforts, Iraq can help establish a shared security framework that aligns the interests of both countries and contributes to regional stability.