

The Washington and Baghdad Relationship: Are the Allies in the Same Orbit?

Written by Zana Khasraw Gulmohamad

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ZANA KHASRAW GULMOHAMAD, APR 12 2014

From Baghdad's perspective, since the withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq at the end of 2011, Iraq has balanced and preserved its relations with the US despite Washington's shrivelling leverage in Iraq.

While Iraq urgently implores the US for support with military hardware, intelligence, and counterterrorism cooperation for fighting terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, or 'ISIS', Washington has only sluggishly provided its support. One of the delayed issues was the postponed buying and shipping of Apache Helicopters, Hellfire missiles, and other weapons. The hold-up of the deal for sophisticated weapons was due to complexities in firms' procedures and a block by Congress. Both the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Relations Committee blocked the deal on the pretext that Prime Minister Maliki would use these weapons to suppress political opposition. There were accusations against Maliki that he neglected the Iraqi Arab Sunnis' demands in the course of his governance, including those of the Kurds.

Eventually, the objection to the purchase was removed by the Committees, paving the way for the Pentagon to proceed with the arms transfer, and to expedite the delivery of fighter jets, surveillance drones, and training on these weapons. According to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, which oversees foreign arm sales, *"This sale is to Iraq to protect itself from terrorism and conventional threats, to enhance the protection of key oil infrastructure and platforms and reinforce Iraqi sovereignty."* After complaints from Senator John McCain, the deal was reconsidered because leaks from Reuters showed evidence of weapons being purchased by the Iraqi government from Iran. This action raised suspicions and the US called for an explanation. Iraq's Defense Minister denied such a deal, while Iraqi lawmaker Hasan Suneid said in parliament that Iraq had bought light weapons and ammunition. Continuously, the spokesman for Maliki would not confirm or deny the allegations.

Nevertheless, Maliki's demand was fulfilled after ebb and flow between politicians on Capitol Hill. Meanwhile, Maliki's government was seeking alternative options, trying to buy weapons from Russia for counterterrorism purposes. The deal between Iraq and Russia has been shifting since 2013. The weapons include the Mi-28 Night Hunter attack helicopter and heavy armoured vehicles. However, Iraq's Ambassador in the US, Lukman Faily, said in an interview with Rudaw TV in February 2014 that

Russian weapons are for special cases which are helping Iraq for urgent needs against fighting terrorism when the Apache is getting late to be delivered to us [Iraq], however we chose the US as a military and defence ally.

The relationship between Washington and Baghdad has been praised as excellent by many Iraqi officials; this is despite the delays to and the withholding of deliveries of weapons, in addition to suspicions between strategic allies.

The Causes of the Sluggish Relationship

The US administration's frustration with the Iraqi government extends to several areas of the unstable country, including the political atmosphere and security affairs, and the influence of Iran on the Shia-led government. Politically, US influence and leverage has seen remarkable setbacks, especially after the withdrawal of US troops

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when the political situation destabilised and went from bad to worse.

When the US military established and sponsored the 'Sahwa' in 2006, the Anbar awakening encouraged the Sunni tribes in western Iraq to fight the radical Islamic militants and was temporarily successful, which stabilised the country. Since the US withdrawal, the situation has deteriorated and these forces have been ignored by the central government in Baghdad. The collision between political forces in the fragile government in Baghdad, mainly between the Sunnis and the Shia-led government, has provoked Sunnis and radicals, particularly in Sunni areas, to reject the authority of Baghdad. Consequently, this has led to a worsening of the insecurity in Baghdad and western Iraq and is an omen of the revival of the civil war of 2006-2007. Thus, the US failed to induce the political leaders and forces to form an inclusive government which would satisfy the majority of Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds.

Concerns remain over insecurity in Iraq which has risen terribly, killing 9,500 civilians in 2013, a figure almost equal to the 2008 figure, when 10,000 were killed according to Iraq body count. Although this figure is less than the Iraqi civil war, it is an increase on the 2012 figure, when 4,500 were killed. The recent developments in western Iraq show more US political and military frustration when in Fallujah ISIS occupied the town. This brought up memories of when 100 soldiers were killed and 1,000 wounded, and remains the gravest US disaster in Iraq.

Post-Saddam, Iranian influence has spread in the vulnerable country, which many states and commentators have seen as a victory for Iran. Scholars and experts have debated and outlined the extent of Iranian leverage on various levels, including Iranian soft power such as trade and tourism. What has deepened the US administration's disappointment is the concern over Iranian flights over Iraqi air space to Syria, which have raised suspicions that Iran is shipping weapons and giving logistic support to the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad. Iraqi officials have denied any knowledge of these flights and emphasised that they have limited capacity to control their airspace. However, they are willing to help the US if there are any specific flights to inspect.

Iraq's battered image has been mirrored in the US, particularly when various Iraqi factions including the Shia led-government, the Arab Sunnis, and officials from Kurdistan Regional government visit the US and project different pictures of the political developments in Iraq. These problems have had tangible effects on Washington and Baghdad's relationship, although US efforts to keep Iraq as a partner are obvious.

Diplomatic Relations

In addition to the formal representative presences in the US and Iraq, there is the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) signed in 2008, an inclusive cooperation which described bilateral relations on security, political, diplomatic, cultural, economic, technological, energy, and capacity building issues. The SFA led to the creation of the Higher Coordinating Committee (HCC). In November 2013, as part of a meeting between Vice President Biden and Prime Minister Maliki, they committed to strengthening the US-Iraq relationship. This established a platform between the two countries which is articulated by each at every meeting. The decision makers have emphasised the importance of the relationship.

After toppling Saddam's regime in 2003, Baghdad's green zone held the largest US embassy in the world, with a staff of over 16,000. Since the withdrawal of US troops, the number of US staff has reduced gradually. The US ambassador in Iraq, Robert Stephan Beecroft, said that the number of the staff would continue to go down in the future. The former US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta told a government watchdog that "Washington was unable to win Iraqi guarantees that would have allowed a continued military presence, something that deprived the US of important leverage in Baghdad." The policy of reduction was attributed to the US failure to secure continued military presence, in addition to the change of the US foreign policy.

The US has several diplomatic missions in Iraq: its main embassy in Baghdad headed by Beecroft, and consulates in Erbil, Kirkuk, and Basra. The number of missions reflects the strategic importance of Iraq to the United States. Iraq has its embassy in Washington, DC, and four other consulates across the US. Each set of diplomatic missions have frequent connections with political leaders in the hosting country, which maintains extensive cooperation.

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In the same vein, the bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, where Brett MacGurk serves as the deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq and Iran, is involved in strategic consultations. During his visit in January 2014 and the discussion with Iraqi political leaders, he mainly focused on political and security instability in Iraq. In March 2014, MacGurk and the Iraqi Foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari discussed and reviewed preparations for holding an international conference on terrorism, which was held in Baghdad on 12 March. Washington and Baghdad's closeness mainly concerns political and security affairs, particularly fighting extremists such as Islamic militant groups, including ISIS. Additionally, the US maintains a substantial relation with Iraq to counter increasing Iranian influence in the region.

Regarding the concerns about Iran's and Baghdad's closeness, it should be taken into consideration that Iraq shares a longer border with Iran than with any other neighbour (1,458 kilometers). Additionally, Iran hosted and backed the Iraqi opposition parties, the Shiite parties, and most of the Kurdish parties during Saddam's rule. Historically, the large Shia communities in both countries have roots going back to ancient history when Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 BCE, after which Mesopotamia and Iran formed one political union. The relationship would be largely recognised from common sectarian lines and the two large Shia communities where Iraq located Shia shrines in Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad, and Samarra, which attract hundreds of thousands of Shia pilgrims every year. Likewise, Iran placed a Shia Shrine in Mashhad. Despite the competition between the two centres of scholarship and Islamic Shia education in Iraq (Najaf) and Iran (Qum), there are strong ties between the two communities which are reflected in governmental relations. This does not justify the alleged influence on Iraq by the Iranians, but it sheds light on some aspects of their relations.

Progress of the Relationship

Clearly, despite the dilemmas in Iraq's polity and warning voices from Capitol Hill and Western intellectuals, the US exported Hellfire Missiles, M4 Rifles, and ammunition to Iraq in March 2014. The US embassy in Baghdad announced that the shipments were sent to support Iraqi military forces in their war against terrorism, especially against militant groups in Anbar province fighting extremist groups such as ISIS. As security affairs play a substantial role in the Baghdad-Washington rapport, it was crystal clear in their meeting, at which the essence of the discussions was about mutual security cooperation and affairs. Undoubtedly, the economic ties play a role in progressing the relationship. The two-way trade has increased gradually, Iraq was the United States' 59th largest goods export market, and the 25th largest supplier of goods imports in 2012. Iraq's exports are mainly mineral fuels and oil.

Conclusion

The relationship between Washington and Baghdad is paramount, and preserving it is a priority for both countries and will remain so for the time being. However, to argue that both states are on the same track concerning Middle Eastern affairs is veiling the reality and does not represent a rigorous analysis of the interests of both states in the region. Nevertheless, it is not necessary that both countries have the same interests towards any state, or are in the same orbit, to be allied.

About the author:

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