

The Secret Behind the French Interest in Iraq: A Geostrategic Analysis

By Munqith Dagher

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French President Emmanuel Macron visited Iraq twice in the span of one year from 2020-2021. The first visit was on September 3, 2020, when he declared his intention to support Iraqi sovereignty.¹ His visit demonstrated a clear message about the significance of Iraq to France, especially as it immediately followed his important trip to Lebanon. The second trip was on August 27, 2021, to attend the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership. There, he reiterated the same message as well as represented a commitment to strategic partnership, indicating a pronounced shift in the French approach toward Iraq and the rest of the region, which had so far only mirrored that of the United States.²

There were four key points communicated during the second visit. The first was on the geostrategic level, as France was the only non-regional participant in the Baghdad Conference as well as the only participant that is a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

The second was on the security level, as Macron reiterated France's commitment to the fight against ISIS in Iraq.³ This comes at a crucial time, with the visit occurring immediately after the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan. This hasty withdrawal sparked doubt in regional governments and popular opinion about the seriousness of the West's commitment, led by the U.S., to maintaining the security of the region against the threat of terrorism. A similarly full withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq is planned to be completed by the end of the year, according to recent agreements between the Iraqi and U.S. governments. After this withdrawal, the role of the U.S. will be limited to providing training. Analysts are expressing grave concerns about a strong return of ISIS in Iraq, mirroring that of the Taliban's in Afghanistan.

The third point is an economic one. The visit was timed with the giant French oil and gas company, *Total's* – established in Iraq more than a hundred years ago – signing of a hefty contract worth tens of billions of dollars to invest in Basra's gas fields.⁴ The French government also intends to be involved in funding and contracting French companies for the Baghdad Metro project as well as other reconstruction projects in ISIS-liberated Iraqi cities.⁵

The, last but not least, fourth point concerns culture and was possibly missed in the noise from the powers involved in Iraqi affairs, including that of the United States. Macron made three important cultural visits during his trip to Iraq. The first visit was to Al-Kadhimiya Mosque and Shrine, considered one of the holiest sites for Shias in Iraq and worldwide. The second was to Mosul, the liberated capital of ISIS, where he went to the Great Mosque of al-Nuri, a nod to the Sunnis, as well as to a prominent local church, reaching out to the Christians. The third visit was to Erbil, where he met with Kurdish leaders. With these three strategic visits, France showed that it stands with Iraqis of all different backgrounds, respecting Iraq's unity, diversity and sovereignty.⁶

It is evident that Macron is keen on shaking up France's most recent approach to foreign policy, possibly starting with Iraq, thus echoing Charles de Gaulle's belief that France should not simply follow U.S. foreign policy.⁷ However, the question remains: What is the reason behind Macron's sudden interest in Iraq? Is it for reasons linked to French elections, as some analysts pointed out?⁸ Or are there other strategic reasons behind this eagerness, such as geostrategic and economic competition with China?

The Chinese Geostrategic Threats

French concerns about China as a growing geostrategic economic competitor began in 2010, when China started to be successfully involved in Africa's economy. This region is historically and traditionally of great geostrategic and economic interest to France due to its colonies in West and North Africa from the eighteenth until the twentieth century.⁹ Even after their independence, many of these African ex-colonies maintained strong cultural, political, and economic ties with France. However, in recent years, China was able to displace France and the United States in becoming the biggest foreign economic partner to African countries. In 2019, Chinese investments in Africa reached 192 million dollars.¹⁰ In 1950, Africa's share of the total French foreign trade was 60%. By 1970, it decreased to 8.7% and even lower to 5% by 2015. Despite that, Africa remains an important trade partner to France. Around 35% of oil and gas imported into France comes from Africa, and 28% of oil and gas produced by *Total* is from Africa.¹¹

What France and most Western countries find quite concerning is the economic colonial approach China uses to drown countries in debt. Some African countries have borrowed so much from China that China is effectively in control of a significant percentage of their domestic product. Unable to pay it back, their sovereignty becomes fragile and at risk. China has lent a total of 400-600 billion dollars to developing countries, with a big share going to Africa. Djibouti owes China almost 100% of its GDP. Both the Democratic Republic of Congo and Niger owe China around a third of their GDP. The unofficial figures are much more alarming.¹²

It is, therefore, understandable why the French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, stated that "France is in a state of power struggle with China in Africa." Similarly, during his 2019 trip to Djibouti, Macron warned, "China's increasing involvement in Africa threatens to end up being negative over the medium to long term. I wouldn't want a new generation of international investments to encroach on our historical partners' sovereignty or weaken their economies."¹³ It is this threat to African sovereignty from debt traps set by China that forces France to try to reclaim its historical role in Africa, a region of great geostrategic importance not only to France but also to the rest of the West.

During the Cold War, France was encouraged by Europe and the U.S. to maintain its strong political, economic, and cultural ties with Africa as an effective means of guarding the region from Soviet influence. Today, France is on a mission to reclaim that position of power against a rising China. It plans to face growing Chinese influence through its support of the G5 Sahel, an institutional framework established to coordinate regional cooperation among five West African countries. One of the main achievements of the G5 Sahel is the Cross-Border Joint Force in Bamako (FC-G5S), a joint initiative to fight terrorism and human trafficking. This involved the military of the G5 African countries with support from the UN according to Resolution 2359 of June 21, 2017. To fight terrorism, FC-G5S received more than half a billion dollars in funding from European countries, led by France, as well as from the United States. Another major outcome of the G5 Sahel is the Priority Investment Program created in 2014. This program resulted in multiple development projects across the involved countries, amounting to billions of dollars in grants and donations also from European countries, as well as from the U.S. and international organizations.¹⁴

The French Model in Iraq

It seems that the success of the French-driven G5 Sahel in Africa encouraged France to play a similar role in Iraq, supported by Europe and the United States. Iraq remains of great geostrategic value to the West and to the whole region, even following the decline of the

relative importance of its oil. This decrease is due to the U.S. becoming an oil exporter as well as from the increased global reliance on alternative energy sources.

Oil currently represents 40% of the mix of different energy sources used globally, yet it is still expected to continue to remain in demand for decades to come. Daily demand is forecasted to rise by 38 million barrels to reach 115 million barrels by 2025. OPEC is therefore predicted to remain a major player in the global energy market.¹⁵ Iraq, being the second highest oil producer in OPEC and having one of the biggest oil reserves in the world, will continue to be of utmost geostrategic significance for the global economy. In addition, its geographic location means it is a crucial transport link between the European and Asian markets.

The ill-fated U.S. invasion of Iraq further proved its geostrategic importance, with dangerous political and security consequences all over the Middle East. The most prominent negative outcome has been the growth of terrorist movements in the region and worldwide. Destabilizing security in Iraq started off with endless waves of religious and ethnic violence, resulting in the displacement and migration of tens of millions of people. This has ultimately resulted in a direct threat to the security of Europe, the U.S., and the whole world.

Iraq is therefore of profound geostrategic importance, not only to France, which maintains the biggest Muslim community in Europe, but also to the rest of the continent that regards this region as its backyard. As for the U.S., in addition to having strategic interests in Iraq, it is obviously keen on preventing Iraq from being under the control of its international competitors China and Russia, or its regional competitor Iran. Furthermore, neither the U.S. nor the rest of the world, want to see Iraq turn into another Afghanistan.

The common interests of France and the U.S. in Africa are under threat because of the increased power of Islamic extremist movements that are most likely connected to ISIS. One such example is ISIS in Mozambique, which is designated as a terrorist organization. Less than a month ago, ISIS in Mozambique managed to take control of a number of key cities in the north of Mozambique, stopping work on a French-U.S. oil investment project worth 120 billion dollars. Such a threat to their common interests, combined with the strain of Chinese competition, makes it increasingly possible for France and the U.S. to orchestrate a military response using G5 Sahel forces instead of direct involvement.¹⁶

The global growth of Islamic extremist movements undoubtedly highlights the importance of international cooperation to fight ISIS in Iraq, which serves as the original model and inspiration. The success of the G5 Sahel model of regional cooperation framework to fight terrorism is likely to encourage France, Europe, and the U.S. to seek implementing similar set-ups in the Middle East through the Iraqi gateway.

China's competition with France and the U.S. is not limited to Africa. It has also reached the Arabian Gulf in recent years. Historically, the West was known as the economic partner of the Arabian Gulf countries. In the meantime, China's exponential economic growth coupled with the U.S. self-sufficiency in oil resulted in an increase in China's share of the Arabian Gulf's total oil exports, which itself amounts to around 70% of these countries' incomes. A third of Saudi Arabia's oil exports goes to China, amounting to more oil than China receives from Russia. A fourth of Kuwait's oil exports also goes to China. Furthermore, in the last two years, China signed contracts worth tens of billions of dollars in communications and technology projects in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and it also bought massive shares in giant Gulf companies.¹⁷

Making matters even worse for the West was the alarming news in March 2020, when China signed a 25-year strategic partnership agreement with Iran, estimated by the World Bank to be worth a trillion dollars.¹⁸ The agreement would facilitate China's global strategic "Belt and

Road Initiative.” What deepens the concern of the West even further is a military aspect of the agreement that enables China, for the first time ever, to gain access to the land and water of the Gulf, a region historically known to be under strict U.S. control.¹⁹ China will now have a military presence in Iran as well as in its military base in Djibouti, flanking the oil sources in the Arabian peninsula from the east and west. Although China owns the biggest army in the world, it has lacked land bases abroad to expand its global power and control. With the recent changes, the situation is becoming increasingly precarious to the West and especially to the United States.²⁰ It is worth noting that some neutral analysts are doubting the ability and desire of China and Iran to indeed operationalize the details of the agreement. On the one hand, to proceed would be against some interests that China has toward the U.S. and the Gulf countries. On the other hand, there is internal Iranian disagreement about this partnership.²¹

All the above factors add to Iraq’s significance as a means to stop China’s encroachment in its attempt to surround Europe’s south. China already has a strong presence in Central Asia, east of Europe. This, then, explains France’s increased efforts in Iraq lately. It seems that France is spearheading the operation of stopping China’s strategic expansion in order to guard Western economic interests in the region. But the question remains: Why France? What characteristics of France make it the key player to take on this strategic role in the region on behalf of the West? Before attempting to answer this question, one must understand the geostrategic nuances of the region. Why is Iraq the choice as the starting point for French and Western efforts against the economic and geostrategic competition from China?

Why Iraq?

Since the U.S. invasion in 2003, Iraq has been suffering from its inability to control regional and international interference in its security, economic, political and social affairs. Although most regional countries made attempts to secure their interests in Iraq by controlling different Iraqi politicians, the reality of the situation is that the U.S. and Iran are the main players in Iraq following the invasion.

Iran has been able to use its geographic, cultural, political, and economic weight to secure its power and influence in Iraq, often even surpassing that of the United States. The influence of the U.S. was built solely on its hard power through the military invasion. In contrast, in addition to Iran’s hard power represented by its affiliated Shia militias, it has very significant soft power as the representative patron country of Shiism. Iraq has been turned into a proxy conflict field for the U.S.-Iranian feud to be played out.

Following the U.S. sanctions against Iran, the latter increased its pressure in Iraq in attempts to incorporate the country into the Chinese-Iranian axis in the region, after the strategic Chinese-Iranian agreement. Despite some internal opposition in Iran to the agreement, Iran still pressured Iraq to sign a similar deal with China in 2019, during Adil Abdul-Mahdi’s government.²² The subsequent and current government, headed by Mustafa al-Kadhimi, is not showing interest in the Chinese agreements for now. However, if such a decision is to take place in the future, there would be serious repercussions for Western interests in Iraq. According to the West’s reading of the situation, there is a real risk that Iraq joins the rival Iranian-Chinese-Russian axis in the region.

Another key detail is Iraq’s geographic location, linking Syria and Lebanon to Iran, which in turn would provide China and Russia with access to this strip. With the importance of Syria and Lebanon to France, it is imperative that they are not left to fall under the control of rivals. If the completion of the crescent of Chinese-Russian influence is allowed, stretching from Iran through Iraq and into Syria and Lebanon on the Mediterranean, this would form a crescent of power north of the oil in the Arabian Gulf and south of Europe.

The use of Iraq as a proxy field for regional and international political conflict has resulted in a failed state. This has also formed fertile ground for extremist religious movements, such as ISIS, to stretch its influence to Africa, a region that maintains strategic importance to France and the West. Therefore, there is a real motivation and interest in the West, in general, and in France, in particular, to transform Iraq into a successful state, so that it can help eliminate terrorism.

Iraq also presents promising economic opportunities for France in particular. During Macron's latest visit, the French company *Total*, with its long-established history in Iraq, signed a contract worth tens of billions of dollars to extract oil and gas from a number of wells in Basra.²³ There is also another French contract to construct the Metro in Baghdad. In addition, France hopes to secure contracts to reconstruct the Sunni areas destroyed in the war against ISIS. There is also great potential for military contracts to sell French airplanes and military equipment to Iraq.

Increasing the chances of France's success in Iraq is the regional consensus in supporting al-Kadhimi's government, which has the ability to handle the delicate balance of regional and international powers. Iraq has recently been enjoying positive relationships with its surrounding Arab and Gulf neighbours, but al-Kadhimi has a tense relationship with the Iraqi militias affiliated with Iran. Despite that, he managed to appease the influential Iranian neighbor by succeeding in convincing the U.S. to decrease its involvement in Iraq, changing its role from being involved in combat to consultancy and training only.²⁴ With his endless shuttling visits, al-Kadhimi was also able to build strong relationships with Turkey and other powerful European countries, including France. Then came his most recent trip to Washington in July 2021 to confirm the strength of the strategic U.S.-Iraqi partnership.²⁵

Under the leadership of al-Kadhimi, Iraq has been transformed to a regional meeting point, after having been a place for regional and international feuds.²⁶ It managed to play the role of an honest broker in crucial regional discussions, such as the recent Turkish-Emirati-Egyptian talks. Furthermore, for months now, Baghdad has become the venue for Saudi-Iranian negotiations. Recently, the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership witnessed a meeting between Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia – a first since a very long time. The joint efforts of al-Kadhimi and Macron to find a regional common ground for cooperation have indeed culminated in the successful Baghdad Conference, presenting as an important opportunity to create a platform for regional communication and understanding, similar to the G5 Sahel in Africa.

Why is France leading the West's efforts in Iraq?

In addition to the security and economic reasons mentioned above, France has three strategic advantages to qualify as the leader of Western efforts to protect the region from falling prey to terrorism and extremism as well as to stop Chinese encroachment.

1. France enjoys warm economic and political relationships with all regional countries, with the exception of Turkey. It can therefore take on the role of the trusted partner in any regional campaigns, such as fighting terrorism and extremism or building strategic economic partnerships. With the U.S. having a bad reputation for its role in Iraq and with the UK leaving the EU, France has become the most qualified representative of the West in the region.²⁷

It is also a permanent member of the Security Council and a major ally of the United States and United Kingdom. This position would enable France to mobilise any required international support for security arrangements. Indeed, it managed to play this

role with the G5 Sahel, securing its international legitimacy with the UN Resolution 2359 of 21 June 2017.²⁸

Only days ago, France was furious when it lost its existing defense deal with Australia, as the latter signed a new deal with the U.S. and UK for a supply of nuclear-powered submarines. The U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was quick to reassure France of its valued strategic partnership with the U.S. and the rest of the West, not only in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, but worldwide.²⁹ This confirms that there is a strategic U.S.-French agreement to curb growing global Chinese influence. The Arabian Gulf, including Iraq, is one of the key regions for geostrategic competition between the West and China.

In fact, the betrayal felt by France from being pushed aside by the U.S. and UK will increase its determination to be the key Western player in the region.³⁰ It will most likely be keen to reinforce its strategic power and weight, so that the U.S. and UK will think twice before repeating another move without consulting France.

2. The absence of France from the invasion of Iraq on one hand, and its balanced relationship with the rest of the regional countries, on the other, make it the most acceptable partner in Iraq. Macron highlighted this neutrality when he extended his last visit to Iraq by another day, only to visit al-Kadhimiya – holy to the Shias – Mosul – important to the Sunnis – and Erbil – the capital of Kurdistan.
3. France and its European partners rejected the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran. This makes France more accepted to the Iranians, who are quite influential in Baghdad, as a regional player in the security and economic arrangements in Iraq and the region. This was clearly communicated by the new Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, in his comment on France's participation in last month's Baghdad Conference. Despite Iran's negative opinion about Western influence in the region, it finds the French presence to be the least harmful option. Due to its special relationship with the U.S., France also acts as a potential mediator, as Iran hopes to have the sanctions that have crippled its economy lifted. Winning the acceptance of Iran is also a decisive factor in succeeding to curb the geostrategic encroachment of China in the region.³¹

Conclusion

By choosing to become Iraq's strategic partner and strengthening its relationship with France, there are multiple important gains for France. The most notable, however, are the geostrategic benefits that France and the West can secure by encouraging and supporting this partnership. The global Chinese-Western competition is nearing a level close to that of the Cold War, experienced for decades after WW2 and until the fall of the Berlin Wall. The only difference now is that the main threat to global Western interests is from China instead of the Soviet Union.

There are a number of reasons that France is the optimal Western partner for Iraq at the moment. In Africa, it has had successful involvement in the fight against terrorism and the curtailment of Chinese encroachment. Regionally and within Iraq, it currently enjoys an acceptance that no other Western country does. Such a partnership with Iraq would be beneficial for both countries. The presence of France would create a buffer zone in the region and an obstacle in the path of Chinese encroachment, which has become increasingly alarming for the West with last year's Chinese-Iranian strategic agreement. Furthermore, the withdrawal

of U.S. troops from Iraq creates a necessity for alternative international arrangements to guarantee the continuation of funds and support to fight terrorism, which still threatens the region and the world. Having provided training and leadership to the joint forces of the G5 Sahel in their fight against terrorism, France can play a similar role in Iraq, with support from the rest of the West, to curtail the threat ISIS poses in Iraq and the whole region.

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