

# Navigating the US-Iraq Relationship: Toward Stability and Cooperation

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Apr 29, 2024

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Brief Analysis

**Both sides have a role to play in developing an U.S.-Iraq relationship built on Sudani's vision of "sustainable cooperation" and in addressing the actors that can limit this potential.**

**A**head of Sudani's visit to Washington, the Prime Minister's [article](#) (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iraq/iraq-needs-new-kind-partnership-united-states>) published in *Foreign Affairs* highlighted the main objectives of his meeting with President Biden and emphasized the ideal of "sustainable cooperation." For Sudani, encompassed in this agenda is the promise of restoring stability and security to Iraq and working towards demilitarizing armed groups: "little by little, as security and stability are restored, the need for weapons outside the control of the state and its institutions will disappear. We are working concertedly toward that end." However, the article—and Sudani's subsequent statements—have failed to define these groups or present a clear policy of how his government will achieve this goal. Without specifics and a clear political will to back them up, such statements will be a façade. Moreover, Sudani's apparent current inability to control these groups hinders the viability of implementing this in reality.

Iraqi observers speculate that Sudani could potentially emerge as a formidable leader capable of steering Iraq towards genuine sovereignty, provided he takes bold steps now. Yet according to the authors' interview with [Ihssan Al-Shmary](#) ([https://twitter.com/ihssan\\_shmary?lang=en](https://twitter.com/ihssan_shmary?lang=en)), the Head of the Center for Political Thinking in Iraq and a Professor at the University of Baghdad, Sudani's long overdue visit and agenda will not bear fruit so long as the

current U.S. administration still perceives him to be operating in his capacity as head of a government that emanated from a coalition of armed factions allied with Iran.

Analysts view Sudani's official White House visit this year as an opportunity to showcase his leadership and garner international support, potentially bolstering his re-election prospects after parliamentary elections scheduled for next year. However, Sudani's ascent to power has been marred by allegations of electoral fraud in favor of Iranian-backed factions. **Domestic and international critics**

**(<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%A8%D9%83%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%86>)** argue that Sudani's current role is largely symbolic, serving as a political shield for these factions.

Al-Shmary argues that Sudani's focus on beginning a new phase in the U.S.-Iraq relationship by disregarding the decades-long building of this relationship undercuts previous governments' efforts since 2003. Moreover, he points out that while Sudani justifies the existence of armed groups as an enduring result of the widely recognized call from Ayatollah Sistani to form militias to fight back against ISIS incursions a decade ago "these groups are groups founded by Iran, with military, security and economic policy goals."

**Ayad Al-Anbar (<https://twitter.com/ayadhusein1>)**, a researcher and Iraqi professor of political science at the University of Baghdad likewise emphasizes during an interview that when Sudani talks about balance of power on the one hand but then goes to acknowledge the existence and effectiveness of certain factions, these descriptions are problematic and give the impression that he operates in a gray area. Sudani is attempting to navigate between the demands of armed militias and his own policy priorities while postponing the decision to confront these groups. This stance greatly weakens Sudani and undermines his credibility. Al-Anbar argues that one consequence of this is that Sudani has not presented a clear roadmap of how to handle a transition of the U.S. Iraq relationship that addresses U.S. concerns in this respect by indicating that he will take a direct approach towards those who would rebel against the Iraqi government's stance on bilateral relations with Washington.

Another case in point is the recent **announcement (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqs-kataib-hezbollah-suspends-military-operations-us-forces-statement-2024-01-30/>)** of Kata'ib Hezbollah's (KH) suspension of its attacks on U.S. bases. While Sudani's administration attributed this pause to his government's intensive efforts aimed at restraining militias, Al-Shmary argued that this pause was in fact Iran's decision, and that the PM is using this decision to show himself capable of restraining these militias. Specifically, the sudden halt in attacks by KH coincided with the **visit of a high-ranking Iranian military official to Baghdad (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-armed-groups-dial-down-us-attacks-request-iran-commander-2024-02-18/>)**, and there are suggestions that Iran's gesture is aimed at avoiding U.S. retaliation—not due to pressure from Baghdad—underscoring Tehran's desire to maintain significant influence in Iraq **and the withdrawal of American forces (<https://www.newsweek.com/exclusiveiraq-militia-warns-us-troops-will-exit-coffins-if-biden-wont-withdraw-1883807>)**.

The incident suggests that while Sudani wishes to present himself as in control of Iraq's armed groups, and in spite of his extensive experience in Iraqi politics, the Prime Minister likely finds himself constrained by the grip of militias and terrorist groups. Until he breaks free from these constraints, the consistent interference of these groups in Iraqi politics will compromise his ability to enact genuine change.

## **Navigating Iraq's Political Dynamics**

In order to counteract these pressures, Sudani needs robust international and domestic support when he does make steps towards decoupling Baghdad from Iranian pressures. Both sides have a role to play in developing an U.S.-Iraq relationship built on Sudani's vision of 'sustainable cooperation' and in addressing the actors that can limit this potential. Iraq's political landscape is characterized by a delicate balance of power, where the relationship with the United States holds significant sway over the legitimacy and stability of the ruling political class. To navigate this terrain effectively, Iraqi leaders must prioritize open communication and cooperation with their American counterparts, grounded in mutual respect and understanding.

Visits to Washington by Iraqi officials are not merely diplomatic niceties but are perceived as opportunities to consolidate political power and secure vital support. This visit is important for setting what Sudani refers to as the "new phase" of strategic partnership following the recently announced [transition \(https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3735450/usiraq-higher-military-commission-principals-meeting-statement/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3735450/usiraq-higher-military-commission-principals-meeting-statement/) in the military mission of the international Coalition for the Defeat of ISIS in Iraq. These and future meetings are an opportunity to demonstrate transparency and a genuine commitment to addressing mutual concerns and priorities, transcending short-term political gains for the long-term benefit of both nations.

For his part, Sudani needs to assert his authority over the various militias operating within Iraq, presenting himself as the legitimate leader of the country in action as well as in word, even if he receives significant pushback from other significant political players. This entails publicly challenging the undue influence of groups like KH and emphasizing his constitutional role as Iraq's highest official. Specifically, key militia leaders should be expelled from their positions of power in Iraq's government; this includes individuals like [Abdul Aziz Al-Mohammadaw \(https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-51605106\)](https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-51605106), known as "Abu Fadak" and Hussein Falih Aziz, known as [Abu Zeinab al-Lami \(https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/hussein-falih-aziz-aka-abu-zainab-al-lami\)](https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/hussein-falih-aziz-aka-abu-zainab-al-lami), whose ties to designated terrorist organizations compromise the stability of Iraq.

For the part of the United States, it must be clear that Washington respects Iraqi sovereignty and its political realities, while intensifying its efforts to dismantle the financial and industrial networks that support those militias hindering the independence of Iraqi politics. To this end, Washington can continue its targeting of [leaders \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/abw-baqr-alsady-arhaby-fy-ktayb-hzb-allh-wmswwl-fy-alhshd-alshby\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/abw-baqr-alsady-arhaby-fy-ktayb-hzb-allh-wmswwl-fy-alhshd-alshby), [businesses, and entities \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-militias-exclusive-idUSKCN1Q20R5/\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-militias-exclusive-idUSKCN1Q20R5/) directly linked to groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq to further build pressure.

However, sensitive topics such as Iranian influence and the presence of armed groups require careful navigation and diplomatic finesse. Collaborative efforts between Iraq and the United States, possibly involving multilateral approaches with regional stakeholders, are essential to address these complex challenges effectively. Iran's response to Sudani's diplomatic overtures to the United States could have significant implications for regional dynamics. Iraq must maintain open channels of communication with Iran while asserting its sovereignty and independence in its relations with other nations, including the United States.

Likewise, changes in U.S. administrations may introduce uncertainties in the U.S.-Iraq relationship, underscoring the importance of a long-term strategic approach to which Washington is committed at a bipartisan level. Both countries should strive to build a relationship based on shared interests and mutual respect, transcending partisan politics and focusing on the broader objectives of stability, security, and prosperity in the region. To maintain this relationship, Iraq must ensure U.S. troops are protected from the [threat of retaliatory attacks \(https://www.newsweek.com/us-troops-face-big-threat-iran-vows-revenge-against-israel-attack-1888130\)](https://www.newsweek.com/us-troops-face-big-threat-iran-vows-revenge-against-israel-attack-1888130) from Iran and its proxies, especially in the context of the Israel-Hamas war.

In conclusion, navigating the complexities of the U.S.-Iraq relationship requires a commitment to dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding. Both sides must ensure that diplomatic engagements are conducted with respect for each other's sovereignty and political realities, avoiding actions that may escalate tensions or undermine trust.

By addressing shared challenges and prioritizing long-term strategic interests, both nations can contribute to regional stability and prosperity, fostering a relationship grounded in trust, respect, and cooperation along the lines envisioned in Sudani's *Foreign Affairs* article. The next steps will be a crucial test of Sudani's leadership and his commitment to confronting Iran's influence in Iraq, and success in implementing these measures may pave the way for discussions on reducing U.S. military presence in the country. However, it remains to be seen whether Sudani can effectively navigate these challenges and whether his efforts will be sufficient to secure the support of the United States and other international stakeholders. ❖

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