

THE GULF BETWEEN THEM: WHAT ARAB GULF COUNTRIES CAN LEARN FROM IRAN'S APPROACH TO IRAQ

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SUMMARY

- The strong Iranian presence in Iraq troubles Arab Gulf leaders and discourages them from engaging with the country more deeply.
- Iran adopts a strategically pragmatic approach to Iraq, cooperating widely to maximise its influence while working hard to retain vital Iraqi economic support, especially vis-à-vis its rivalry with the US.
- In contrast, Arab Gulf states' approaches to Iraq have been stop-start – although Iraq's own weak governance also contributes to this.
- Popular Iraqi anger at Iranian influence allows Arab Gulf states to present a positive image of themselves as potential investors in Iraq's economy.
- Europeans should encourage Arab Gulf states to act more strategically on Iraq.
- An Iraq that has diverse regional relationships is more likely to be stable and secure, in line with European interests in the Middle East.

Introduction

The Gulf Arab states are leagues behind Iran in the scale, scope, and significance of their relations with Iraq. The Gulf-Iraq relationship has witnessed a mild renaissance since the departure in 2014 of then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and his sectarian approach to politics. But there has been uneven progress in the development of substantial political, economic, and security ties since then. Gulf states remain cautious about investing too heavily in Iraq, fearing that their engagements will ultimately be derailed by Iranian-backed politicians and armed actors in the country. There is also a level of complacency generated by the American and European diplomatic and military presence in Iraq, which reassures the Gulf states that the country does not represent an immediate threat to their security.

When the Gulf states do engage with Iraq, their outreach is often inconsistent, short term, and unstrategic – although there are differences between the countries. In particular, Gulf governments have, on occasion, sought to identify specific Iraqi political actors to support. But this invariably fails, yielding little from Gulf states' point of view while tarnishing their reputation in Iraq. More positive engagements have focused on the development of joint economic projects. But Gulf states have expressed frustration at the slow pace of the Iraqi bureaucracy's responses to such projects, and they have struggled to determine whether these projects are stymied by deliberate political sabotage or by the weakness of Iraq's governance capacity.

Meanwhile, Iran has extensive political, economic, security, and cultural ties throughout Iraq – not only in Shia areas. These relationships provide considerable value to Iran's economy and to its ability to project power regionally and further afield. The Iranian approach is particularly remarkable in its flexibility, durability, and long-term outlook. However, there are some signs that Iran's engagement in Iraq has been weakened by the assassination of Quds Force commander General Qassem Suleimani in January 2020 – which appears to have heightened competition between different Iranian actors seeking to control their country's Iraq policy. Moreover, the considerable influence that Iran wields in Iraq is increasingly alienating the Iraqi public, particularly after Iranian-backed armed groups played a part in driving the violent response to the 2019-2020 protest movement in Iraq.

Drawing on interviews with Gulf analysts, political leaders, and advisers, this paper argues that the Gulf states have an opportunity to differentiate themselves from Iran in the eyes of the Iraqi public. They can do so by visibly rejecting the Iranian approach, and by pursuing a relationship that benefits the Iraqi public and respects the sovereignty of the Iraqi state. This will mean investing in the development of strong institutional ties and refraining from backing individual political actors or parties. It will also mean committing resources to projects that directly benefit ordinary Iraqi citizens.

If the Gulf states adopt this approach, they have an opportunity to build sustainable long-term relations with Iraq based on a growing reputation for integrity – one that would stand in stark contrast to the Iranian approach. Strengthening Iraq-Gulf relations also creates opportunities for Iraq to play a positive regional role, including by mediating between Gulf states and Iran (an initiative the government in Baghdad is currently pursuing). Europe has an interest in encouraging this process. The diversification of Iraq's regional relationships would support the European desire for the country to be politically and economically stable and capable of insulating itself from geopolitical conflicts.

Iranian interests in Iraq

Core interests

Iran perceives itself as an embattled state that is victimised by Western powers. It characterises its proactive engagement in Middle Eastern states, including Iraq, as a primarily defensive act that is designed to asymmetrically balance against threats to its national security emanating from the West. During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, US leaders referred to Iran as being part of an “axis of evil”. And there was every reason to believe that the United States would have pursued regime change in Iran had its experience in Iraq been successful. Iran had an existential interest in derailing the invasion of Iraq and in preventing its neighbour from becoming a pro-Western satellite in the Middle East; it has been largely successful in this regard.

Iran has long viewed the Iraqi military, which has been substantially trained and equipped by Western states, as a potential threat. It has sought to undermine the influence of the military first by stuffing federal police forces with recruits from Iranian-backed militias, and then by supporting the development and institutionalisation of armed groups that were strengthened by the war on the Islamic State group (ISIS). The network of armed groups in Iraq that Iran has nurtured allows it to credibly threaten Western interests, while maintaining the level of distance and deniability required to prevent unsustainable escalation.

The imposition of US-enforced sanctions on Iran has rendered the country extremely economically vulnerable. Its extensive economic relationship with Iraq has, therefore, given it a critical lifeline. Trade between Iraq and Iran runs into the tens of billions of dollars, Iraq's continued purchase of Iranian energy provides important income, and, on the informal side, Iran's currency exchanges with Iraq are a valuable source of US dollars. Iraq also provides a route for Iranian oil smuggling.

Iran views Iraq as not just a conduit for threats from the West, but also a potential economic rival and security threat in its own right. Iran is very aware that, when its oil sales are removed from global

markets, Iraq is able to take up that market share by increasing its own oil production.[1] And a stronger Iraqi economy that developed its production and export capacity could threaten to undermine Iranian exports. On the security side, the Iran-Iraq war, which killed more than one million people, continues to loom large in the memories of the commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), who shape Iran's Iraq policy. For them, preventing any possibility of conflict between the two states remains a priority. More recently, the rapid growth of extremist groups in Iraq, including al-Qaeda in Iraq and ISIS, has underscored for Iran the security risk that its neighbour continues to pose.

Iran's approach

Iran has deep-rooted relationships with powerful Iraqi political parties, including the Da'wah Party; the Badr Organisation; and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), as well as its offshoot, the Hikmah party – all of which were formed in Iran by exiled Iraqi opposition actors who had fled the former regime. However, Iran has not limited its political outreach to the actors with which it has historical ties. Instead, Iran has cultivated relationships with Iraqi political actors from across the ethno-sectarian spectrum, including with politicians who have been vocally anti-Iran or who Tehran may perceive as having acted against Iranian interests.

The flexibility, patience, and resilience of the Iranian strategy are its most remarkable characteristics. Iran has a pragmatic and realist approach that provides slack for Iraqi politicians who need to pursue anti-Iranian positions for political reasons.[2] This means that Iraqi politicians always have the option of seeking support from the Iranians. And they often turn to Iran for help when they are stuck in difficult negotiating positions within the Iraqi political system. This affords Iran extraordinary leverage at critical moments in Iraqi political negotiations, including during government formation processes. Iraq's electoral system means that elections do not produce a clear winner and governments emerge out of lengthy and opaque negotiations that take place behind closed doors. Iran's ability to broker agreements between Iraqi political actors provides it with the opportunity to exert significant influence over these negotiations. This means that ministers and senior political appointees often owe their positions to Iranian support, making them more amenable to Iranian requests.

Iran has pursued its security interests in Iraq by supporting the growth of armed actors outside the control of the Iraqi Ministry of Defence. The Quds Force, the overseas operations arm of the IRGC, provides Iraqi armed actors with training, financing, and equipment. The war on ISIS created an opportunity for a major expansion of armed groups in Iraq. And Iran helped sustain them by supporting their integration into the Iraqi government through the Popular Mobilisation Committee –

a vehicle that gives the groups access to billions of dollars of state funding without bringing them under Iraqi state control. Reports indicate that the Iraqi central government increased its budgetary allocation to the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) by more than 45 per cent between 2019 and 2021. Although not all PMUs have connections to Tehran, most have close links to the Quds Force.

More recently, Iran has supported the development of armed groups outside the structure of the PMUs to enable it to act against Western interests in Iraq while to some extent insulating the groups and their Iraqi political backers from retribution. The expansion of armed groups with direct ties to Iran has enabled the Iranians to hedge against the Iraqi military, which it views with some suspicion because of its extensive training and supply relationships with the US. These groups help Iran exert pressure on Western states and retaliate against perceived Western aggression. The groups also provide Iran with ways to shape both national and local political and economic activities in support of its own interests.

Iran's exercise of power in Iraq has been disrupted by the assassinations of Suleimani and deputy commissioner of the Popular Mobilisation Committee Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Suleimani had fostered deep relationships across Iraq's political, security, and economic apparatus that helped him wield extraordinary authority and influence. Suleimani's replacement, General Esmail Ghaani, has made strides towards building relationships in Iraq but is not able to impose his will on Iraqi political activities to quite the same extent.

The death of Suleimani also appears to have contributed to an escalation in competition between different Iranian players over Iraq policy. Iraqi political actors and observers say that the Quds Force sometimes pursues policies that clash with those pursued by different Iranian intelligence agencies operating in Iraq, and that those approaches are at times further contradicted by the messaging of Iranian ministers or other senior government representatives during their visits to Iraq. One senior political adviser relates that the Quds Force was "at war" with other Iranian intelligence agencies operating in Iraq, but concluded that it was still able to maintain the upper hand because of its considerable resources and relationships in the country.[3]

Meanwhile, the death of Muhandis, who exercised considerable control over Iraqi armed groups, has undermined the coherence and discipline of these groups. It has also placed a greater burden on Iranian actors who seek to coordinate the activities of armed groups.

Iran particularly seeks to exercise soft power in Iraq by capitalising on the shared Shia identity of most Iranians and Iraqis. But its close association with Iraqi political leaders and armed groups has undermined its reputation among the Iraqi public. Nonetheless, while the Shia element is not determinative of the relationship, it has provided opportunities for Iran to portray itself as a natural

partner and ally of Iraq. Millions of Iranian pilgrims and seminarians visit the Shia holy centres of Najaf and Karbala every year, providing the opportunity for cross-cultural and citizen-to-citizen engagement. The money these pilgrims spend during their trips to Iraq is an important source of income for the country. And Iran's government and citizens have spent millions of dollars refurbishing shrines in Iraq.

Gulf interests in Iraq

Core interests

Prior to 2014, Gulf states largely gave Iraq the cold shoulder, pursuing only minimal relations with it. In contrast to their Iranian counterparts, Gulf leaders are quick to take offence and cut ties with Iraqi political actors who do not “follow instructions or show loyalty”, according to one adviser to an Iraqi political leader.[4]

Gulf states also felt significant discontent with Western powers – which they blamed for allowing Iranian influence in Iraq to grow – and believed that serious diplomatic engagement with Baghdad was futile. Gulf concerns about Iraqi domestic politics were further strengthened by what they perceived as Maliki's anti-Sunni sectarianism. Overall, Gulf governments expected Western states, and the US in particular, to take responsibility for protecting them from any threats emanating from Iraq.

The territorial gains made by ISIS in Iraq in 2014 shifted Gulf perceptions of their security interests in the country. The group's rapid expansion across northern Iraq in 2014 presented an urgent ideological and security threat to Gulf states, creating the impetus for them to engage with Iraq to defeat it. Maliki's departure and the premiership of Haider al-Abadi presented an opportunity for Gulf states to reset their relations with Iraq and to embark on a more positive and proactive approach to the country.

Since the territorial defeat of ISIS, the proliferation of Iranian-backed groups has come to represent Iraq's greatest security threat to the Gulf states. They are worried about these groups launching direct attacks on targets in their territory, a fear likely borne out by the 2019 drone attack on state oil company Aramco's facilities in Saudi Arabia, which was widely believed to have originated in Iraq (although the Iraqi government strenuously denies this).

Gulf states are also concerned about the extent to which Iran's strategic depth and ability to project power regionally are strengthened by its relationships with Iraqi armed groups.[5] Despite

intensifying their diplomatic activities in Iraq in recent years, the Gulf states do not appear to have a broad strategic vision of how to protect their security interests in the country. As a result, they largely continue to free-ride on Western security activities in Iraq.

Although the Gulf states have pursued economic projects in Iraq to varying extents, there is generally a perception that economic cooperation benefits the country more than them. As such, they think the Iraqi government should be more proactive in pursuing economic collaboration. There is still significant frustration about the failure of Iraqi state bureaucracy to implement agreed activities and to carry its weight in joint projects. Governments in the Gulf also fear that investments they make in Iraq will be physically or politically attacked by pro-Iranian actors in the country. They are keenly aware that a new and more pro-Iranian Iraqi government could overturn formal agreements that the Iraqi state has made with its Gulf counterparts.

Differences among the Gulf states

Gulf states have different approaches and priorities when it comes to their relations with Iraq. The United Arab Emirates has taken a largely business-centric approach to the country,[6] while Saudi Arabia's outlook remains primarily political. Meanwhile, Qatar's limited interactions with Iraq have shifted away from a Sunni-centric approach since the other Gulf states mounted a blockade against it. [7]

Among the Gulf states, the UAE has the most substantial economic activity in Iraq, with a particular focus on investments in the energy sector in the Kurdistan region, on construction projects,[8] and on exports to Iraq, including those of electrical equipment, machinery, and precious metals. The UAE has sought to minimise its political interventions in Iraq, in the hope of protecting its economic activity in the country. It is aware of the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq, and seeks to present itself as an unthreatening economic actor.[9] There are also suggestions that, to avoid clashing with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi allows the Saudis to take the lead on political and security policy on Iraq.

Although it has a high-level commitment to developing a stronger economic relationship with Iraq, the UAE remains somewhat hesitant to do so – primarily because it fears that the next Iraqi government may be less hospitable to Gulf investment. One Iraqi official describes the UAE as having “one foot in and one foot out” when it comes to its economic activities in Iraq.[10] The implementation of economic agreements also appears to be hampered by bureaucratic weaknesses on both sides.

Saudi Arabia continues to view Iraq primarily as a conduit for the expansion of Iran's regional power.

Accordingly, its priority is to reduce Iranian influence in the country.[11] When asked to characterise Saudi interests in Iraq, the Saudi embassy in Baghdad told this author that they were to ensure that “political decision-making is independent and far from foreign interference”. The embassy added that: “the Kingdom’s foreign policy is constant towards rejecting the Iranian role of sabotage and interference in the internal affairs of the countries of the region.”[12]

There is little indication of how exactly Saudi Arabia intends to limit Iranian influence in Iraq. But, to this end, Riyadh appears to have given political and likely financial support to particular Iraqi politicians. The approach has not resulted in a significant increase in Saudi influence in Iraqi politics. And the Saudis have been deeply frustrated by the perceived disloyalty and inconsistency of their Iraqi partners. Saudi Arabia’s aborted attempt to build a partnership with Iraqi political leader Muqtada al-Sadr is a case in point. Sadr was received in Saudi Arabia in 2018, but the fledgling relationship ended because of Saudi anger at Sadr’s visits to Iran and apparent cooperation with senior Iranian leaders. [13] The Saudi approach to supporting Iraq’s political leaders is far less successful than the Iranian one, but the continued effort risks undermining Iraqi public perceptions of Saudi Arabia – as Iraqis vehemently reject foreign intervention in their political system – while providing Saudi Arabia with few political advantages.

Saudi Arabia has pursued a stronger economic relationship with Iraq, although the Saudi embassy admits that “trade exchange between the two countries [does] not meet the aspirations of the two countries and does not reflect their capabilities.”[14] The April 2021 visit to Saudi Arabia by Iraq’s prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, prompted the announcement of several initiatives, including the establishment of a \$3 billion joint Iraqi-Saudi fund, paid for by the Saudis, to promote investment in the Iraqi economy. The success of these initiatives, however, requires the Iraqi state to take steps to enable Saudi investment to go ahead. The Saudis have made clear that a number of their initiatives in Iraq have been stymied by the slow, unresponsive, and inefficient Iraqi bureaucracy. And they are frustrated that their positive efforts in Iraq are not succeeding despite the apparent high-level political support for them on both sides.

Before other Gulf states imposed a blockade on it in 2017, Qatar heavily focused its Iraq policy on providing visible support to Iraqi Sunni political leaders. Qatar worked with Turkey to try to bring these leaders together in a unified Iraqi Sunni political bloc following the defeat of ISIS. Although other Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, have also sought to organise and coordinate Iraqi Sunni political leaders, their diplomatic outreach to Iraq was not limited to – and, therefore, not wholly characterised by – these efforts. All Gulf initiatives to strengthen Iraqi Sunni political leaders have failed. This is partly due to the Gulf states’ unrealistic expectations and lack of flexibility and strategic patience, and partly due to the strong incentives for these politicians to compete against one another

for the limited positions available to Sunnis within the Iraqi political system.[15]

Qatar's focus on Sunni political actors undermined its reputation among the public and the political elite in Iraq. And it did little to protect Qatar's strategic interests there. Following the onset of the blockade, Qatar overhauled its regional policy – including in relation to Iraq – by seeking, above all, to establish positive diplomatic relationships across the political spectrum.[16] Doha's new approach helped it reduce its reliance on the Gulf states that participated in the blockade. In a meeting with Iraq's president, Barham Salih, in 2019, Qatar's emir said that the Gulf state stood by Iraq and supported “promoting stability and peace and in achieving progress in the economic fields”. Having expended considerable energy to survive the blockade politically and economically, Qatar was left with little capacity to develop a substantive relationship with Iraq. However, the shift in Qatar's rhetoric and attitude towards Iraqi Shia leaders has laid a positive foundation upon which it can build this relationship.[17]

How Gulf states have negotiated Iraq's evolving political landscape

The Abadi government

Abadi's positive outreach

Abadi's ascension to the premiership in September 2014 was an important moment in the thawing of relations between Iraq and the Gulf. Gulf states deeply mistrusted Maliki, viewing him as a pro-Iranian and anti-Sunni sectarian leader who could not be relied on to keep his word. Although Abadi hailed from the same political party as Maliki, he adopted inclusive rhetoric from the outset and took substantive steps towards reconciling with Sunni leaders. This shift in approach gave the Gulf states confidence that the outlook of the new administration represented a significant departure from that of the previous government.

The Abadi government engaged in significant positive outreach to the Gulf states – publicly stating that Iraq sought balanced relationships with them and Iran, and emphasising that Iraq did not wish to be “part of any axis”. These overtures to the Gulf states were further supported by other influential Iraqi political leaders, including Sadr and moderate Iraqi Shia political leader Ammar al-Hakim. This persuaded leaders in the Gulf that there was a newly hospitable environment in Iraq with which they could engage.[18] The shift in Saudi Arabia's approach to Iraq may also be related to the death of King Abdullah in January 2015. Abdullah had a deeply sceptical view of post-invasion Iraq and felt burned

by his previous attempt to engage with Maliki. Yet his successor, King Salman – and Salman’s son, Muhammad bin Salman – were able to approach Iraq and the region with fresh eyes and renewed enthusiasm.[19]

There was a flurry of diplomatic activity between Iraq and the Gulf states during Abadi’s time in office. In December 2014, Kuwait agreed to suspend Iraq’s compensation payments for the first Gulf war (which took place in the early 1990s) for one year, to enable Iraq to navigate its financial crisis. In 2015 Saudi Arabia sent an ambassador to Iraq for the first time since that conflict, and resumed diplomatic visits. In 2017 Abadi and then-interior minister Qasim al-Araji visited Riyadh, while then Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir visited Baghdad. Gulf states also restored other bilateral diplomatic ties with Iraq: in May 2015, Qatar announced that it would reopen its embassy in Baghdad following a successful meeting between then Iraqi president Fuad Masum and Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

War against ISIS

Abadi’s government was overwhelmingly focused on defeating ISIS in Iraq. As the US and other Western powers equivocated about providing military support, Iran immediately offered military assistance, strategic direction, and training to Iraq – and, at times, provided Iranian troops and senior Iranian commanders to engage directly in the military response. One Iranian institute estimates that Iran transferred \$16 billion in weapons to Iraq to support the fight against ISIS, while US intelligence officers note that Iran was deploying advanced rockets and missiles to battles in Iraq. This assistance, which was heavily publicised in Iraq, had a powerful positive impact on Iraqi public perceptions of Iran. Suleimani appeared to be ubiquitous on the front line; he was often photographed engaging directly with Iraqi military leaders. The leader of one PMU group said that Suleimani participated “in the operation command centre from the start of the battle to the end and the last thing (he) does is visit the battle’s wounded in the hospital.”

Iran also played a substantial role in raising, training, and organising informal Iraqi armed groups to fight against ISIS – a role that afforded the Iranians significant influence over tens of thousands of armed actors in Iraq. The Popular Mobilisation Law, which was passed in 2016, formalised these armed groups and provided them with access to state funding without effectively exerting Iraqi state control over them. The law ensured that these armed groups would not be disbanded once the war against ISIS was over, thereby consolidating Iran’s ability to influence armed activity in Iraq.[20]

As Gulf states saw the rise of ISIS as an immediate and direct threat to their security, they placed their security forces on high alert. The group made direct threats against the Gulf states: it called on Saudi citizens to attack their own government

, and inspired the deadly shooting of eight Shia worshippers at a mosque in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province in November 2014, as well as the killing of three Saudi border guards at the al-Arar border between Iraq and Saudi Arabia in 2015. Gulf states were also deeply concerned about the large number of their citizens who were travelling to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS, prompting Muhammad bin Salman to admit that "we have not done enough to protect our nation from extremism, and its youths from militancy and radicalism." The scale of the threat posed by ISIS led Gulf governments to examine the factors that enabled the growth of violent extremism within their own states. The UAE created several initiatives to counter violent extremism, including the Hedayah project. There were also broader efforts in the Gulf to crack down on terrorist financing and to curtail incendiary commentary on Gulf satellite channels. This shift in approach was an important step in rehabilitating the reputation of the Gulf states in Iraq, after years of frustration among Iraqi leaders at Gulf rhetoric that they believed to be fuelling Sunni extremism in Iraq.

The Gulf states participated in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain all taking part in coalition air strikes against the group – albeit in Syria. Gulf states allowed US aircraft to deploy from bases in their territory, including from al-Udeid air base in Qatar, al-Dhafra Air Base in the UAE, and Ali al-Salem Air Base in Kuwait. They also offered humanitarian support: Saudi Arabia pledged to donate \$500m to the United Nations' humanitarian efforts in Iraq, Kuwait contributed \$10m to UN work with displaced Iraqis, and Qatar sent 300 tonnes of humanitarian aid to Iraqi cities hosting displaced persons.

Early Gulf engagement with the global military effort to counter ISIS soon gave way to scepticism as it became clear that the coalition intended to pursue a limited, Iraq-focused approach that would not overthrow the regime in Syria or effectively counter Iran's growing influence in the region. Over time, Gulf states refocused their security priorities on Iran, which they saw as a more significant threat than ISIS.

The Kuwait reconstruction conference

In early 2018, the European Union and Kuwait co-hosted an international conference to raise funds for the post-ISIS reconstruction of Iraq. The event had the potential to reset the Iraq-Gulf relationship, but mismanaged expectations of what it could achieve meant that it largely ended in disappointment on both sides. The conference sought to raise grants, loans, and private sector investment to contribute to the reconstruction of Iraq. The Iraqi government had estimated that the cost of reconstruction would be \$88.2 billion, but it failed to manage its own expectations and its messaging to the public about what could be realistically raised at the conference. As a result, even though \$30 billion was raised at the event – albeit mostly in credit facilities and investments rather

than in grants – the headlines branded it a failure. This caused consternation among Gulf states at what they believed to be the Iraqis' ingratitude.

Had the conference been framed differently, it could have instead been seen as a watershed moment in Gulf-Iraq relations in which the Gulf states substantially stepped up their engagement with Iraq. Saudi Arabia contributed \$1 billion in loans and \$500m in export credit; the UAE pledged \$500m in assistance, also promising \$5.5 billion in investment from the private sector for the Al-Rasheed base and Umm Qasr port. Qatar pledged \$1 billion in loans and investment focused on infrastructure, while Kuwait pledged a \$1bn loan and another \$1 billion in investment. Few of these pledges have been fulfilled, but officials in the Iraqi government admit that this is in large part because of its own inability to manage the development of investment programmes that can take advantage of the loans. [21] There was also substantial participation in the conference from Gulf-based companies, which created an opportunity for Iraq to connect with the private sector in the Gulf. There have been few successful outcomes from such engagement, however. This is because the barriers to doing business in Iraq remain incredibly high, mainly because of poor Iraqi regulation and extreme bureaucratic burdens, which enable corruption at every stage of a private venture.

Iran also attended the Kuwait reconstruction conference, with foreign minister Muhammad Javad Zarif leading a delegation. Tehran did not make a pledge at the conference but, a month later, Vice-President Eshaq Jahangiri offered a \$3 billion credit line to Iraq. Due to its own financial difficulties, compounded by US sanctions, Iran was ultimately unable to provide substantial reconstruction funds to Iraq. Gulf states could have used their media channels to highlight the contrast between a lack of reconstruction investment from Iran compared to their own pledges, but they missed this opportunity to reach out to the Iraqi public.

The Trump years

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 American presidential election shifted regional dynamics, placing Tehran under substantial pressure following the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, and shoring up Gulf confidence in Washington's support against Iranian expansionism in the region. Following their years of anger at the Obama administration because of the nuclear deal, Gulf states were buoyed by the Trump administration's hawkish approach to Iran. Gulf states were more inclined to respond to US entreaties to strengthen their relations with Iraq because they now felt that Washington was taking their regional security concerns seriously. In particular, the inauguration of the Saudi-Iraq Cooperation Council, which took place in October 2017 and was attended by then US secretary of state Rex Tillerson, symbolised a more rigorous and long-term approach to developing

sustained and multifaceted relations with Iraq.

Meanwhile, the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the reimposition of sanctions on Iran contributed to a rupture in the relationship between Iran and Abadi. The Iranians were infuriated by the perceived injustice of the US withdrawal from the deal and, deeply aware of their need for Iraqi assistance to circumvent renewed sanctions, felt that Abadi offered insufficient reassurance and support to Iran during its time of need.[22] Although Iranian leaders are realistic about Iraqi engagement with the US and about the need for formal compliance with the sanctions regime, they felt that there was a lack of informal and moral support from Abadi at a particularly sensitive time for them. The damage to Abadi's relationship with the Iranians was compounded by his efforts to limit funding to the PMUs, by his turbulent relationship with the IRGC, and by difficulties that the Iranians faced in sustainably accessing and influencing the activities of his tight inner circle.[23]

The Mahdi government

The impact of Mahdi's approach

The outcome of the 2018 parliamentary election was relatively positive for Iran. Tehran was pleased that Abadi's Nasr coalition performed poorly, while the pro-Iran Fatah bloc won the second-highest number of seats. Iran worked intensively to broker an agreement between Fatah and the Sunni political group led by Khamis al-Khanjar, giving the Fatah alliance an important Sunni component. [24] Iran's willingness to negotiate with Khanjar, who had previously been one of the most vociferous anti-Iran voices in Iraqi Sunni politics, demonstrates its pragmatism and willingness to work with any actor in pursuit of its interests.

Although the Iranians pushed for former national security adviser Faleh al-Fayyadh to become prime minister, the eventual selection of Adel Abdul Mahdi was a satisfactory outcome for them.[25] Mahdi was a former member of the ISCI, the Iraqi opposition group created by Iran in the 1980s, and he had extensive relationships with Iranian political and military elites.[26] Perhaps even more importantly than their relationship with the prime minister himself, the Iranians influenced the set-up of the Prime Minister's Office such that they had extraordinary access to, and say on, day-to-day decision-making. There is a broad perception among Iraqi analysts and political figures that Mahdi was a relatively passive prime minister, and that policy was controlled by his chief of staff Mohamed al-Hashimi, also known as Abu Jihad, and by other senior political figures including Fayyadh.[27] Abu Jihad was, like the prime minister, a former member of ISCI and was believed to have very close links with the Quds Force. Numerous sources state that Abu Jihad was in frequent communication with the Iranians, and granted their requests to such an extent that some questioned whether his loyalties

primarily lay with Iran rather than with Iraq.[28]

Although there was some continued engagement between Iran and the Gulf states during Mahdi's time in office – including the signing of 13 political and economic agreements between Iraq and Saudi Arabia in April 2019 during a visit by Mahdi to Riyadh – there was a widespread perception that the pro-Iranian actors in Mahdi's office actively sought to stymie closer relationships with the Gulf.[29] Growing US anger at the Mahdi administration's alignment with Iran also contributed to Gulf hesitancy during this period.[30] Ultimately, the Mahdi administration only lasted 18 months, and created an inhospitable environment for the growth of Iraq-Gulf relations.

The US 'maximum pressure' campaign

The Trump administration stepped up its 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran – comprising sanctions and other forms of coercion – during Mahdi's time in office. This inadvertently fostered an even closer economic and political relationship between Iran and Iraq.[31] Iraq became a vital economic lifeline for its increasingly isolated neighbour. Iraq has been Iran's top export destination since 2018; Iran reportedly exported \$12 billion worth of goods to Iraq in 2019 (excluding substantial black-market activity). The head of the Iran-Iraq Joint Economic Committee (and also Iran's energy minister) Reza Ardakanian predicted in January 2021 that bilateral trade would increase to \$20 billion and revealed the Iranian and Iraqi governments' plan to sign new agreements on cooperation on water and energy. Ardakanian claimed that Iran supplies 40 per cent of Iraq's electricity, and exports \$4 billion worth of gas to the country each year – reportedly one-third of the gas used to generate power in Iraq in 2019.

The US heavily pressured the Mahdi administration to reduce Iraq's reliance on Iranian energy exports, and supported the conclusion of the September 2019 deal to enable Iraq to tap into the Gulf electrical interconnection network. This will eventually allow the import of 500 megawatts of electricity to Basra from Kuwait, with the potential for expansion to 1,800 megawatts. These efforts, however, have been unable to eliminate Iraqi reliance on Iranian fuel. And, during the maximum pressure campaign, the US ultimately provided repeated sanctions waivers to allow continued energy imports from Iran, to prevent destabilising electricity cuts in Iraq. In June 2020, Baghdad and Tehran agreed a two-year extension to their contract on supplying Iranian gas for Iraqi electricity.

Iran's initial reaction to the maximum pressure campaign was muted, as it sought to maintain support from European states. However, it eventually responded by escalating attacks on US assets in Iraq through its relationships with Iraqi armed groups. Attacks by Iran-aligned groups on US-led coalition forces in Iraq – including rocket attacks on bases and roadside bombs targeting convoys supplying the

coalition – increased towards the end of 2019. This surge led to the killing of a US civilian contractor at the K1 base, which sparked a week of intense violence, including US air strikes on a militia base and an attack by militia supporters on the US embassy in Baghdad. This culminated in the US drone strikes that killed Suleimani and Muhandis.

The protest movement

Iraq's so-called October Revolution – a protest movement in southern and central Iraq that erupted in October 2019, and has continued in fits and starts to this day – was perhaps the largest challenge to Iran-Iraq relations since the civil war of 2006-2007. The extremely heavy-handed response to the demonstrations by Iraq's security services, including the PMUs, resulted in the killing of more than 560 protesters. Armed groups also hunted down individual activists, focusing on liberal middle-class university students and graduates, and mounted a campaign of assassinations against them. The fury of the Iraqi public at this violent response was partly directed against Iran because of the close support it provided to the Iraqi government, state security forces, and non-state armed groups.[32]

Iranian officials issued pronouncements against protesters, accusing them of being foreign agents seeking to undermine the Iraqi state. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei blamed “America and Western intelligence services” for stoking discord, which further escalated protesters' anger at Iran. Some demonstrations explicitly called for Iran to get out of Iraq; protesters set alight the Iranian consulate in Najaf on three separate occasions and attacked the Iranian consulate in Karbala. Protesters also targeted the headquarters of Iranian-backed political parties and the PMUs.

The demonstrations were an important setback for Iranian influence in Iraq. The country's reputation among the Iraqi public was severely damaged – one survey of more than 1,000 protesters found that only 1 per cent of them trusted Iran – the legitimacy of their close allies in Iraq was deeply undermined, and the resulting resignation of the Mahdi administration led to the loss of a government that had been extremely cooperative and supportive of Iranian activities in Iraq.[33] This was further compounded by Suleimani's assassination shortly afterwards.

The Kadhimi government

Impact of Kadhimi's approach

Kadhimi, a former intelligence chief, replaced Mahdi in May 2020 as a transitional prime minister tasked with overseeing early elections. The selection of Kadhimi was not Iran's preference, but the loss of Suleimani and the reputational damage the country incurred from the Iraqi protest movement reduced its ability to determine who succeeded Mahdi.[34] One senior Iraqi official says that Kadhimi

had been “blackballed” by Suleimani, and would not have been nominated as prime minister had Suleimani lived.[35] Although Kadhimi reportedly has positive relationships with President Hassan Rouhani’s government in Tehran and with non-IRGC Iranian intelligence services, he appears to have a difficult relationship with the Quds Force.[36] This fact has been underscored by his repeated efforts to rein in the unsanctioned activities of PMU elements and Iranian-backed non-state armed groups in Iraq, all of which he has aborted because of threats of violence from these groups.

Meanwhile, Kadhimi’s positive view of the Gulf states has enabled the emergence of perhaps the strongest Iraq-Gulf relations since 2003.[37] Upon assuming office, Kadhimi highlighted the development of “brotherly relations and cooperation” with the Arab states as one of his key priorities. Government officials confirm that Kadhimi has actively pursued the development of a strong economic and political relationship with the Gulf states.[38] This has been aided by close personal ties between Kadhimi and Gulf leaders, which they nurtured during his tenure as head of the Iraq Intelligence Service. Iraqi sources report that Kadhimi has close personal relationships with Muhammad bin Salman and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed – and that these relationships have fostered closer cooperation between Iraq and Saudi Arabia and the UAE.[39] The Kadhimi government has also sought to use its close ties with Saudi Arabia to facilitate talks between the country and Iran.

The Kadhimi government has been in negotiations with the UAE to open a direct shipping line from Iraq’s Umm Qasr port to the UAE. In January 2021, an Emirati company signed a deal to develop an oil refinery in Dhi Qar. And Abu Dhabi signed an agreement with Baghdad for \$3 billion in UAE investment in Iraq, before promising further economic cooperation following Kadhimi’s visit to the UAE in April 2021. In November 2020, Iraq’s foreign minister announced that his government would purchase 400 megawatts of electricity from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) network through Saudi Arabia. The same month also saw the reopening of the al-Arar border crossing, which was billed as a sign of progress in Iraq-Saudi relations. There are also Saudi-led talks to look at investment in solar power and in capturing waste natural gas. These positive developments in the Iraq-Saudi relationship provided a foundation for Kadhimi’s visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2021, which resulted in the announcement of a number of agreements designed to boost cooperation between the two states, including a \$3 billion Saudi investment fund for joint economic initiatives in Iraq.

Despite this progress in Iraq-Gulf relations, there remains significant hesitancy among Gulf states because Kadhimi’s government is only an interim administration. They are concerned that agreements concluded under his government could be overturned following the election due to take place in October 2021, if a pro-Iran administration takes power. Gulf states also continue to be frustrated by delays to the implementation of joint agreements caused by the dysfunctional Iraqi state

bureaucracy. And they fear that their initiatives are being actively undermined by pro-Iranian political actors in Iraq.

The fallout from the assassination of Suleimani

The Kadhimi administration has been forced to contend with a major escalation in the conflict between the US and Iran following the assassination of Suleimani, with the kinetic elements of this conflict primarily taking place on Iraqi soil. Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project has shown a substantial increase in the number of violent incidents in Iraq between Iranian-backed armed groups and the US and its allies, rising from 19 recorded incidents in 2019 to 87 incidents in 2020. Both the US and Iran have brought significant pressure to bear on the Kadhimi government to defend their interests in Iraq. General Kenneth McKenzie, commander of US Central Command, remarked in June 2020 that Iraq “is the principal theatre of confrontation” between US and Iranian forces and that “we turn to Iraq first to provide defence”. Meanwhile, Khamenei said in a July 2020 meeting with Kadhimi that Iran “expects its Iraqi friends to know the US and to bear in mind that the presence of the US in any country will bring about corruption, ruin and destruction”, adding that Iran expected the Iraqi government to expel US troops. Attacks by Iranian-backed groups eased somewhat before and during the 2020 US presidential election, and for some time after Joe Biden’s victory, as Tehran sought to provide political space to allow a new US administration to return to the Iran nuclear deal. But the Biden administration’s decision not to immediately return to the deal has led to an uptick in attacks, because Iran seeks to raise the costs for the US of continuing to impose sanctions on it.

The Kadhimi administration remains hopeful that Biden will seek to reduce tensions with Iran, and thereby enable a reduction of violence in Iraq. The US has already made some important tactical choices: it decided to respond to an attack on US personnel in Iraq in early 2021 by striking a PMU target in Syria rather than in Iraq, and has reportedly agreed to release Iranian funds that were previously frozen in Iraq by US sanctions. These choices signal that the US wants to protect Iraq from its conflict with Iran. And they ease some of the pressure that Iran is placing on Kadhimi. Although the Gulf states are unenthusiastic about a US return to the Iran nuclear deal, such a development would substantially reduce tensions in Iraq and open up the possibility of stronger Gulf engagement there.

Iranian competition over Iraq policy

Several Iraqi analysts and political sources believe that there has been an escalation in competition between different Iranian actors to define Iran’s policy in Iraq since the assassination of Suleimani.

[40]

As many as four Iranian intelligence agencies are said to be coordinating the actions of Iraqi armed groups, with reports of contradictory and conflicting commands. Although the Quds Force remains dominant, it no longer has the level of authority that it was able to exert in Iraq under the leadership of Suleimani. Iranian intelligence services not linked to the IRGC have sought to intervene in relationships with Iraqi armed groups, causing some confusion and conflict.[41] There have also been conflicting opinions within the leadership in Tehran over how to respond to Suleimani's assassination and the extent to which it should pressure the Biden administration to return to the nuclear deal. This may also have contributed to a less coherent exertion of Iranian influence in Iraq.[42] There has been speculation that Tehran does not fully approve of some of the ongoing attacks by Iranian-backed Iraqi armed groups on US targets in Iraq.[43]

Iran's presidential election is due to take place in June this year. Many Iran analysts suggest that someone directly affiliated with or close to IRGC will be among the front-runners in the contest.[44] If an IRGC-linked politician wins the presidency, it is possible that there will be an intensification of attacks on Western targets in Iraq, and that Iran will adopt a more hawkish approach to growing Gulf relations with Iraq.

Conclusion and recommendations

European states are committed to supporting the stability, security, and economic sustainability of the Iraqi state. And they recognise that strengthened Iraqi relations with the Gulf states would contribute to those goals. European states and the EU have long encouraged stronger Gulf-Iraq relations while also recognising the sensitivity of the dynamics in Iraq and the limitations of their influence on the matter. By virtue of their reputation for neutrality, particularly when compared to the US, European states have an opportunity to continue to press Tehran and Washington to de-escalate the US-Iranian conflict. They can also call for Iraq to be kept apart from such hostilities, particularly as there is a receptive audience in the Biden administration for this sort of message.

Europeans should not see encouraging greater Gulf engagement with Iraq as a means of confronting Iran – which would lead to escalation and further polarisation – but as a means of assuring Iraq's sovereignty and stability, and of insulating it from regional rivalries. Indeed, an Iraq that is positively engaged with both Iran and its Gulf neighbours could serve as an important example of a stabilising approach for the region, given the broader conflict playing out across it. Although pushing back against Iran's regional power projection is a primary goal of the Gulf states in Iraq, European countries should advise them that a more constructive and positive approach to building sustainable relations with Iraq has a better chance of paying dividends in the long term. Indeed, if it has the

opportunity to play a more independent role in the Middle East, Iraq could help reduce tensions in the region. This is reflected in the role that the Kadhimi government has recently played in facilitating talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Baghdad.

With this in mind, Europeans should press the Gulf states to better define and pursue a long-term strategic approach to Iraq. The relationship, which has advanced in fits and starts since 2014, is undermined by the lack of consistency in Gulf outreach – which compares poorly to the relentless outreach of the Iranians.^[45] Gulf actors are often reluctant to invest too heavily in Iraq, worrying that a change in government or an escalation in the activities of armed groups could undermine their progress. But a longer-term approach would help the Gulf states absorb short-term setbacks while remaining committed to the ultimate goal of strengthening their position in Iraq. Such an attitude would encourage Iraqi political leaders to cooperate with the Gulf states, and would justify a stronger Iraqi commitment to the relationship.

Europeans can also seek to persuade the Gulf states to escalate their economic and security cooperation with Iraq, to invest far more heavily in cultural and public-facing investments in the country, and to refrain from funding individual Iraqi political actors and parties.

Gulf states have an opportunity to capitalise on the Iraqi public's growing anger at Iran for its sponsorship of armed groups and corrupt political actors in Iraq. Rather than seeking to compete with Iran by replicating the Iranian approach, Gulf states should clearly differentiate themselves from Iran by eschewing direct engagement with Iraqi politics and by publicly refusing to fund or materially support any Iraqi political actors or parties. Gulf states should also invest in a campaign to improve their image among the Iraqi public by investing in programmes that have a direct impact on the lives of vulnerable Iraqis, by engaging in cultural outreach, and by addressing sectarian or divisive rhetoric coming out of the Gulf. The UAE's 2018 pledge to rebuild the Al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul, and its commitment to assisting with the reconstruction of a Syriac church in the city, are positive examples of such engagement. But the Gulf states should also provide assistance to Iraq's Shia-majority southern provinces, where suspicion of them is greatest.^[46] Saudi Arabia's 2019 pledge to build a Sports City in Basra was an important gesture focused on southern Iraq – one that capitalised on the positive reception of the Saudi football team that played in the city the previous year.^[47] By offering Iraqis easier access to visas and opportunities to use health services in the Gulf, the Gulf states could have a powerful and direct impact on Iraqi public opinion.

European states can also address Gulf states' hesitancy to invest in Iraq – which is largely born out of fear that pro-Iranian actors will undermine these activities – by developing joint investment projects with them. Gulf states may also benefit from European technical assistance to identify promising

areas for economic cooperation in Iraq. They could increase the impact of their economic investment in Iraq by focusing on issues where Iraq has the greatest need. Agreements to give Iraq access to electricity from the GCC interconnection grid are particularly beneficial and strategically important, because they reduce Iraq's dependence on Iranian energy. There are other opportunities for the Gulf states to invest in Iraq's electricity distribution network, and to support the country's need to deliver a sustainable and predictable supply of electricity.

In addition, as the Kadhimi government seeks to identify ways to diversify the Iraqi economy following a major economic crisis in 2020, Gulf states could support the Iraqi government with technical and policy advice based on the ambitious initiatives they have undertaken to support diversification in their own countries, such as Saudi Vision 2030. European states could also aid the implementation of projects that have already been agreed on by providing the Iraqi government with technical assistance. The government needs such support to overcome substantial bureaucratic hurdles.

Ultimately, the Gulf states need to adopt a more resilient approach to Iraq that clearly identifies their own interests in the country, that divorces their approach to Iraq from their policies on Iran, and that reduces their reliance on European states and the US to protect their security interests in the country. Gulf states' policy on Iraq should acquire a greater tolerance for inevitable Iranian influence in the country, while seeking to strengthen their engagement with it through the development of consistent relationships with Iraqi institutions rather than individuals.

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[1] Author's interview with Mohammad Shabani, from Amway.media, by telephone, 24 March 2021.

[2] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021.

[3] Author's interview with senior Sadrist by telephone, 5 March 2021.

[4] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021.

[5] Author's interview with the embassy of Saudi Arabia in Baghdad by email, 3 April 2021.

[6] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021.

[7] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021.

[8] Author's interview with Iraq analyst by telephone, 4 March 2021.

[9] Author's interview with an adviser to al-Hikmah political party by telephone, 8 March 2021.

[10] Author's interview with Iraq analyst by telephone, 4 March 2021.

[11] Author's interview with Sadrist intellectual by telephone, 6 March 2021.

[12] Author's interview with the embassy of Saudi Arabia in Iraq by email, 3 April 2021

[13] Author's interview with an adviser to al-Hikmah political party by telephone, 8 March 2021.

Author's interview with Iraq analyst by phone, 4 March 2021.

[14] Author's interview with the embassy of Saudi Arabia in Iraq by email, 3 April 2021

[15] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021.

[16] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021.

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[17] Author's interview with an adviser to al-Hikmah political party by telephone, 8 March 2021.

Author's interview with Sadrist intellectual by telephone, 6 March 2021.

[18] Author's interview with an adviser to al-Hikmah political party by telephone, 8 March 2021.

[19] Author's interview with an adviser to al-Hikmah political party by telephone, 8 March 2021.

[20] Author's interview with Iraq analyst by phone, 4 March 2021.

[21] Author's interview with Iraqi official by telephone, 16 March 2021

[22] Author's interview with Sadrist intellectual by telephone, 6 March 2021. Author's interview with senior European diplomat by phone, 19 March 2021.

[23] Author's interview with Iraqi political analyst by telephone, 24 March 2021

[24] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021.

[25] Author's interview with Sadrist intellectual by telephone, 6 March 2021.

[26] Author's interview with Iraq analyst over communication app, 13 March 2021.

[27] Author's interview with senior Iraqi government source by telephone, 6 March 2021. Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by phone, 16 March 2021.

[28] Author's interview with senior Iraqi government source by telephone, 6 March 2021. Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021. Author's interview with Iraq analyst over communication app, 13 March 2021.

[29] Author's interview with senior Sadrist by telephone, 5 March 2021.

[30] Author's interview with an adviser to al-Hikmah political party by telephone, 8 March 2021. Author's interview with Iraq analyst by telephone, 4 March 2021. Author's interview with Sadrist intellectual by telephone, 6 March 2021.

[31] Author's interview with Mohammad Shabani, from Amway.media, by telephone, 24 March 2021.

[32] Author's interview with participants in protests in Babil, Baghdad, Nasiriyah, and Basra, Zoom, December 2020.

[33] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021.

[34] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021. Author's interview with Iraqi official by telephone, 6 March 2021.

[35] Author's interview with Iraqi official by telephone, 6 March 2021.

[36] Author's interview with Iran analyst over Zoom, 10 March 2021.

[37] Author's interview with an adviser to an Iraqi political leader by telephone, 16 March 2021.

Author's interview with an adviser to al-Hikmah political party by telephone, 8 March 2021. Author's interview with Iraq analyst by telephone, 4 March 2021.

[38] Author's interview with Iraqi government official by telephone, 16 March 2021.

[39] Author's interview with Iraq analyst over communication app, 13 March 2021. Author's interview with Iraqi government official by telephone, 16 March 2021.

[40] Author's interview with Iraq analyst by telephone, 4 March 2021. Author's interview with senior Sadrist by telephone, 5 March 2021.

[41] Author's interview with senior Sadrist by telephone, 5 March 2021.

[42] Author's interview with Iran analyst over Zoom, 10 March 2021

[43] Author's interview with senior Iraqi government source by telephone, 6 March 2021.

[44] Author's interview with Iran analyst over Zoom, 10 March 2021.

[45] Author's interview with Iraqi government official by telephone, 16 March 2021. Author's interview with senior Iraqi government source by telephone, 6 March 2021. Author's interview with Sadrist intellectual by telephone, 6 March 2021.

[46] Author's interview with senior Sadrist by telephone, 5 March 2021.

[47] Author's interview with Sadrist intellectual by telephone, 6 March 2021.

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