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This working paper looks into the complex issue of Russia–Iraq relations. It provides a detailed analysis of the foundations of the bilateral ties between the two countries, Russia’s approach to the Kurdish issue, and the future of cooperation between Russia and Iraq now that both countries have completed their respective electoral cycles.

The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of RIAC.

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Introduction

Russia's interest in the Middle East and the strengthening of Moscow's position in the region cannot be explained solely by the issue of Syrian regulation. Over the past few years, Russia has been consistent in building relations with very diverse forces in the region. Iraq is among the countries that is amicable to Moscow and eager to develop contacts. Moscow and Baghdad have a long history of cooperation that is founded on a solid legal basis and which dates back to the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the USSR and Iraq signed on April 9, 1972. The Soviet Union helped Iraq with industrialization, and was the country's largest arms supplier.¹ These ties are now being gradually restored at different levels.

The outcome of the 2018 parliamentary election in Iraq impacted the prospects of Russia–Iraq cooperation. It would appear that the Saairun alliance, which won 54 seats in parliament, has no contacts with Russia. Despite the fact that relations are relatively limited at present, nothing is preventing the parties from expanding these ties in the future. Importantly, however, Iraq has yet to come to an internal agreement on the composition of the new government, and here Saairun may face certain difficulties. The pragmatic statements coming from the alliance's leader Muqtada al-Sadr on the need to work together with other political forces, suggest that he favours the same approach when it comes to foreign policy. If this is true, then there is a chance for Moscow and Baghdad to further develop bilateral relations.²

¹ John C. K. Daly. Russia Reemerging as Weapons Supplier to Iraq // The Jamestown Foundation. 21.03.2018. URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-reemerging-weapons-supplier-iraq/>

² Certain parts of this material were first published on the Al-Monitor web portal and in the magazine *Limes*

1. Moscow and Baghdad: Relations Based on Pragmatism

When Islamic State (recognized as a terrorist organization and banned in Russia – *ed.*) was mounting its offensive in Iraq in 2014, Moscow promptly supplied Baghdad with arms and military equipment, including warplanes.³ The shipments were part of a \$4.2 billion contract signed between the Ministry of Defence of Iraq and Russia's state arms exporter Rosoboronexport back in 2012.⁴ It was essential for Iraq to get the equipment as soon as possible, as Islamic State was just a few kilometres away from Baghdad. The United States, for its part, proved unable to provide the required assets, whereas Russia did its best to supply Iraq with everything it needed within the shortest possible time. Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Iraq Maksim Maksimov noted at the time: "We have always stated our readiness to provide full assistance to the country in its effort to strengthen the defensive capacity of its armed forces. As part of military-technical cooperation, the Russian defence industry has already supplied the Iraqi government with a significant amount of military equipment, which has proved effective in fight against Islamic State. We are talking Mi-35M and Mi-28N helicopters, Sukhoi Su-25 ground-attack aircraft, Kornet-E anti-tank guided missiles and other weapons systems."⁵ Russia also supplies Iraq with T-90 tanks under contracts signed in 2017.⁶ Reports in early 2018 suggested that Iraq was interested in purchasing Russian S-400 SAM systems,⁷ although they subsequently denied by the Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to the Russian Federation Haidar Hadi.⁸

Russian energy companies, which have been operating in Iraq since before 2003, have now been given the opportunity to bid in oil-and-gas development tenders in that countries. Gazprom Neft is working on the Badra deposit in Wasit Governorate and at two blocks in Iraqi Kurdistan (Shakal and Garmian).⁹ On December 6, 2017, the company put a gas factory into operation at Badra.¹⁰

³ Military-Technical Cooperation between Russia and Iraq. Case File // TASS. May 20, 2015.
URL: <http://tass.ru/info/1981871>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Russian Ambassador to Iraq: Situation in Iraqi Kurdistan Following Referendum Detrimental to Russian Companies' Operations // Interfax. February 8, 2018. URL: <http://www.interfax.ru/interview/599071>

⁶ Russian Ambassador to Iraq: Situation in Iraqi Kurdistan Following Referendum Detrimental to Russian Companies' Operations // RIA Novosti. July 23, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/spravka/20170723/1498945524.html>

⁷ Iraqi Foreign Minister Says Baghdad is Interested in S-400 // Interfax. February 27, 2018.
URL: <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/601669>

⁸ Iraqi Ambassador Comments on Plans to Purchase S-400s from Russia // RBC. February 27, 2018.
URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5a95702c9a79477175405bc9>

⁹ Iraqi Oil Minister Calls on Russian Companies to Actively Participate in Oil-And-Gas Tenders // TASS. April 9, 2018. URL: <http://tass.ru/ekonomika/5108667>

¹⁰ Gazprom Neft Puts Gas Factory into Operation at Badra Deposit in Iraq // Gazprom Neft. December 6, 2017.
URL: <http://www.gazprom-neft.ru/press-center/news/1263566/>

As of March 2018, Russia's Lukoil has invested a total of \$8 billion into the development of the West Qurna 2 and Block 10 fields.¹¹

The situation involving the Russia's Rosneft remains unclear. The company had agreements with the Kurdistan Regional Government on the development of oil fields in Kirkuk Governorate, but now that the province has been taken over by Baghdad, the Ministry of Oil of Iraq has since announced that it does not recognize any prior agreements signed without the involvement of the central government. But the Russian oil giant maintains a presence in Iraq. According to media reports¹² there were plans for former Prime Minister of Iraq Haider al-Abadi to meet with Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin in order to settle the issue. But the Russian company did not confirm the rumours.¹³ Reuters reported that Rosneft had come into possession of the Kirkuk-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline, which has a daily throughput capacity of some 300,000 barrels.¹⁴ The pipeline transports most of Iraqi Kurdistan's oil to global markets via Turkey.¹⁵ This is just another factor making Rosneft a key player in the relations between Baghdad and Erbil.

Iraq is important for Russia not only as an economic and trade partner, but also as a factor in influencing regional policy. Russia clearly understands that its possibilities in the country are limited, as Iran and the United States are the main foreign players with direct influence on Iraq. They are followed by Saudi Arabia, which has done much over the past year to strengthening its position in Iraq, including through contacts with Muqtada as-Sadr, a Shiite scholar hailing from a religious family and the leader of the Saairun alliance, which won the 2018 parliamentary election. China, Iraq's key economic partner, prefers not to meddle with the country's home politics.¹⁶

For its part, Baghdad supports strengthening Moscow's positions in an exchange that creates a new point of influence in the country potentially able to balance both Iran and the United States. Iraq thus gets a broader space for maneuvering among all the interested parties. Iraq is seeking to return to regional politics, and is also attracting the attention of those actors interested in mutually beneficial relations. One such pragmatic and influential actor is, of course, Moscow. The continuing development of contacts between Russian and Iraqi politicians both facilitates the exchange of opinions and paves the way for more substantial progress in bilateral relations. The two countries boast a history of variegated rela-

¹¹ On the Meeting between Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to Russia Haidar Hadi // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. July 18, 2018.

URL: http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/iq/-/asset_publisher/WizNA2SGNV5/content/id/3299903

¹² Sechin to Visit Iraq to Resolve the Issue with Contracts, Media Reported // Russia News Today. February 28, 2018.

URL: <https://chelorg.com/2018/02/28/sechin-to-visit-iraq-to-resolve-the-issue-with-contracts-media-reported/>

¹³ Iraq Ambassador on Prime Minister's Planned Visit with Sechin // RBC. February 28, 2018.

URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/business/28/02/2018/5a96a1589a7947356afb9110>

¹⁴ Updated: Abadi Tells Erdogan Iraq is "Keen" to Export Kirkuk Oil to Turkey // Rudaw. July 14, 2018.

URL: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/14082018>

¹⁵ Rosneft Boosts Clout in Iraqi Kurdistan with Gas Pipeline Deal // Reuters. May 25, 2018.

URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-rosneft-kurdistan/rosneft-boosts-clout-in-iraqi-kurdistan-with-gaspipeline-deal-idUSKCN11Q121>

¹⁶ Opinion: China is Playing a Big Role in Iraqi Reconstruction // CGTN. February 17, 2018.

URL: https://news.cgtn.com/news/78597a4e33677a6333566d54/share_p.html

tions, specifically in power generation and defence.¹⁷ Iran potentially supports this alliance, and the United States has not criticized it openly.

The opinion that Tehran has in fact been encouraging a rapprochement between Moscow and Baghdad as a counterbalance to Washington's influence in the region is dubious. The Iraqi authorities have built the potential for independent decision-making in recent years, and they are generally fairly sympathetic towards Russia.¹⁸ This is indicated by the current discussions on the possibility of simplifying doing business for Russian companies and other similar measures.¹⁹ Tehran's only win may result from offering Russia more serious support within Iraq. However, Russia does not intend to engage with in Iraq's internal political processes; instead, it is building pragmatic ties and business contacts that would benefit both parties.²⁰ Baghdad supports Moscow in its desire to strengthen its presence in the country, since this would ultimately result in the creation of another pole of influence. By navigating the different sources of influence, Iraq would have more opportunities to secure its own interests.

Moscow and Baghdad regularly coordinate efforts with regard to regional issues and the fight against terrorism. On September 25, 2015, a quadripartite agreement on information sharing was reached between Russia, Iraq, Iran and Syria, followed by the establishment of a joint information centre in Baghdad.²¹ The countries agreed that this cooperation would not be aimed against any third parties. Rather, it pursues fairly specific objectives of coordinating warfare against Islamic State, identifying terrorists, searching for children taken out of Russia by Russian nationals who have joined Islamic State, etc. This joint work has had a positive effect on the global fight against terrorism, while serving the interests of Moscow, Baghdad, Tehran, Damascus and Washington as well.

The Baghdad information centre was set up with the aim of ensuring closer cooperation in the war on terrorism in general, and on Islamic State in particular. Now that the fight against Islamic State has been put on the back burner, the centre's mission may be revised and developed further. This sets a new precedent for cooperation and is certainly beneficial for Russia.

Moscow has an assortment of instruments to maintain bilateral cooperation with each of the aforementioned countries, and they can all come to an understand-

¹⁷ Ruslan Mamedov. Putin Eyes Visit to Baghdad Amid Growing Russian–Iraqi Contacts // RIAC. December 4, 2018.

URL: <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/putin-eyes-visit-to-baghdad-amid-growing-russian-iraqi-contacts/>

¹⁸ Iraq calls on Russian companies to «coordinate» and invest (in Arabic: «التنسيق إلى» العراق يدعو الشركات الروسية إلى «التنسيق» and invest) // Al Hayat. January 27, 2018.

URL: <http://www.alhayat.com/article/912950/العراق-يدعو-الشركات-الروسية-الى-التنسيق-والاستثمار>

¹⁹ Baghdad Looking to Offer Preferences to Russian Companies, Iraqi Foreign Minister Says // RIA Novosti. February 28, 2018. URL: <https://ria.ru/economy/20180228/1515432345.html>

²⁰ Russia aspires to participate in electricity generation projects in Iraq (in Arabic: روسيا تطمح للمشاركة في مشاريع توليد الطاقة الكهربائية بالعراق) // Alghat Press. February 18, 2018.

URL: <https://www.alghadpress.com/news/اهم-الاخبار-العربية-والدولية-روسيا-تطمح-للمشاركة-في-مشاريع-توليد-الطاقة-الكهربائية-بالعراق>

²¹ Pavel Kolesnikov, Salwan Jaber Hashim. International Legal Framework for Quadripartite Regional Coalition to Fight Terrorism in Middle East.

URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/v/mezhdunarodno-pravovaya-osnova-chetyrehstoronney-regionalnoy-koalitsii-po-borbe-s-terrorizmom-na-blizhnem-vostoke>

ing on the need to strengthen bilateral or multilateral ties (or possibly create new ones). Iraq is interested in taking part in such formats as the Astana talks on Syria, which indicates Baghdad's desire to keep its finger on the pulse while simultaneously promoting its own role in the region as a country capable of acting as a negotiator in conflict settlement situations.²² As for the United States and Saudi Arabia, these countries could join the dialogue and produce a joint initiative for the creation of a new collective security organization or a working group of sorts that would address possible risks.

The comprehensive nature of Moscow's institutional-level interaction with Baghdad is worth special mention. The key mechanisms here include the above-mentioned Baghdad information centre, as well as the Russia–Iraq working group on energy cooperation and the working group focused on repatriating women and children from Iraq and Syria. The primary driver of intergovernmental cooperation is the Russia–Iraq Commission On Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation co-headed by Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Yuri Borisov (previously by Dmitry Rogozin) and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq Mohamed Ali Alhakim (who supersedes Ibrahim al-Jaafari).²³

Moscow's Iraqi strategy is thus focused on building deeper ties with Baghdad, supporting the country's territorial integrity and maintaining diverse contacts with a variety of actors on the ground, from the Presidents of Iraq to the leaders of the Popular Mobilization Forces.

²² Iraq Wants to Join Alliance of Russia, Turkey and Iran // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. February 9, 2018.
URL: http://www.ng.ru/world/2018-02-09/6_7169_irak.html

²³ Iraqi Ambassador Comments on Plans to Purchase S-400s from Russia // RBC. February 27, 2018.
URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5a95702c9a79477175405bc9>

2. The 2017 Referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan and Moscow's Policy Towards the Kurds

Russia's policy in West Asia is historically based on two principles: the primacy of the state in international relations and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.²⁴ Russia objects to attempts to change regimes from the outside, and particularly to the passing of decisions bypassing international institutions, such as the UN Security Council.

Russia continues to adhere to these principles amid the current statehood crisis in the region, but amends its actions to reflect the changing situation. It should be noted that Moscow has never had a clear-cut strategy towards the Kurds. Now that Moscow is re-establishing its presence in the Middle East and the Kurdish political forces are increasingly making themselves heard in the region, the opinion has emerged that the Kremlin has finally started to formulate its own Kurdish policy.

Iraqi Kurdistan was granted broad autonomy following 2003, with the Kurdistan Regional Government receiving three provinces under the 2005 Constitution. Despite this, Baghdad and Erbil continued to bicker over the status of two other provinces and the oil- and gas-rich province of Kirkuk. Article 140 of the Constitution of Iraq called for a referendum to be held in the disputed districts by December 31, 2007. Erbil accuses Baghdad of having shifted the elections to 2017.²⁵ This new phase in Iraq's history did not have any critical effect on diplomatic relations between Russia and Iraqi Kurdistan. The Embassy of the Russian Federation is in Baghdad, and there is a Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Erbil.

Much will depend on the political and socioeconomic situation within Kurdistan, which has been worsening since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, and is exacerbated by the crisis in Baghdad. This is not due so much to the emergence of Islamic State or the hostilities and internal migration in the region as it is to the falling energy prices. Iraqi Kurdistan depends on money received from extracting oil and transporting it to Turkey, and these funds are essential to the wellbeing of the local population. There have been unconfirmed reports that Iraqi Kurdistan smuggles oil into neighbouring states. On top of that, Erbil was briefly stripped of budget funding under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2014 due to disagreements between the two parties.²⁶ By constantly bringing up the

²⁴ Some parts of this chapter were first published in the *Limes* magazine.

URL: <http://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/anche-la-russia-si-serve-dei-curdi>

²⁵ Barzani Stresses Need to Implement Article 140 of Iraqi Constitution Ahead of Elections // Kurdistan 24. January 24, 2018. URL: <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/72213347-e496-485b-8b11-913ad0e24eae>

²⁶ Kurdistan Government Blasts Baghdad Over Budget Freeze // Rudaw. March 3, 2018.

URL: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/030320141>

topic of an independence referendum in his public speeches, the Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani has distracted the public from the grave socioeconomic situation and, indeed, from his own predicament: Barzani's term in office ended in 2015 and was only extended by parliamentary edicts. The referendum, which was finally held on September 25, 2017, provided the Kurdish administration with popular support for a short while, but eventually resulted in a political crisis.

Discord within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) helped the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in terms of having its decisions implemented. It is likely that there was an economic agreement between the parties. In these circumstances, Russia's main task was to avoid any serious imbalance in its relations with the two Kurdish political forces. In addition, the PUK-connected Gorran Movement, founded in 2009, started to lose influence following the May 2017 death of its charismatic leader Nawshirwan Mustafa. The situation in Kurdistan changed rather rapidly. The Gorran Movement, which was at one time banned from parliament, stood a real chance of becoming part of a coalition.²⁷ However, the movement caved in under the pressure of competition.

Russia needed to be prepared for any possible development. The PUK then split, resulting in the emergence of the Coalition for Democracy and Justice led by former Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq Bahram Salih and the New Generation Movement headed by Shaswar Abdulwahid. The forces won two and four seats in parliament, respectively, in the 2018 elections.²⁸ Salih then went on to be elected President of Iraq as a PUK candidate.

Moscow maintains contacts with both Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, and the Kurdistan Regional Government has a representative office in Russia that works with the local Kurdish diaspora, holds major cultural events and coordinates medical assistance to members of Kurdistan's Peshmerga armed units. Iraqi Kurdistan is also important to Russia in terms of Erbil's and Sulaymaniyah's contacts with Kurdish groups in Syria as a means to coordinate the fight against terrorism.

Russia's growing presence in the Middle East has resulted in broader cooperation with Iraqi Kurdistan, including in the sphere of energy. Russia is represented in the region by Gazprom Neft and Bashneft, and Rosneft's role has increased dramatically over the past two years. Rosneft has recently taken over Bashneft, which had already been operating in Kurdistan, thus gaining a solid foothold in the region. There were reports in the media in late 2016 that Erbil had signed major contracts with Rosneft. The additional agreements signed at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum turned Rosneft into a leading energy company operating in Iraqi Kurdistan and put it in control of the local energy transportation system with a throughput capacity of 700,000 barrels per day. Rosneft is planning to increase the throughput capacity to over one billion barrels per day by late 2019. The amount the company plans to invest in Iraqi Kur-

²⁷ Sergey Malyzhenkov. Gorran Movement. History and Prospects Following Leader's Death // RIAC. June 8, 2017. URL: <http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/sandbox/dvizhenie-gorran-istoriya-i-perspektivy-posle-smerti-lidera/>

²⁸ Sadr Highlights Role of Youth in Meeting with New Generation Leader // Rudaw. May 23, 2018. URL: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/230520181>

distan has not been disclosed, but media reports suggest that the figure is just shy of \$4 billion.²⁹ If true, this would be a hefty sum for the region, given that the very first contracts were paid in advance (an unprecedented case for Iraqi Kurdistan). Such steps are reshaping the Middle Eastern situation, helping Russia strengthen its position and offsetting the influence of the United States in the region.

Rosneft now operates Iraqi Kurdistan's oil transport system, including the key pipeline leading to Turkey. This safeguards the Kurds' positions in the face of possible actions on the part of Turkish, while giving Moscow yet another tool of leverage over Ankara. It should be noted that Russia actively cooperates with Turkey, while maintaining contacts with Kurdish political circles.

Moscow believes that any change to the status of individual territories within different states is an internal matter for the country involved. In theory, therefore, any change to the status of Iraqi Kurdistan should come as a result of negotiations and the mutual desire of all the parties involved, primarily Erbil and Baghdad.

In the early 2000s, Russia's interest in Iraqi Kurdistan was exclusively dictated by possible economic gains. After the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime Russia, maintained contacts with both Baghdad and the Kurds, but did not conduct an active policy there. Now that Russia has returned to the region, and the Kurdish factor has grown more noticeable in the regional processes, bilateral contacts are intensifying. In fact, should the Kurds gain maximum possible autonomy, this would give Moscow more leverage with the region's four capital cities.

Russia is therefore prepared to consider the possibility of new states emerging in the Middle East exclusively within the framework of international law and on condition that all the parties involved agree. Moscow recognizes the territorial integrity of the Middle Eastern states, and believes that the status of their integral parts is to be determined through talks. Russia's foreign political pragmatism and its contacts with Kurdish representatives on the ground allow it to plan for different scenarios, irrespective of the future status of Iraqi Kurdistan.

²⁹ Rosneft Leaves without Oil and \$1 Billion // Kommersant. November 7, 2017.
URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3460501>

3. Iraq Before and After the 2018 Elections. Relations between Moscow and Baghdad

Despite the domestic political crisis, Iraq should not be viewed through the prism of the approaches used immediately after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. It is possible that now, 15 years into the country's new history, a relatively positive agenda may appear in Iraq. The parliamentary elections on May 12 changed the political scenario in the country. Unlike in the past, modern Iraq clearly demands secularization, as witnessed – but not necessarily met – by the ongoing political processes, splits and mergers.

The Iraqi politicians, irrespective of their political affiliations, need Moscow as a foreign policy beacon. Besides, even despite its limited influence on the region compared to other major actors, Russia may still be useful as a defence partner. For example, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, head of Muqtada al-Sadr's office, has notoriously said: "We will work towards strengthening the country's defensive capacity and reinforcing the Ministry of Interior for the purpose of protecting the country from external and internal threats. We will work to depart from religious and political discords and concentrate on fighting corruption."³⁰ It would appear that the government formed as a result of the election and thanks to the agreements reached among the key coalitions will continue to purchase Russian arms and accept Russian assistance in the development of oil fields and the post-conflict restoration of the country.

It would be erroneous to believe that the left-wing arm of the Sadrist Movement can facilitate further progress in Russia–Iraq relations. The main thing here is for the very existence of secular forces to have a positive influence on politics within Iraq, which would benefit everyone.

Al-Sadr is not going to be an easy partner for Russia, but the best results are often achieved through a sober and pragmatic approach to relations. When Maksim Maksimov, the new Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Iraq, met with the Sadrist chairman of the Iraqi Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Security Hakim al-Zamili in 2017, the latter spoke highly of Russia's role in supporting his country's government in its fight against Islamic State.

Al-Zamili stressed "the importance of developing relations between the two friendly countries and build bridges of cooperation in the military, economy and services spheres."³¹ In another development, the politician said in February 2018

³⁰ Representative of Muqtada al-Sadr: We Will Not Allow Anyone to Intervene in Iraq's Affairs // RIA Novosti. May 15, 2018. URL: <https://ria.ru/interview/20180515/1520573163.html>

³¹ What Moscow said about the movement of Muqtada al-Sadr (In Arabic: ماذا قالت موسكو عن تيار مقتدى الصدر؟) // Baghdad today. July 13, 2013. URL: <https://baghdadtoday.news/news/7659/ماذا-قالت-موسكو-عن-تيار-مقتدى-الصدر/>

that Iraq had the right to “protect its land and airspace from external airborne threats.”³² Al-Zamili was evidently talking about the possibility of procuring advanced S-400 SAM systems from Russia. These statements caused concerns both in the region’s countries and in the United States. Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to the Russian Federation Haidar Hadi later announced that no negotiations on the purchase of S-400 systems were taking place.

The personnel reshuffles within the two countries’ governments are sure to introduce changes to the operation of existing bilateral institutions. The Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation was previously co-chaired by Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Dmitry Rogozin and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq Mohamed Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Rogozin has since been appointed Director General of the Roscosmos State Corporation for Space Activities, meaning that he is no longer head of the commission. Al-Jaafari, for his part, has been replaced as minister of foreign affairs by Mohamed Ali Alhakim.

Despite the internal political changes, Russia and Iraq have developed experience of bilateral cooperation and generally hold coinciding views of international affairs. The new Iraqi leadership will work to maintain the current level of contacts with Moscow and even increase it in the future. Russian energy companies, including Gazprom Neft and Lukoil, continue to operate major Iraqi oil fields (which many Iraqi actors believe to be a positive development). Perhaps the only issue to be ironed out here is the status of Rosneft in Iraq.³³ The Russian company is likely to strike a deal with Baghdad after the new government has been formed. On May 23, 2018, Rosneft released a statement that its subsidiary Bashneft International B.V. had discovered the Salman oil field in the southwest of Iraq.³⁴ The size of the field has not been disclosed, but the company sees it as “an important milestone in the development of exploration and extraction projects abroad.”³⁵

On October 4, 2018, the militaries of Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria marked the third anniversary of the Baghdad information coordination centre set up as part of the effort to fight Islamic State. It is possible that Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and North Africa Mikhail Bogdanov had the proposal to gradually build up a security system for Iraq and train army contingents in mind when he said in late September 2018 that he did not rule out the possibility of stationing Russian military personnel in Iraq should Baghdad ask for them: “Representatives of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation and Rosobornexport are working closely with the Iraqi leadership. There is a special intergovernmental commission in place, and personnel are being prepared for Iraq’s security agencies. Russia also supplies arms to Iraq, which is the largest customer

³² Iraqi MP Explains Why Baghdad Needs S-400 Systems // TASS. February 24, 2018.
URL: <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/4985631>

³³ Future of Kurdistan’s Energy Sector in Hands of Rosneft // Rudaw. April 3, 2018.
URL: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/03042018>

³⁴ Rosneft opens new oil field in Iraq // Rosneft. May 23, 2018.
URL: <https://www.rosneft.ru/press/news/item/191015/>

³⁵ Ibid.

for Russian weapons in the world after India. As for the presence of Russian regular troops in Iraq, just like with Syria, it would depend on the political will of the Iraqi leadership: if they express such a desire, then Russia may provide military assistance similar to the assistance it currently provides to Syria.”³⁶

Following the completion of the electoral cycle in Iraq, Moscow intensified contacts with the new Iraqi officials.³⁷ On November 23, 2018, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov met behind closed doors with Iraqi President Barham Salih on the side-lines of the Mediterranean Dialogue forum. Earlier, on 20 and 21 November, Bogdanov visited Baghdad and held a series of meetings with Iraqi decision makers.³⁸ Mohamed al-Halbousi, the newly elected Speaker of the Council of Representatives of Iraq, has met with Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Iraq Maksim Maksimov, and has been invited to Moscow by Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, a visit that would go a long way towards strengthening bilateral parliamentary ties. Russia may be restricted in its capabilities compared to the United States or Iran, but it may prove an experienced actor possessing skills that could benefit Baghdad. This does not just go for energy and security cooperation, even though Russia’s potential in these areas is indeed huge. Moscow could also offer its services in power generation and water supply, both of which are critical to Iraq. The opening of a border crossing station into Syria, and the enforcement of security along the motorway linking Baghdad with Damascus, creates new opportunities for Russian companies. In general, closer ties between Russia and Iraq would facilitate stabilization in the region, and Moscow welcomes such developments.

In this sense, Ibrahim al-Jaafari is of particular interest. The previous Iraqi co-chairman of the Intergovernmental Commission was replaced as minister of foreign affairs by Mohamed Ali Alhakim. Shortly before that, it became clear once again that Russia and Iraq held similar views of the Syrian issue. Al-Jaafari visited Damascus on October 14, 2018 and held talks with President Bashar al-Assad and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic Walid Muallem.

Visits to Damascus would normally be carried out by Al-Jaafari or Falih Alfayyadh, the former Prime Minister’s Adviser for National Security and Chairman of Popular Mobilization Committee. Al-Jaafari said in Damascus that Iraq was promoting “the establishment of close coordination and strategic planning with Syria for the sake of a better future for both countries.”³⁹

³⁶ Yuri Sumaneyev. Bogdanov Does Not Rule out Russian Military Assistance to Iraq // International Affairs. September 28, 2018. URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/20651>

³⁷ Mamedov R. Will Sadr’s Victory Impact Russia–Iraq Relations? // Al-Monitor. May 27, 2018.

URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/iraq-russia-relations-defense-oil-politics-sadr.html>

³⁸ Ruslan Mamedov. Putin Eyes Visit to Baghdad Amid Growing Russian–Iraqi Contacts // RIAC. December 4, 2018.

URL: <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/putin-eyes-visit-to-baghdad-amid-growing-russian-iraqi-contacts/>

³⁹ Media: Syrian, Iraqi Foreign Ministers Urge Speedier Introduction of Border Crossing Points // Rambler. October 14, 2018.

URL: <https://news.rambler.ru/other/41035551-smi-glavy-mid-sirii-i-iraka-prizvali-uskorit-otkrytiyepogranichnyhperehodov/?updated>

It is believed that Alhakim will conduct a balanced policy in the new government. Alfayyadh, for his part, has been facing opposition to his appointment as Minister of Interior. He appeared to be one of the most pragmatic Iraqi politicians, well received in Damascus and accepted by influential Russian structures, including the Security Council.⁴⁰

The Baghdad information coordination centre continues to operate successfully, but its future needs to be considered. Perhaps it would make sense to use the centre as a platform for strengthening confidence and creating a regional security structure. This could prove beneficial to regional and external actors alongside the Astana process led by Iran, Russia and Turkey.

Despite the relatively positive dynamics between Moscow and Baghdad, much depends on the domestic political processes taking place in Iraq and on the behaviour of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States.

⁴⁰ Ruslan Mamedov. What Does Nikolai Patrushev's Meeting with Head of Popular Mobilization Forces Mean? // RIAC. December 28, 2016.
URL: <http://russiancouncil.ru/analytcs-and-comments/columns/ruslan-mamedov/chto-stoit-za-vstrechey-glavy-al-khashd-ash-shaabyi-s-nikola/>

Conclusions and Recommendations

The aforementioned factors affecting Russia–Iraq relations, including the results of the Iraqi elections and the victory of Muqtada al-Sadr’s Saairun alliance, are unlikely to change the relationship between the two countries in any significant way. Moscow will continue to cooperate with all the Iraqi actors and governmental institutions. The two countries will strive to build mutually beneficial relations in different areas. Let us outline the following promising aspects of such cooperation.

- There are good prospects for economic cooperation, and not just in the defence and energy sectors. The legal status of certain Russian companies in Iraq will largely depend on the new Iraqi government. Moscow should pay attention to its partners in Iraq. Overall, Russian companies perform well in the country. Perhaps the two countries should look into the possibility of direct Russian investments, which could help increase mutual trade. This could be done with the support of the Russian–Iraqi Business Council and relevant government structures. Russia could help Iraq restore and develop its railway network, expand its rolling stock and build power generation facilities.⁴¹ Russian specialists have been present in Iraq for many decades; they are well acquainted with the country and its problems and are expected to return. All this, however, is only possible if Iraq creates a proper business environment. The recent resumption of direct air services between Moscow and Baghdad is just one step in this direction. Russia should look into the possibility of supporting medium-sized businesses by way of creating Russian or joint Russia–Iraq banks or branches of banks in different cities across the Middle East.
- The International Conference for Iraq’s Reconstruction was held on 13–15 February 2018. At the Conference, the Iraqi delegation held intensive talks with representatives of international business, humanitarian organizations, the UN and the World Bank.⁴² International organizations and various regional and external actors expressed their readiness to invest \$30 billion out of the required \$88.2 billion in the reconstruction of Iraq.⁴³ Russian representatives also held talks, but they did not publicly announce the size of the planned investment. This is fair enough, given how sensitive different actors are to Moscow’s presence in certain regions across the globe. It would be wise to intensify the efforts of the Russia–Iraq intergovernmental commission to involve Russian businesses in Iraqi restoration projects.

⁴¹ Alexander Frolov. Russia’s Difficult Return to Iraq // Supplement to the International Affairs Magazine. URL: <http://analyticmz.ru/?p=112>

⁴² Kuwait to Host International Conference on Post-War Restoration of Iraq // TASS. February 12, 2018. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/4949298>

⁴³ Conference in Support of Iraq Ends in Kuwait // TASS. February 15, 2018. URL: <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/4959134>

- Russia and Iraq have a huge potential in the humanitarian, scientific and educational spheres. It would be very useful for such initiatives to be supported by major Russian companies that have a presence in Iraq. The number of Iraqi nationals studying in Russia should be increased from the current 5000-plus.⁴⁴ Think tanks in the two countries should cooperate more, universities should set up branches, launch dual degree and joint master's programmes in various fields, establish cultural centres and offer internships for young specialists studying the other country's language. The ministries of foreign affairs of the two countries could help universities develop contacts with partner organizations. Russia could look at how other countries approach this: for example, the American University of Iraq Sulaimani trains specialists from all over Iraq, mainly for the private sector. Support for Russian universities and institutes (including those that are part of the Russian Academy of Sciences) and Iraqi specialists researching the ancient world and the Middle Ages is critical for history and archaeology. This is particularly important in the context of the fighting against black market trade of illicit antiquities. Support for cooperation between museums and the funding of joint archaeological expeditions to study ancient civilizations (such as Mesopotamia), as well as other measures, could increase Russia's role in preserving the global cultural heritage and contribute dramatically to international science.
- The United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) may have a negative effect on Iraq's domestic policy. This approach adds an element of uncertainty rather than stability. In this context, it would be useful for Russia and Iraq to build relations in such a way as to not directly affect the interests of Iran; it would be even better if they coordinated their actions with influential actors. Much will depend on the position and ability of the European Union to ensure that Tehran remains a party to the JCPOA. Russia and the European Union will likely need to develop tools to protect their economic interests in Iran and Iraq and possibly use alternative mechanisms for promoting economic cooperation.
- The fate of the Baghdad information centre depends on the parties involved deciding on further cooperation (seeing as the fight against Islamic State is no longer among the priority targets), and also on external actors (such as the United States and Saudi Arabia). Iraq has already hinted that it is interested in taking part in such formats as the Astana talks on Syria, which indicates Baghdad's desire to keep its finger on the pulse and turn into a potential negotiator in the region.⁴⁵ As for the United States and Saudi Arabia, they could join the process and propose a joint initiative on setting up a new collective security organization or a relevant working group. Such a joint mechanism in lieu of the current confrontation between Washington, Riyadh, Moscow and Baghdad would benefit everyone. Given the proper level of coordination with

⁴⁴ Ambassador of Iraq to Russia: The War against Islamic State in Iraq is Won // RIAC. September 19, 2017.
URL: <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/interview/ambassador-of-iraq-to-russia-the-war-against-islamic-state-in-iraq-is-won/>

⁴⁵ Iraq Wants to Join Alliance of Russia, Turkey and Iran // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. February 9, 2018.
URL: http://www.ng.ru/world/2018-02-09/6_7169_irkak.html

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Tehran (say, via Moscow), such a format could help de-escalate tensions in the region in general and strengthen confidence in security in the Gulf. Iraq itself has repeatedly stressed the importance of ideas aimed at developing regional security cooperation.

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