

## **The Saudi Foreign Policy towards Iraq after 2014**

By

**Hayder Abed kadhim**

University of Baghdad, College of Political Science, Iraq.

**Shefaa Khaleel Ibrahim**

University of Baghdad, College of Political Science, Iraq.

Email: [shefaa.khlee182@gmail.com](mailto:shefaa.khlee182@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Iraq is a fundamental core in Saudi Arabia strategic perspective as a result of its significance in regional political interactions and economic potential, which made it a prominent focus in perceptions of its neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. This has turned it into an arena for conflicts between regional powers, all these countries seek to increase its influence in Iraq. Therefore, KSA has sought to have an effective and influential role in Iraq, because of the political, economic, and security importance it represents.

**Keywords:** Iraq, importance, Saudi perception

### **Introduction**

The political importance of Iraq lies in its strategic importance, as the political aspect of its position in regard to neighboring countries is significant. Iraq, with its elements of power, has been able to be a balancing country in the region, especially among neighbors with varying strength. It has become a major role to be the country of balancing the power between Iran and the Arab Gulf states (Sahib, 2003). Since the establishment of Iraqi state in 1921, until today, it has occupied a distinct position in balancing the regional powers, and in the views of the major powers, for several reasons related to its position in the regional powers, as well as the power factors it possesses, such as historical depth, ancient civilization, political and economic significance, especially after the discovering oil at the beginning of the 20th century (Qublan, 2015).

Since the previous regime seized the power (1968-2003), they aspired to make Iraq a great power by maximizing its regional influence, especially after it had a war with Iran and invading Kuwait. Iraq has become a power capable of causing political, military, and security instability in the area, because it recognizes the complexity of its engagements within the region and its oscillations between cooperation and confrontation. (Maggiolini, 2013). Iraq must play a role in those interactions that occur at the level of its neighboring countries in particular, or at the regional level in general. (Husseini, 2020). For decades, Iraq has been a key element of strategic balance in the region alongside both Iran and Saudi Arabia, because it has capabilities and capabilities qualified it. (Majeed, 2019). The relations of Iraq with its neighboring Arab and non-Arab countries have acquired significant strategic dimensions, especially after the political events after 2003. These countries have played a major role in Iraq, especially after US occupation. The importance of Iraq has significantly increased, as it has become a vital area for regional competition and international conflict. This prompted some neighboring countries to try consolidating their influence in Iraq for ensuring their interests by interfering in its internal affairs, whether directly or indirectly (Mut'ab, 2013).

After the fall of the Iraqi regime in 2003, Saudi Arabia realized that it has a regional

leadership role to hold accountable for. (Guz et al, 2010). The opportunity has become ripe for it to have influence in Iraq, whether by providing funding to extremist armed organizations, or through its attempts to thwart any government in which the Shiites represent the majority. This is an attempt from it to maximize its influence in the region, as well as an attempt to contain Iran's rising influence in Iraq, by building and strengthening its regional and international alliances (Hashim & Al-Rubaiy, 2020).

### **First: The political Importance**

As a result of the Iraqi regional significance, a distinct geographical location, economic and military capabilities, resources, capabilities, and the religious and ideological rapprochement between Iraq and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as well as the regional and international interventions by powers with strategic interests not only in Iraq, but in the Arab Gulf region, Iraq is of great strategic importance to KSA. All this led to KSA to realize the extent of the great importance that Iraq has. (Khamis, 2010). The political ties between Saudi Arabia and Iraq have been excellent. These ties were not on the same rhythm, rather, they were fluctuating, whether before or after occupation. There have been periods of time between the two countries that were characterized by positivity, others by tension, distance, rapprochement, providing support, and backing, especially in the Iraq-Iran war. The situation was different during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, where Iraq has become a source of threat to Saudi security in particular and regional security in general. (Al-Amri, 2018)

Although Iraq was a center of attraction for the Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, at the same time, it feared of Iraq, as Iraq was considered a source of threat to them. Saudi Arabia had a permanent doubt and mistrust in its neighbor, Iraq, since the 90s of the last centuries (Khamis, 2010). The matter which exacerbated these doubts was the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, in addition to threatening the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This prompted Iraq to adopt security strategies, aiming to maintain the security of its political system against regional threats and ideological challenges, which pose a threat to its Saudi political system and its internal security. This turned the relationship between them into a state of hostility, and made Saudi Arabia take part in the second Gulf War in 1991, by agreeing to use Saudi lands to target Iraq. Furthermore, KSA spent vast sums of money as a kind of material support during that period in order to weaken the former Iraqi regime, and to weaken Iraq because it was afraid of its power (AbdSada, 2019).

Saudi Arabia was deeply afraid of the Iraqi growing power, but it never sought to change the existing regime of Iraq, because changing the regime would not be of interest to it. KSA thought that the regime assuming the power from the previous central regime might pose a threat to it, especially since the Shiites represented the vast majority of Iraqi government. It was also afraid that Iraq would become a regional competitor, especially if Iraq would ally with Iran. In addition, it did not favor for democracy in Iraq, because this would make Iraq a model for neighboring peoples to follow. Consequently, it would be under local and American pressures to introduce unwanted reforms. Despite the fears that KSA had about the political change that took place in Iraq after 2003, it, at the first glance, affirmed that it stood with the national forces working for the unity of Iraq. It would confront any attempt to dismantling or dividing Iraq or ignite sectarian strife among the Iraqi people. KSA believed that the unity of Iraq would maintain the regional balance, and achieve security and stability not only for Iraq, but for the countries of the region as well (Al-Hariri, 2012).

KSA did not have any clear strategy for dealing with Iraq after the US occupation in

2003 and did not have any role in forming the new political system in Iraq. However, it refused to interfere in the internal Iraqi political affairs, due to the tense relations between the two countries (Al-Ali, 2019).

The retreat of KSA and its failure to make vast relations with Iraq made it feel dangerous later, especially after the sectarian war that swept Iraq in 2006. This led it to review its accounts, as it proceeded to host the reconciliation conference that was held in 2006. This resulted in signing the Mecca Document between the Iraqi Sunni and Shiite parties (Al-Ali, 2019). The importance of Iraq in the Saudi perception clearly emerged after Mohammed bin Salman assumed the mandate of the covenant in 2017. KSA realized the grave mistake made by its former leaders in moving away from Iraq and leaving it as an arena for the influence of other countries, as well as realizing that it can play a prominent role in the region by returning to Iraq. Therefore, it decided to use its soft power by trying to win over the Shiite parties that did not owe allegiance to Iran and the moderate Sunni parties, to achieve its desired goals of returning Iraq to the Arab arena. In addition, it considered this rapprochement as an attempt to counter Iranian influence. It began to show a clear rapprochement with some Shiite political entities such as the Sadrist Movement, the Hikma Movement and Al-Wifak, and some moderate Sunni leaders (Al-Abadi, 2019).

KSA viewed that Iran exclusive influence in Iraq, especially after the US withdrawal in 2011, and its influential role in Syria led to encircling the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with a Shiite crescent, extending from the north of the Arabian Peninsula to Iraq and the Levant. Moreover, Iranian influence in Yemen will facilitate Iranian attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of the Arab Gulf states with Shiite minorities (Qublan, 2003). This made the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia seek in its move to stop Iranian influence by correcting its strategic mistake it has been on the other side of interfering in the Iraqi affairs after 2003 and leaving it until it became significantly under Iranian influence (Shareef, 2022).

The events happened in Iraq, since the US occupation in 2003, until the US military withdrawal in 2011, weakened the Iraqi regional role, and opened a wide scope for Iranian interference to fill the void by influencing and controlling Iraqi political affairs to serve its interests by consolidating the ties with the Iraqi political elites (Al-Khafaji, 2014). The period from 2014 and the following years represented a key stage in the rapprochement and understanding between the two countries at all levels, especially after the government of Haider Al-Abadi, the Iraqi Prime Minister for the period 2014-2018, adopted a new foreign policy. This period was characterized by openness to the neighboring countries of Iraq, particularly KSA. The new government desired to build new relations with KSA, and based on that, reciprocal visits took place between the two countries. Iraqi President Fuad Masum paid a visit to KSA. As a result, the Kingdom re-established its diplomatic representation in Iraq. Thamer Al-Sabhan was sent as its ambassador to Iraq in 2016 (Al-Akedy, 2020).

The Arab Gulf states in general, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in particular, have realized the importance of Iraq, which is an important geopolitical and strategic axis and is influential on the Arab, Islamic and regional levels. It affects the regional and international balance in the region. Iraq is also the political, security, and economic bridge linking Europe and the Arabian Gulf, in addition to being an important part of the Arab Body. Therefore, the Gulf orientation towards Iraq after the control of the terrorist organization ISIS in 2014, was the basis not only for Arab, but for regional and international action to confront the threat of the organization, which has become a threat for all neighboring countries. As a result, the organization has extensions in some Gulf and Arab countries, and even some countries of the world (Khader, & Marai, 2018). Although Saudi Arabia was far from the events going on in

Iraq, it did not have any part in it since the very beginning. However, after 2014, several motives made KSA try to have an influential and prominent role in it. The first of these motives was to get Iraq back to the Arab embrace and protect its borders from the danger of the terrorist threat, in addition to its desire to repel and contain Iranian influence (Al-Rashid, 2016).

## **Secondly: The Importance of Security**

The invasion of Iraq in 2003, by the US occupation forces, and the collapse of the Iraqi military and security institutions made it far from the regional balance, and turned it into an arena for external interventions, whether in its internal or external affairs, especially after some countries supported terrorist operations in Iraq. This led to deteriorating the security situation in Iraq, and its transformation into an arena for conflicts. This political and security deterioration of Iraq has led its neighboring countries to take security precautions, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia worked to take its security precautions for fear of terrorism reaching its lands through Iraqi lands. Therefore, in 2006, it built a fence equipped with the latest security technologies along its border with Iraq with a length of 814 km (Mahdi, 2020).

It is worth noting that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia tried to assist Iraq with security before it built the security fence separating it from Iraq, by putting forward a security initiative in the year 2004. The assistance was based on sending military forces to help Iraq maintain its security and stability. KSA made contacts with countries interested in the Iraqi issue and the deteriorating security situation of Iraq and have the capabilities to send military forces contributing to restoring security and stability to Iraq. However, the initiative had not been implemented because of its conflict with the interests of USA. (Al-Jubouri, 2017).

Several changes took place in the strategic security environment in the Middle East in general, and the Arab Gulf region in particular. These changes left great risks to the security and stability of the region and the Arab Gulf states. The terrorist organizations, which have been considered one of the biggest threats to Gulf and Arab security, are among the most prominent of these changes and risks. This threat prompted the Gulf states, especially KSA, to head towards Iraq and provide support against terrorism through security and intelligence coordination between the Gulf states and the major countries, especially USA. (Khader, & Marai, 2018).

## **Third: The Economic Importance**

The fact that Iraq and Saudi Arabia located in one geographical area, made the two countries have global importance, because of their distinct geographical location, as well as the presence of oil sources and other energy deposits made them the focus of the attention of the major countries, in addition to being constantly threatened. Therefore, the two countries considered that there must be a rapprochement between them. Although the rapprochement did not occur until after 2015 (Al-Khazraji, 2019), it represented an unprecedented progress in their relations. KSA has sought to cooperate with Iraq in various security, commercial and tourism fields (Bourdoun, 2019).

KSA has found that Iraq precarious economic situation is the most appropriate for improving its relations with it. It seeks to integrate with it, and to reach its markets, which were dominated by Iranian and Turkish products. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia introduced many economic initiatives to Iraq, such as investing agricultural land, expanding Iraq share of Hajj

and Umrah seats, and opening direct airlines. In addition, Saudi Arabia offered to connect the electrical grids between the two countries in return for better prices than Iran is asking for. Accordingly, the volume of trade exchange between the two countries has increased, reaching nearly 2 billion and four hundred billion Saudi riyals in 2018, in addition to the participation of Saudi companies in the exhibitions held by Iraq. 60 companies participated in the Baghdad International Fair that was held in 2017. In 2019, the Arar border was reopened and operated, which was considered a commercial gain for the two countries (Matar, 2019).

KSA has placed Iraq among its top priorities, due to its growing role in all political and economic fields, and its quest for stability. This led to an increase in investment not only between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, but also between Iraq and the Gulf states (Maggiolin, 2013). Moreover, the Saudi-Iraqi partnership can enhance development, especially in the Iraqi private sector, with the great financial support it provides. On the other hand, Iraq has provided great investment opportunities for Gulf and Saudi investors. This is what prompted the Kingdom to encourage its Gulf partners to participate in the reconstruction in Iraq. Those projects would greatly support the desired rapprochement between the two countries, in addition to Saudi Arabia focusing on cooperation between it and Iraq in the fields of energy such as oil, gas, agriculture, transportation, education and others. (Kathem, 2002). KSA has sought to strengthen its economic relations with Iraq, as this would lead to the interest of both countries. Strengthening the economic relations will contribute to establishing friendly relations with the Iraqi government. Consequently, this will help Iraq to restore the Iraqi regional role and influence, as an independent, effective and influential state in the region. (Al-Obaidi et al, 2010).

## Conclusion

As stated earlier, Iraq is of great importance in the Saudi strategic perception, as KSA realized that getting Iraq back to the Arabs is inevitable. Therefore, it sought to restore the status, strength, and sovereignty of Iraq in order to limit the Iranian influence that has penetrated the various sectors of the Iraqi state. This is what prompted Saudi Arabia to restore ties with Iraq, especially after Salman bin Abdul Aziz assumed power, where Mohammed bin Salman reached the mandate of the covenant.

- 1- Iraq is of great importance in the Saudi strategic perception. This has led the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to seek to have an instrumental role in the post-2003 Iraq.
- 2- KSA was seeking to contain Iranian influence in Iraq, so it worked to cooperate with Iraq in various fields, political, security, economic, and other fields, especially after Mohammed bin Salman assumed the mandate of the Covenant in 2015.
- 3- KSA has sought to strengthen the ties with Iraq, especially in the economic aspect, because it believes that this would contribute to establishing friendly relations with the Iraqi governments. Thus, this would help Iraq to restore its regional role.

## References

- 1- Al-Abadi, A, M. (2019) *Has Saudi Arabia Realized the Importance of Iraq?* Al-Naba Information Network, 20/2/2019, available at the following link: Date of entry 13/4/2022 <https://m.annabaa>org/arabic/authorsarticles/18350>
- 2- Al-Akedi, B, F, J. (2020) *Contemporary Developments in Iraqi-Saudi Relations 2014-2018. Lark Journal of Philosophy, Linguistics and Social Sciences, Department of Political and Strategic Studies, Center for Regional Studies, University of Mosul,*

Volume 3, Issue 38.

- 3- Al-Ali, Y. (2019) This is how Saudi Arabia lost the Sunni sect of Iraq and handed over the country to Iran. *Al-Istiqlal newspaper*, 3/24/2019, available at the following link, date of entry 7/4/2022. <https://www.alestiklal.net/ar/view/538/dep-news-1553321697>
- 4- Al-Amiri, I, M. (2018) Determinants of Saudi Policy towards Iraq after 2003. *Journal of Political and Strategic Studies*, House of Wisdom, Baghdad, No. 37,
- 5- Al-Hariri, J, Y. (2012) *Strategic Relationships between Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries, Past - Present - Future 2003-2020*. The center for Gulf Studies, University of Basra.
- 6- Al-Jubouri, M, A, M. (2017) *The Role of Saudi Diplomacy in Resolving Arab Conflicts, Case Study (Iraq - Palestine - Lebanon - Yemen)*. Zain Law and Literary Library, Beirut.
- 7- Al-Khafaji, H, J, M. (2020) *Security Strategies of Iraq Neighboring Countries and Their Impact on Iraqi National Security after 2014, (selected models)*. Master's thesis (unpublished), Department of Strategy, College of Political Science, Al-Nahrain University.
- 8- Al-Khazraji, H, J, M. (2019) *Iraqi-Saudi Relations after 2003: The aspects of cooperation and differences*. Center for Strategic Studies, 2019, available at the following link, [https://kerbalacss.uokerbala>edu>iq/wp/blog/2019/03/04\\_Entry\\_date\\_4/14/2022](https://kerbalacss.uokerbala>edu>iq/wp/blog/2019/03/04_Entry_date_4/14/2022).
- 9- Al-Obaidi, M, R, Y., and et al. (2010) *Iraq and the Arab Gulf states (a study in the motives and future of Iraq's relations with the Arab Gulf states)*. Center for Regional Studies, Ibn Al-Atheer House for Printing and Publishing, University of Mosul.
- 10- Al-Rashid, A. (2016) The Saudi Iranian Conflict in Iraq. *Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper*. Issue (13714), 2016, available at the following link. <https://aawsat.com/home/article/6655517>, entry date 13/4/2022.
- 11- Bourdon, J. (2019) *Saudi Arabia and Iraq: Borders as a Catalyst for Cooperation*. King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies.
- 12- Guz, G., and et al, (2010). *Gulf International Relations, a brief report*. Center for International and Regional Studies, School of International Affairs, Georgetown University, Qatar, Report No. 1.
- 13- Hashem, F, A., and Al-Rubaie, K, A. (2020) *The Saudi Zigzag Transitions and the Reshaping of the New Regional Geopolitical Space*. Dar Al Moataz for Publishing and Distribution, Jordan.
- 14- Kathem, M, (2018) *A new era beckons for Iraqi –Saudi relations*. Date of entry 15/4/2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/a-new-era-beckons-for-iraqi-saudi-relations/>
- 15- Khader, F, S., and Maree, M, F. (2018) *The current Gulf trend towards Iraq, a study in nature and variables*. Al-Nabaa Information Network. <https://annabaa.org/arabic/studies/14034>, entry date 13/4/2022.
- 16- Khamis, K, M. (2010) Iraqi foreign policy towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia after 2003. *Journal of International Studies*, Center for International Studies, University of Baghdad, No. 44.
- 17- Maggolini, P. (2013) Iraqi foreign policy directions and regional developments. Where does Iraq foreign policy star?. *Analysis Magazine*. No 199 (USA:ISPI center)
- 18- Matar, H. (2019) *The Saudi Policy of Openness towards Iraq: Motives and Pillars*. Consultative Center for Studies and Documentation, Issue 16.
- 19- Mut'b, M, D. (2013) A Political Reading in Iraq Foreign Relations with Neighboring Countries. *Political and International Journal*. College of Political Science, Al-Mustansiriya University, No. 23.

- 20- Qahtan A, A. (n.d) Iraqi-Saudi relations after 2003 and their future features. *Journal of International Studies*. Center for International Studies, University of Baghdad, Volume 10, Number 38, No. T.
- 21- Shareef, R. (2022) *The challenges of Saudi foreign policy in the era of King Salman bin Abdulaziz*. Entry date 4/13/2022. <https://derqipark.org.tr> is available at the following link .