
Saudi Arabia's Opportunities to Promote Security and Stability in Iraq

Daniel Gulda

After the fall of ISIS in 2017, civilian protests, sectarian divides and the fight over influence by the two main regional powers Iran and Saudi Arabia have plagued Iraq's security and stability. This essay analyzes Saudi Arabia's role in security and stability in Iraq over the next two years. Specifically, this paper argues that the kingdom, aligned with US interests, is likely to support political cooperation, security and stability in Iraq.

Background

Since 2005, Iraq has been a federal parliamentary republic adhering to democratic division of power. Division between multiple ethnic and religious groups is among the key challenges in governing Iraq. Ongoing civil demonstrations stemming from factors such as Iraq's sectarian divide, lack of economic opportunity, and the aftermaths of the terrorist group ISIS—have put the government's stability under pressure.¹ Although Iraq declared victory against ISIS in 2017, approximately 2 million individuals remain internally displaced² and ISIS still claims responsibility for regular local attacks.³

Due to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Iraq had a troubled relationship with its southern neighbor, Saudi Arabia, until 2014.⁴ To achieve security and stability in the region, new leaders on both sides made efforts to establish closer ties, leading to a milestone in April 2019, when the two signed 13 political and economic agreements.⁵ Saudi Arabia's main interests in Iraq include countering Iran in the region and denying the country as a battleground to radical terrorist groups.⁶ In addition, the kingdom anticipates Iraq will see new trade relationships as an alternative to its dominant regional and economic partners, Iran and Turkey.⁷

¹ Ghassan Adnan and Isabel Coles, "Protesters Rise Up Over Iraq's Missed Economic Opportunities," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 6, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/protesters-rise-up-over-iraqs-missed-economic-opportunities-11570366801>.

² "Iraq," Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2019, accessed Nov. 3, 2019, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iraq>.

³ Alissa J. Rubin and Falih Hassan, "Bus Bomb Kills 12 Iraqis Near Major Pilgrimage Site," *The New York Times*, Sept. 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/21/world/middleeast/islamic-state-bus-bomb-iraq.html>.

⁴ Renad Mansour, *Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (2018), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181105_RM_Gulf_analysis.pdf?AWXv0HPipY0ev0TR2M08I_PbRCQQSY99.

⁵ Mina Aldroubi, "Iraq and Saudi sign 13 new agreements to deepen economic and political relations," (April 17, 2019). <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraq-and-saudi-sign-13-new-agreements-to-deepen-economic-and-political-relations-1.850034>.

⁶ Ronen Zeidel, "Iraq-Saudi Relations 2017-18: Expectations and Limits," (2018). <https://www.mepc.org/journal/iraq-saudi-relations-2017-18-expectations-and-limits>.

⁷ Mansour, *Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq*.

Saudi Arabia's interests in the region overlap with US interests in general, including building peace and stability, fighting ISIS, and countering Iran.⁸ The main problem is that peace and stability depend on a unified Iraq that is able to recover from the aftermath of ISIS preventing the group's resurgence and reconstructing Iraq without aggravating sectarian tensions.⁹ The United States has stationed troops to train Iraqi forces, and sent foreign aid and security assistance to strengthen Iraqi institutions and support operations against the resurgence of terrorist groups.¹⁰ After the United States' strike on Qassim Soleimani, the Iranian commander of the Quds Force, the Iraqi parliament voted to expel US forces from Iraq. However, Iraq is yet to formally order the withdrawal of US troops. For now, the United States continues to operate in Iraq to conduct counterterrorism operations against remaining ISIS fighters in ungoverned territories.¹¹

The Potential for Iraq-Saudi Arabia Cooperation

Saudi Arabia's increasing presence in Iraq has the potential to improve Iraq's stability. Iraq needs foreign investment and technical assistance to develop its economy. Presently, the main economic opportunities for Iraqi citizens depend on trade with Iran. Most goods and resources across the country originate in Iran.¹² Iraq also depends heavily on Iranian natural gas to meet Iraqi electricity demands. Despite the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign, the United States has granted sanctions waivers for Iraq to continue imports.¹³

Through closer alignment, Saudi Arabia can diversify Iraq's economy by boosting trade links, developing Iraqi infrastructure and investing in the private sector.¹⁴ Such prospects suit US interests because Iraq can become more stable through a stronger economy, making it less reliant on US support. A stronger Iraq with better relations with Saudi Arabia could also reduce its dependence on Iran. Iraq would prefer to cooperate with both countries. Baghdad has been making efforts to mediate between the two regional rivals and will likely continue to do so as Soleimani's death has made the region more unstable.¹⁵ Yet, as long as Saudi Arabia sides with the United States, it is challenging to appease both sides.

⁸ Paul R. Pillar, "Iraq and Iran, Sharing a Neighborhood," (2017). <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/iraq-iran-sharing-neighborhood-22937>.

⁹ "Political Instability in Iraq," Council on Foreign Relations, updated Nov. 6, 2019, accessed Nov. 6, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/political-instability-iraq>.

¹⁰ Christopher M. Blanchard, *Iraq and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service (2019), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IF10404.pdf>.

¹¹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Military Reviewing Iraq Operations After 2 Troops Die Fighting ISIS," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/09/world/middleeast/marines-killed-iraq-isis.html>.

¹² Tim Arango, "Iran Dominates in Iraq After the US 'Handed the Country Over'," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/world/middleeast/iran-iraq-iranian-power.html>.

¹³ Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Samya Kullab, "Iraqi officials: US will grant vital Iran sanctions waiver," *AP News*, Feb. 10, 2020, <https://apnews.com/bd4e3e6e737344ccb6a0b12866790e01>.

¹⁴ Mansour, *Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq*, p.4.

¹⁵ Jackie Northam, "Saudi Arabia Fears Being Drawn Into U.S.-Iran Conflict," *NPR*, Jan. 8, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/08/794704361/saudi-arabia-fears-being-drawn-into-u-s-iran-conflict>.

Iraq's Sectarian Divide factor

Building economic opportunities is crucial, but to ensure successful political cooperation in Iraq, Saudi Arabia must consider Iraq's sectarian divide. Saudi Arabia's Sunni majority has posed a challenge to efforts in dealing with Iraqi Shiites. Many Iraqi Shia factions are backed by Iran and although their views on Iran's influence diverge, Soleimani's death has brought Iraq's Shias closer together and pulled them towards Iran.¹⁶ Factors drawing a negative image of Saudi Arabia included the kingdom's support for political rivals of the Shia-led government and regional controversial issues such as the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen.¹⁷

Today, the Shia-led government in Iraq is open to stronger ties to Saudi Arabia, but ongoing civil conflict threatens Baghdad's political stability. Shia protesters took to the streets last year to express their frustration with their government's corruption and inability to bring prosperity to Iraq and blamed the country's structural problems on Iran's foreign influence.¹⁸ The seven-month-old movement has waned off in recent weeks due to a number of setbacks such as a Shia cleric shifting positions to an apathetic political class as well as the coronavirus outbreak.¹⁹ However, problems such as the lack of economic opportunity will persist. Iraq's government is likely to remain incompetent in addressing the protester's demands, given the ongoing quest for choosing a prime minister shows.²⁰ Saudi Arabia can make use of the narrative, in which Iran serves as a scapegoat for Iraq's problems and gives hope to frustrated Shiites by investing into the country.

Saudi Arabia, also known as the Sunni kingdom, is at an advantage in dealing with Iraqi Sunnis due to common religious values. Iraq's Sunni tribal leaders generally welcome Saudi Arabia's increased role in Iraq.²¹ However, the kingdom's attempts to improve its image among the group, such as pouring money into specific Sunni clerics and tribes between 2003 and 2014, have failed to produce unity. Instead, divisions among Iraq's Sunnis increased and led some of them to boycott Iraq's political process.²² Today, Sunni leaders are mainly concerned with rebuilding the cities that ISIS destroyed.²³ In some cases, they hold Saudi Arabia responsible for

¹⁶ Isabel Coles, "Killing of Iranian General Brings Iraq's Divided Shiites Closer," *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 6, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/killing-of-iranian-general-brings-iraq-s-divided-shiites-closer-11578354849>.

¹⁷ Daniel Benaim, "The Next Phase in Iraq's Transition," *Center for American Progress*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/07/02/453034/next-phase-iraqs-transition/>.

¹⁸ Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Joseph Krauss, "Protests in Iraq reveal a long-simmering anger at Iran," *AP News*, Nov. 6, 2019, <https://apnews.com/13c1f4d0ffdd4908ba340abf9631a3cb>.

¹⁹ Samya Kullab and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Iraq's protesters struggle to keep waning movement going," *abc News*, March 14, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iraqs-protesters-struggle-waning-movement-69594651>.

²⁰ Steven A Cook, "Nobody Can Help Iraq Anymore," *Foreign Policy*, April 24, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/24/iraq-new-prime-minister-mustafa-al-kadhimi>

²¹ Taylor Luck, "In Saudi diplomatic shift on Iraq, a hand to Sunnis ... and Shiites," *The Christian Science Monitor*, Aug. 24, 2017, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2017/0824/In-Saudi-diplomatic-shift-on-Iraq-a-hand-to-Sunnis-and-Shiites>.

²² Mansour, *Saudi Arabia's New Approach in Iraq*, pp.2-3.

²³ "Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad," International Crisis Group, updated May 22, 2018, 2018, accessed Nov. 5, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/186-saudi-arabia-back-baghdad>.

the rise of ISIS through the kingdom's promotion of extremist Sunni movements.²⁴ By supporting reconstruction through economic cooperation, the Saudis will have a better chance of avoiding past mistakes and gaining popularity among the bloc, if they consider Sunnis' concerns as a whole.

Unlike Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites, the majority of Iraqi Kurds resist the authority of a central Iraqi government and prefer their northeastern territory to be independent and autonomous.²⁵ The kingdom officially supports a unified Iraq including the Kurds, but past actions make Saudi ambitions appear inconsistent. At the time of the Kurdish independence referendum, Saudi officials voiced their support for Kurdish ambitions to establish the autonomous region Kurdistan. The underlying motivation was strategic and aimed to prevent a power vacuum from inducing regional destabilizing behavior from Iran, Turkey or the Iraqi central government.²⁶ Saudi Arabia will need to adopt a more consistent approach to avoid upsetting both the Kurds and the Iraqi government. For now, the Kurds are anticipating Saudi investments in the region to boost the local economy.²⁷ At a meeting between Kurdish local officials and Saudi diplomats in Kurdistan in 2018, the Kurdistan Region offered over 1,500 projects in tourism, agriculture, and other sectors to Saudi investors.²⁸ If Saudi Arabia succeeds in establishing strong trade links with Iraqi Kurds, the Saudis' bargaining position will improve, enabling Saudi Arabia to potentially mediate between the Kurds and Iraqis.

The Persistent Problem of Terrorism in Iraq

Iraq's terrorist cells are likely to continue to be a vital concern to Saudi Arabia.²⁹ ISIS inflicted significant damage to Iraq's infrastructure and even though US forces killed the group's leader, al-Baghdadi, the underlying conditions that led to the rise of ISIS namely, bad governance, corruption, and repression persist in Iraq.³⁰

With the most capable military force of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),³¹ Saudi Arabia has the potential to strengthen Iraq's security framework and pick up on previous security

²⁴ "Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad."

²⁵ David Zucchino, "After the Vote, Does the Kurdish Dream of Independence Have a Chance?," *The New York Times*, Sept. 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/30/world/middleeast/kurds-iraq-independence.html>.

²⁶ David Hearst, "How Saudi tried to use the Kurds to clip Iran's wings," *Middle East Eye*, Oct. 23, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/how-saudi-tried-use-kurds-clip-irans-wings>.

²⁷ Ramadan Al Sherbini, "Saudis, Iraqi Kurdistan agree on cooperation," *Gulf News*, July 25, 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/saudis-iraqi-kurdistan-agree-on-cooperation-1.2256762>.

²⁸ "Saudi Arabia eyes Kurdistan as starting point for investing in Iraq," *Rudaw* July 24, 2018, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/business/240720181>.

²⁹ Mina Aldroubi, "Saudi Arabia drafts security agreement with Iraq," *The National*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/saudi-arabia-drafts-security-agreement-with-iraq-1.893122>.

³⁰ Charles Thépaut and Matthew Levitt, "The Counter-ISIS Coalition Has Much to Do After Baghdadi's Death," *Washington Institute*, Nov. 7, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-counter-isis-coalition-has-much-to-do-after-baghdadis-death>.

³¹ "Middle East," The Heritage Foundation, updated Oct. 30, 2019, 2019, accessed Nov. 4, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-the-global-operating-environment/middle-east>.

cooperation channels that predate Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.³² Regional military cooperation will allow for training of Iraqi forces. The United States favors such developments because stronger regional allies reduce the need for US forces.³³ That being said, the US will likely need to remain engaged, because despite Saudi Arabia's regional strength, its capabilities rely on US arms sales, training and service support.³⁴

Besides fractured groupings of ISIS, the caliphate no longer holds any formal territory in Iraq and Syria and its threat to the region's security remains diminished.³⁵ Nevertheless, although Saudi Arabia has potential to boost Iraq's economy and increase internal security, some problems will persist. Saudi Arabia is unlikely to overcome the terrorism-related challenges of transitional justice in Iraq. Courts struggle with judging those guilty of supporting ISIS in the country. In addition, Iraqi security forces often execute individuals, including Saudi fighters, believed to be supporters of terrorist groups.³⁶ To address this challenge, a good start is to improve the rule of law in Iraq. However, Saudi Arabia is probably not the best candidate to make Iraq's courts fairer.

Iran's involvement in Iraq

Despite Iran's varying popularity within Iraq's Shiites, Iran's overall grip on Iraq persists as Iran heavily influences Iraq in military, political, economic and cultural affairs. In southern Iraq, Iran trains Iraqi militias; delivers food, household products and drugs; and in some places such as Najaf even provides garbage-pickup services.³⁷ Iran is also Iraq's main provider of electricity.³⁸ Saudi Arabia may be able to serve as an alternative for Iraq by providing civilian security, building infrastructure and investing in Iraq's economy.

Although it is in Saudi Arabia's interest to thwart Iranian influence in Iraq, the kingdom will not be able to achieve it fully. Iran's control over proxy groups and political affairs is too advanced. Iraq included the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a group of Iranian backed Shia militias, in the Iraqi armed forces in 2016.³⁹ The PMF has since then influenced Iraq's political

³² Caline Malek, "What strengthening Saudi-Iraq relations means to the region," *Arab News*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1493621/saudi-arabia>.

³³ Anthony H. Cordesman and Max Molot, *U.S. Strategy—Strategic Triage and the True Cost of War: Supporting Enduring Commitments versus "Endless Wars"*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (Nov. 1, 2019), p.16, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/191101_True_Cost_of_War.pdf.

³⁴ Christopher M. Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service (2018), p.20, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>.

³⁵ The Wilson Center, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," (October 28, 2019). <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

³⁶ Ben Taub, "Iraq's Post-ISIS Campaign of Revenge," *The New Yorker*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/iraqs-post-isis-campaign-of-revenge>.

³⁷ Tim Arango, "Iran Dominates in Iraq After the US 'Handed the Country Over'."

³⁸ Robert Bryce, "Iran's power over Iraq includes electricity," *The Hill*, Sept. 9, 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/energy-environment/477371-irans-power-over-iraq-includes-electricity>.

³⁹ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Pitfalls of the paramilitary paradigm: The Iraqi state, geopolitics, and Al-Hashd al-Shaabi," *Brookings*, June 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/pitfalls-of-the-paramilitary-paradigm-the-iraqi-state-geopolitics-and-al-hashd-al-shaabi/>.

processes by taking control of key ministries and governmental authorities.⁴⁰ At the same time, Iraq's government has been unsuccessful in controlling the PMF and Baghdad is a spectator as US forces and the PMF are exchanging regular missile attacks on Iraqi soil.⁴¹ Even if Saudi Arabia somehow managed to minimize Iran's control in Iraqi political affairs, it is unlikely that Iraq will cut ties with Iran. Iraq and Iran share a deep interest in maintaining cordial relations because the two learned the consequences of their hostile relations in the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, one of the deadliest Middle Eastern wars of the century.⁴²

Conclusion

Increasing political cooperation with Iraq depends on Saudi Arabia's ability to appeal to Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds without alienating any of them. Each ethnic and religious group poses unique challenges, but the kingdom can appeal to each party's economic demands. How Saudi Arabia changes the perception that it is a former backer of ISIS among Sunnis remains unclear, and how the country will continue to address Kurdish separatist ambitions is likewise uncertain.

The US is likely to benefit from Saudi-Iraqi willingness to increase joint security efforts. Iraq can expect to gain advantages from Saudi Arabia's military, its intelligence services and allies, which will improve Iraqi counterterrorism efforts. It remains outside of Saudi Arabia's capabilities to tackle all terrorism-related problems. Issues such as giving former members of ISIS a fair trial will depend on Iraq's ability to develop strong government institutions. While Saudi Arabia may be able to counter Iran's economic influence in Iraq, it will unlikely remove Tehran's political and military footprint. Iraq is struggling to control forces such as the PMF itself and Iraq has a vested interest in maintaining a friendly relationship with Iran for historic and geopolitical reasons.

Saudi Arabia is likely to promote security and stability in Iraq over the next two years. The kingdom's planned economic assistance coincides with US interests because it has the potential to address weaknesses of Iraq's underdeveloped economy and it gives Iraqis an attractive alternative to Iran.

⁴⁰ Michael Knights, "Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 1 (2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CTC-SENTINEL-012020.pdf>.

⁴¹ Crispin Smith, "It's Time Iraq Accepts Legal Responsibility for Its Iran-Backed Militias," *Just Security*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/69273/its-time-iraq-accepts-legal-responsibility-for-its-iran-backed-militias/>.

⁴² Paul R. Pillar, "Iraq and Iran, Sharing a Neighborhood."