Historically, Iraq stands out as one of the cultural, religious and political centres of the Middle East, a leading country which has constantly exerted a relevant impact on the regional system. However, after years of wars and sanctions and, most recently, the Iraqi Freedom military operation, Iraq crumbled into a difficult period of transition which culminated in the civil war between 2005 and 2006. In 2011, the restoration of its full sovereignty opened up a new phase in this process of transition towards a new internal balance of power. At the same time, Iraq's government regained the capacity to determine its foreign policy. This contribution aims to give an overview of the recent developments in Iraq's efforts to reposition itself in the international and regional system, detailing the ratio of Iraqi foreign policy with a specific focus on the relationship between Baghdad, Tehran, Riyadh and Ankara.

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Iraq in the region: a brief historical perspective

Since the second half of the 20th century, Iraq has stood out as one of the most strategic and prominent regional actors in the wider Middle East, whose developments, activities and exploits have always influenced its neighbouring countries. Iraq reached its dominant position due to different factors. Combining the fourth-largest oil reserves in the world with a population of more than 32 million people, Iraq has the critical economic and demographic capacity to sustain dynamic regional politics, whatever significance and direction they could take, as the history of its turbulent international and regional relations has shown. Moreover, Iraq has a strategic geopolitical collocation within the region. It lies at the heart of the wider Middle East and borders on six different countries which have traditionally manifested conflicting and divergent internal and regional ambitions and politics. Iraq has wielded a regional influence from cultural and religious perspectives, combining its majority Shi’a population and the presence of religious centres such as Najaf with its position and influence within Arab-majority Sunni territories. Finally, all these factors have blended with Iraq’s extensive diasporas and transnational networks, contributing to consolidate its position in the region, so that any changes or dynamics occurring within its borders exert a strong impact on the regional balances of power.

Looking at the last three decades of the 20th century, especially after the ascent of Saddam Hussein in 1979, the Iraqi Ba’athist leadership took advantage of these elements to consolidate its autonomy, both domestically and internationally, attempting to maximize its influence over the region, as the war against Iran and the invasion of Kuwait testify. Indeed, Iraqi Freedom found its rationale in the United States’ ambitions and project to reduce and limit Iraq’s traditional regional and international autonomy. However, the uneven proceeding of the military operations brought Iraq far beyond these initial previsions, causing the collapse of the Iraqi state system after the demise of Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athist regime. This has led to a difficult redefinition of the internal balance of power, which still needs to be fully consolidated. The result is that Iraq shifted from being a regional power able to destabilize the entire region to a country that still possesses the capacity and resources to perform an influential role within the wider Middle East but which, at the moment, is highly vulnerable to external pressures and exploits.

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3 T. DODGE, From Bully to Target: Iraq’s Changing Role in the Middle East, Adelphi Series, 52, p. 182.
within the wider Middle East but which, at the moment, is highly vulnerable to external pressures and exploits. This condition not only represents a recurring menace for the country itself but once again makes it a potential source of destabilization for its neighbours.

The fall of Baghdad represented the beginning of ongoing dynamics that strongly reshaped the regional outlook, altering the traditional patterns of regional and international cooperation and competition. At the same time, the collapse of the state and the incapacity of the US invading force to rapidly impose order empowered sub-state actors, militias and political parties. It also made room for neighbouring states (especially Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) to pursue their own agendas, flexing their muscles within Iraq’s territory and capitalizing on its internal divisions, rivalries and the receptiveness of local factions. After 2003, Iraq crumbled into a complex and destructive circle of organized violence which, through internal and external manipulation of Iraq’s specific cultural and religious divisions, culminated throughout 2005 and 2006 in a conflict which was overtly sectarian in its stance. The following years saw a renewed United States commitment to rebuild the civil and military capacity of the Iraqi state. Since 2007, incremented military engagement favoured the reduction and limitation of sectarian actors’ room for manoeuvre. This was achieved through the application of a counter-insurgency doctrine to Iraq and the launch of the surge, combined with promotion of the post-2007 reforms of the security services, and the Sons of Iraq programme. The long-run results of this strategy are still to be fully determined. On the one hand, the focus on security issues reduced the efforts to develop strong state civilian institutions, curtail the ruling elite’s prerogatives and work on pluralism and social justice. In fact, this strategy led to a new concentration of power, especially at the end of prime minister al-Maliki’s term of office, and the expansion of Iraqi armed forces. On the other hand, the same strategy allowed Iraq to surface from the civil war. In 2010, Iraq was able to celebrate the second national elections of the post-Saddam era, which saw a first attempt to overcome the sectarian discourse, challenging the elite’s

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5 T. DODGE, *From Bully to Target* ... cit.


pact through Allawi’s Iraqiyya platform. Moreover, Iraq regained full sovereignty over its territory after the last of the US troops left at the end of 2011. As a result, although the ‘country system’ is still vulnerable to external pressures and internal manipulations, the Iraqi state has recovered the possibility to differentiate its foreign policy from that of the occupying power and the states that sought to influence or undermine its transition since 2003 by pursuing their own international and regional strategic plans.

Therefore, not by chance, the main objective of Iraq’s foreign policy has been to promote the neutrality of Iraq, which has sought to avoid any conflict with other countries. Within this agenda, Iraqi foreign policy focused on freeing the country from the many sanctions and reparation obligations to which it was subjected under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. This was a crucial issue in fostering the development of the country. At the same time, Iraq engaged in negotiations with Washington to reach a peaceful end to the US military occupation, assuring full recovery of its sovereignty. Both objectives can be considered achieved.

Since the restoration of its sovereignty in 2011, a non-alignment stance has inspired Iraqi foreign policy, favouring the improvement of relations with neighbouring countries with many of which Iraq experienced various degrees of hostility in the past. This attitude has been confirmed in the 2013 foreign policy vision of the prime minister’s party, Da’wa. At the same time, that same non-alignment has been considered the only option for a country so affected by deep ethno-sectarian divides. Although at present there are still diverging positions regarding non-alignment, this could lead to the reaching of a consensus between Iraqi distinct factions, therefore avoiding direct involvement in regional conflict that could deepen domestic divisions.

Hence, the success or failure of this strategy resides primarily in the capacity of Iraqi factions to agree on how to coherently implement the necessary policies to promote and consolidate Iraq’s regional position and role. This is a sensitive issue, given the mutual distrust among Iraqi political factions and the divisive effects that relations with neighbouring countries could exert on the Iraqi internal field. In fact, although Iraq has progressed in its foreign relations since 2011 thus normalizing its position within the region, its foreign policy has been

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8 T. DODGE, From Bully to Target: ... cit., p. 173.
10 Middle East and North Africa Workshop Summary, “Iraq’s Foreign Policy in a Changing Middle East”, February 2013, p. 5.
11 C. SPENCER · J. KINNINMONT · O. SIRRI (eds), op. cit., p. 39.
characterized by structural weaknesses. Firstly, it appears to be subjected to numerous manipulations exerted by several state actors as a consequence of their conflicting political agendas\textsuperscript{12}. Secondly, Iraqi foreign policy has been frequently flexed in line with al-Maliki’s ambition to consolidate his system of power and personal control of state institutions. Accordingly, given also the uncertain regional and international environment, these weaknesses could exert serious impacts on Iraqi foreign policy, which may in turn lose direction and cohesiveness.

**Iraq-Iran relations**

Combining its non-alignment position with the aim to create the necessary internal and international conditions to maintain and reinforce the existing regime, Iraqi foreign policy pursued the goal of obtaining support from both the United States and Iran and of maintaining sufficient autonomy from them. The objective is to seek a more central regional role, improving relations with the Arab countries and overcoming the recent perception of being an Iranian puppet. It was no coincidence that Iraq hosted the March 2012 Arab League summit in Baghdad, seeking to mediate between Tehran and the international community on nuclear issues. This attempt was repeated in May 2012 during a round of talks\textsuperscript{13}. Accordingly, both P5+1 and Arab League meetings should be seen as an effort to demonstrate that Iraq is re-emerging as an actor in its own right and recovering from being the battlefield of competing regionalisms\textsuperscript{14}.

Undoubtedly, Iran is still one of the most influential external players in Iraqi domestic affairs. The ratio of Iran’s involvement in Iraq is pragmatically self-evident, considering Tehran’s notion of its natural sphere of influence within the region, the fact that Iran shares the longest border with Iraq, and the pre-2003 historical relations between the two countries that were shaped by Iraq’s 1980 invasion\textsuperscript{15}. Moreover, Iraq still possesses all the economic, demographic, cultural and religious resources to challenge Iran’s hegemonic aspirations within the region, albeit in the long term. Accordingly, since 2003, Iran focused on curtailing and limiting Iraq’s power, assuring that the country remained in a dependent relationship with Tehran. It is along this path that the relationship between Iraq and Iran should be considered. Tehran does not intend to directly control Iraq socially, economically or

\textsuperscript{12} Middle East and North Africa Workshop..., cit.


\textsuperscript{14} Middle East and North Africa Workshop..., cit., p. 15.

\textsuperscript{15} Y. GUZANSKY, *op. cit.*
politically by imposing its personal model of state. In fact, Tehran has pragmatically acknowledged that the Iraqi Shiite community is diverse and complex in its composition. Indeed, the majority of Iraqi Shiites have consistently perceived themselves to be Iraqi and the mainstream leadership of Iraqi Shi’a never promoted Khomeini’s doctrine.

Accordingly, Tehran sought to strengthen its influence over the most receptive local Shi’a components, especially in southern Iraq given its strategic access to the Gulf and its rich oil reserves, to contain Baghdad’s future hegemonic aspirations, thus weakening the Iraqi state.

Iran pursued this objective by capitalizing on Iraq’s internal divisions, playing on sectarian fractures thanks to the disposal of Iraqi factions. Firstly, in 2003-2005 Tehran encouraged Shi’a Islamist parties whose members had largely been exiled in Iran. Later on, during the civil war period, Iran intervened to fund the Shi’a militias and finally, during the national election in 2010, Tehran sought to limit al-Maliki’s power concentration by siding with and backing his rivals, the Iraqi National Alliance which included Sadr’s party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, to gain the Shi’a vote. During the 2010 national elections the development of Iraqiyya, which threatened to derail its strategy, forced Tehran to support al-Maliki for the premiership. Thanks to this move, ties between the two countries were further reinforced and al-Maliki visited Iran in April 2012. Trade between the two countries has also increased, reaching $US11 billion per annum in 2012. At the same time, Iraq increased imports of electricity, oil and gas from Iran, which also has important stakes in the agriculture and religious tourism industries. Nonetheless, while relations between Iraq and Iran continue to develop and remain positive and strong divergences are unlikely, Iraq should not be considered entirely subject to Tehran’s hegemony. In fact, Iraq’s foreign policy interests can differ significantly from those of Iran. Oil wealth is a primary factor that can lead to changes in Iran-Iraq relations. Baghdad’s more assertive position within OPEC and the region will produce a fundamental shift in the

16 Middle East and North Africa Workshop…, cit.
18 Y. GUZANSKY, op. cit., p. 39.
regional balance of power between these two countries. At the same time, the Syrian uprising is increasingly placing Iraqi decision-makers in an uncomfortable position. This is partially due to Iraq’s divergent interest from Iran’s position of supporting the Assad government, owing to the possibility of over-spilling violence within its territory that may destabilize its government. In parallel, Baghdad’s contradictory approach to the Syrian crisis is damaging Iraq’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, replicating within Iraq’s diplomatic relations its internal lack of consensus on the nature of the Iraqi state.

Iraq and the Arab Gulf States

To a large extent, relations between Iraq and its Gulf Arab neighbours have mirrored and aimed to counteract Iraq-Iran interactions. Despite the long-standing tribal and political connections and familial and commercial ties between them, it is in fact through the prism of Iranian influence in the region that Iraq’s Gulf Arab neighbours have frequently viewed the Iraqi situation. This perception has discouraged their political and economic engagement, favouring Tehran’s agenda. However, a new and more nuanced approach has begun to develop since 2011, showing a new interest in investing in their relations. Iraq sought to benefit from greater cooperation with its Gulf Arab neighbours (Kuwait especially), wiping out old debts and renewing investments, reducing possible negative influences originating from such contexts and balancing Tehran’s influence. Therefore, Iraq’s relationship with its Gulf Arab neighbours could positively foster the development of Iraqi security and reconstruction. In fact, whereas Gulf Arab countries ensured their relative immunity to Iraq’s overspill, Baghdad suffered from a destabilizing overflow of men and money from this area, and especially from Saudi Arabia. Gulf Arab states should consider Baghdad a priority, given its growing role in oil production and its persisting vulnerability vis-à-vis the wider sectarian discourse and unrest in the region. At the same time, they have begun to pragmatically sustain the Iraqi state’s development in order to stabilize the country, reducing a possible negative spill-over from Iraq and curbing the weight of Iran.

22 Middle East and North Africa Workshop … cit., p. 2.
23 T. DODGE, From Bully to Target: … cit., p. 193.
26 Y. GUZANSKY, op. cit., p. 41.
Accordingly, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have already developed a less hostile position toward Iraq, increasing financial investments there. Nevertheless, the Emir of Kuwait was the only Gulf head of state to attend the Arab League summit in 2012. Iraq’s diplomatic relations with its Arab Gulf neighbours are, however, the least complicated in the region, thanks to a mutual and shared interest in investing in them. For example, in 2011 Kuwait’s decision to develop the Bubyan Island project at the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, with the possible consequence of undermining the Iraqi Gran Faw project, produced new agitation in Iraqi-Kuwaiti relations but both parties attempted to mediate this issue through diplomatic negotiations. Similarly, during the 2012 Arab League conference in Baghdad, Iraq again showed its will to overcome long-standing disputes with its Arab Gulf neighbours by agreeing to pay $US 300m in reparations and settling a dispute dating back to 1990. This decision was particularly beneficial to Iraqi-Kuwaiti relations, expressing a shared commitment to resolve outstanding border disputes and the issue of Kuwaiti prisoners of war. Nonetheless, Iraq’s relations with Saudi Arabia remain complicated, although some signals of distension have begun to develop since 2012. In March 2012, for the first time since the invasion, Riyadh dispatched a non-resident ambassador to Baghdad and signed a security agreement with Iraq. After 2003, Saudi Arabia decided to avoid any contact with Baghdad. Riyadh focused on building a security barrier along their shared border, limiting its actions to a sort of containment of Iraq’s possible spill-over, guaranteeing the local Sunni interest in an attempt to curb Iran’s growing influence over the country. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia clearly expressed its concerns over the possible connection between the Iraqi Shi’a community and its own Shi’a citizens within its Eastern Province. At the same time, one of Saudi Arabia’s main long-run concerns is related to Iraq’s potential industrial development, especially in the oil sector, that could substantially undermine its own status as a leading oil exporter. Regarding this aspect, it is certain that Iraq will exert a relevant impact on Gulf Arab countries and within the entire regional economy. Therefore, both Iraq and Saudi Arabia should develop their relations in order to assure that this occurs in a cooperative and secure environment rather than in a destabilized region.

27 T. DODGE, From Bully to Target: ... cit., p. 193.
29 T. DODGE, From Bully to Target’ ... cit., p. 192.
30 Middle East and North Africa Workshop Summary..., cit., p. 18.
31 Y. GUZANSKY, op. cit., p. 42.
The Ankara-Baghdad-Erbil triangle

Looking north, Iraq needs to focus on developing diplomatic relations with Turkey; another component of Baghdad’s foreign policy which is deeply interconnected with its internal balance of power. The Ankara-Baghdad relationship embraces three strategic areas of interest for Iraq, involving i) the relationship between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi central government, ii) the issue of the pipeline between Kurdistan and Turkey, and finally, iii) the Syrian uprising. Since al-Maliki’s consolidation of power, the relationship between these two countries has considerably deteriorated. Firstly, during the national elections of 2010, Ankara supported al-Maliki’s rival, Ayad Allawi, also orchestrating Saudi financial support for Allawi’s Iraqiyya. Secondly, in 2011 Ankara granted refuge to the Iraqi vice-president, Tareq al-Hashemi, who escaped from a juridical procedure that he considered to be politically orientated and motivated. Simultaneously to these two episodes that clearly informed Baghdad of Turkey’s intention to implement a more active regional policy along with Saudi Arabia, checking al-Maliki’s ambitions, the Ankara-Erbil-Baghdad triangle remains one of the more critical issues in the Iraq-Turkey relationship. Increased Turkish trade and business activism with the KRG not only represents a lucrative activity but is also considered a strategic policy to contain the possible repercussion of Iraqi Kurdish autonomy on its own Kurdish minority. The possibility to build a pipeline to transport oil and gas from the KRG’s region through Ceyhan port to the world market is equally strategic as it can reduce overdependence on Basra and the Strait of Hormuz, thus making Turkey an energy hub. Nonetheless, the decision to develop such a project through an exclusive relationship with the KRG or the existing Iraqi federal infrastructure, and legal mechanism is of vital importance for the Iraqi central government. The choice of the former solution will drastically impact on the Iraqi internal balance of power, reinforcing the ambition of a region that already maintains foreign relations that contradict with its own. In the long-term, the existence of shared concerns and opportunities might persuade Turkey and Iraq to coordinate hydrocarbon exploration and exports, increasing Iraqi internal stability while also serving Turkish interests.

32 C. SPENCER · J. KINNINMONT · O. SIRRI, Iraq’s Foreign Policy…, cit., p. 39.
33 T. DODGE, From Bully to Target…, cit., p. 189.
34 Middle East and North Africa Workshop…, cit., p. 2.
Conclusions

To conclude, the involvement of any external regional or international player should not a priori be understood to be the source of all of Iraq’s problems. Its internal weaknesses are the real trouble-makers that render Iraq vulnerable to any type of foreign interference, particularly Iranian\textsuperscript{35}. Accordingly, sectarian divisions could be considered a factor of regional destabilization and not a reality and a driver per se\textsuperscript{36}. Sectarian divisions do not manifest themselves and emerge in a vacuum or as an indicator of irreducible religious and cultural contrapositions, but are exploited by political elites within a broader struggle to shape the regional balance of power. Therefore, sectarian divisions are both symptoms and consequences of a regional transition that still needs to find a landing place. However, such divisions have fragmented Iraq’s foreign policy, so Iraq appears to have several different foreign relations stances rather than one unique and coherent foreign strategy\textsuperscript{37}. With these entropic dynamics, domestic stability, foreign meddling, oil production policy, and Iraq’s and Syria’s political evolutions are all key factors and concerns that prove to be inexorably entwined. Therefore, their make-up and interaction will determine the future regional balance of power. Nonetheless, acknowledging that room for political manoeuvre between Iran and the Arab Sunni world is tight, Iraq’s foreign policy can coherently and concretely contribute to the development of the country and its society only if the Iraqi state and its political elites are able to cut the Gordian knot of the country’s identity and therefore of its institutional system, thus fostering political reconciliation within its borders\textsuperscript{38}.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[35] Y. GUZANSKY, op. cit., p. 39.
\item[36] A. JAHNER, Saudi Arabia and Iran, The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Gulf, «International Affairs Review», Vol. XX, No. 3, Spring 2012, p. 44.
\item[38] Middle East and North Africa Workshop..., cit., p. 2.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
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