



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## E-NOTES

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## HOW IRAQ'S FUTURE MAY BE SHAPED BY ITS NEIGHBORS

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Since the last American soldiers left Iraq more than a year ago, the fear of rising Iranian influence in the country has become more pronounced. This fear that Iran may fill the vacuum left by the United States has prompted Turkey and several Arab states to clarify their position vis-à-vis Iraq in an attempt to counterbalance Iran's influence.

There was a time when Iraq's Arab neighbors considered it an alien entity, an Iranian proxy, and as a center of terrorism to be ostracized. However, these same neighbors, who in recent years avoided close ties with Iraq because of its relations with Iran, have come to understand—now more than ever—that the way to affect Iraq's orientation and to contain Iran's influence is precisely by improving political and economic relations with Iraq.

In contrast to its largely passive foreign policy over the past decade, Iraq now appears to be seeking a more central role in setting the inter-Arab and Arab-Iranian agenda. Since the withdrawal of American troops in December 2011, Iraq has done much to rebuild relations with the Arab world and change its image as an Iranian puppet. As such, Iraq has made attempts to revive old alliances and to jumpstart diverse economic initiatives. For example, Iraq hosted the Arab League summit in Baghdad in March 2012, tried to mediate between Tehran and the international community on the nuclear issue, and even hosted a round of talks on the topic in Baghdad in May 2012.

Having essentially abandoned Iraq to Iran's mercy, the Arab states were hesitant to upgrade ties with Iraq because they saw Nouri al-Maliki's government as an Iranian proxy. The general Arab sentiment was that, due to the geographical proximity, historical ties, and sectarian similarity between Iran and Iraq's current leadership, Iran's influence over Iraq was inevitable. Therefore, there was no point in trying to develop relations. Additionally, the Gulf States feared that Iraq would rebuild its armed forces and once again become a military threat, this time with advanced American weapons, including F-16 fighter jets and Abrams tanks. However, times have changed and Iraq's Arab neighbors are no longer the passive spectators they once were. After the withdrawal of American troops, the neighboring Arab states became more willing to invest in their relations with Iraq, thereby affording them a better vantage point from which to affect the state's development and curb Iranian influence. Iraq too is looking for greater cooperation with the Arab states as a way—it hopes—to wipe out old debts and renew investments, to prevent negative Arab interference in its internal affairs, and to serve as leverage against Tehran.

By early 2012, Iraq seemed to have found its way back into the midst of the Arab world. Prime Minister al-Maliki agreed to extend flight and landing rights to Kuwait's national airline and, more importantly, pay \$300 million as partial compensation for the damages caused by Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. In return, Kuwait agreed to waive the \$1 billion worth of debt owed to the Kuwaiti national airline. Iraq also signed a prisoner swap agreement with Saudi Arabia and promised to try to suspend the death sentence imposed on Saudi citizens held in Iraqi jails. Furthermore, and unlike at previous summits, al-Maliki did not extend an invitation to non-Arab states such as Turkey and Iran to attend the Arab League summit in Baghdad in March 2012.

Likewise, transferring the Arab League presidency to Iraq in 2012 symbolized, for many, the beginning of Iraq's return to the Arab sphere. The temporary tactical change in the tone of the Iraqi leadership toward the Assad regime in the spring of 2012 also helped narrow the gap between Iraq's Syrian policy and that of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Accordingly, Iraq supported the Arab League resolution, initiated by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, calling for the establishment of an Arab-international peacekeeping force and for providing political and material support to the Syrian opposition. Subsequently, however, the sides very quickly reverted to their long-time mutual suspicion and accusations, owing to Iraq's continued attempts to block any meaningful anti-Assad resolutions suggested by the Arab League.

The upheaval in the Arab world since early 2011 has highlighted Sunni-Shiite tensions in the area, negatively impacting relations between Iraq and the Sunni Arabs.<sup>1</sup> Despite the measured closeness described above, Iraq's Arab neighbors remain suspicious of the Iraqi leadership. The Gulf States are worried that al-Maliki's growing autocratic tendencies and his assumption of control of all political centers of power while simultaneously destroying the still fragile democratic mechanisms in Iraq, will substantially marginalize the Sunni minority. They are also wary of many of al-Maliki's policies, which they see as being pro-Iranian and pro-Syrian. The Arab daily newspaper, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, whose positions are close to those of the Saudi leadership, went so far as to call on the Arab states to boycott al-Maliki and impose economic sanctions on Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

Turkey has followed a seemingly opposite path toward Iraq. Especially during al-Maliki's first term in office, but also later, Turkey was much more open to cooperating with the central Iraqi government and pursued a policy that tried to bypass sectarian divides. This was evident when, for example, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited several major Shiite shrines in Iraq in 2011. It seems, however, that by the second half of 2012, Turkey lost faith in al-Maliki. The expulsion of the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPAO) from an energy exploration deal in Iraq in November 2012, and the refusal to allow entry to a plane carrying Turkey's Energy Minister, Taner Yıldız, into Iraqi airspace in December 2012 are seen by Ankara as indications of the degree of hostility al-Maliki harbors toward Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Turkey's lack of trust in al-Maliki strengthened its resolve to cooperate with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) as an act of regional balancing.

This change in Turkish policy has caused tensions between the US and Turkey as it seems that Turkey's cooperation with the KRG, especially with regard to energy matters, is encouraging the KRG to seek independence from Iraq.<sup>4</sup> While publicly Turkey still supports the vision of a unified Iraq, it can be argued that Turkey's recent steps towards facilitating the flow of oil from the Kurdish-controlled regions to Turkey, without the consent of the central Iraqi government, are undermining this vision.

The prospect of Iraq disintegrating into three separate entities poses both risks and opportunities for its neighboring. On one hand, it may consolidate Iranian influence on the Iraqi Shiites, but on the other hand, it will mean the Sunni and Kurdish entities will be highly dependent upon the Gulf States and Turkey, respectively. Hence, from an Arab and Turkish perspective, this means they could wrest at least parts of Iraq from Iran's control. There is of course a strong US objection to Iraq's disintegration. There is also the danger that such disintegration would be accompanied by renewed violence reminiscent of that which plagued Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Moreover, the population in Iraq is fearful of the resurgence of such violence, and the current political arrangements seem to many to be the lesser evil in comparison to the possibility of forming three potentially weak states.

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<sup>1</sup> Ned Parker, "Anger is Growing Among Iraq's Sunnis," *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Tariq Alhomyed, "Impose Sanctions on al-Maliki," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 3, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Ilnur Cevik, "Kirkuk Shines Spotlight on Turkey's Iraq Policy," *Al-Monitor*, February 5, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Hasan Kanbolat, "Turkey's Iraq Challenge," *GMF on Turkey Analysis*, February 12, 2013.

In 2013, the Iraqi city of Baghdad was crowned the Capital of Arab Culture for the first time, a symbolic title expressing Iraq's ambition—after a two-decade hiatus—to resume its central role in the region. The weakening of the traditional Arab centers due to the Arab Awakening and the significant growth of Iraq's oil production have facilitated Iraq's ambition to play a more important role in setting the regional agenda. However, geographical, historical, and ethnic factors have left the Iraqi leadership with very limited room for political maneuvering; with Iran on one side and the Arab-Sunni world on the other, it is constantly forced to walk a tightrope. If it fails to maintain this delicate balance, its neighbors will assuredly pounce on any opportunity to collect whatever pieces fall, and it will be difficult for Iraq or its successor states to release themselves from their clutch.

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