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## Iraq's Position in Iran's Neighborhood Policy: Primacy or Priority?

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### Abstract

#### Extended Abstract

Neighboring countries and neighborhood policy are fundamental components of the foreign policy of any country, especially the Islamic Republic of Iran, due to the deep and wide-ranging impacts these relationships have on various areas such as economic, security, cultural, and geopolitical aspects. In this regard, Iraq, with its unique geographical, economic, and political characteristics, holds special significance for Iran. Iran's neighborhood policy with Iraq, particularly after the fall of the Ba'ath regime and the emergence of a new republic in Iraq, has undergone significant changes. This article, based on the field observations of the authors and library studies from articles, books, theses, and reports, examines the role of Iraq in Iran's neighborhood

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policy and analyzes the priority and position of Iraq within the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iraq's importance as Iran's western neighbor is highlighted for multiple strategic and historical reasons, especially within the framework of Iran's neighborhood policy. Iraq, with a border length of 1,609 kilometers with Iran, is one of Iran's primary neighbors. The extensive border impacts the security and interactions between the two countries, which are influenced by the various types of border—land, riverine, and maritime. In addition to these geographical features, the demographics of the two countries are also remarkably similar. The predominant population of both countries consists of similar ethnic groups, and religious ties, especially among the Shi'a population, form deep cultural and social connections between the two nations.

Iraq, as a country with vast oil reserves and a unique geopolitical position, plays a crucial role in both regional and global policies of Iran. Iraq's oil reserves, being among the largest in the world, are a key factor in the economic interactions between the two countries. These oil resources can serve as an important element in economic and energy cooperation, potentially fostering long-term collaborative relationships.

In terms of people-to-people interactions, over 10 million citizens travel between the two countries annually. This is a clear indicator of the strong social and cultural relationships that exist between Iran and Iraq. These exchanges, especially in religious and pilgrimage activities (such as travels to Karbala and Najaf), play a significant role in shaping the deep human and cultural ties between the two nations, which have a profound impact on bilateral relations.

Beyond these features, Iraq also holds a special place in Iran's regional policies. Since the fall of the Ba'ath regime and the downfall of Saddam Hussein, and with the rise of Shiite political influence in Iraq, unprecedented opportunities for the Islamic Republic of Iran have emerged in Iraq. This shift has turned Iraq from a strategic rival into a strategic partner, playing a key role in reducing regional tensions. Iraq has been able to serve as an intermediary between Iran and Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, and has facilitated the expansion of bilateral cooperation across various domains, including security, economy, and politics.

Compared to other neighboring countries, Iraq holds a unique position in terms of culture, religion, economy, and security. Due to shared cultural and religious attributes—particularly the Shi'a population in both countries—Iraq is considered a crucial strategic and cultural partner for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Furthermore, Iraq, with its geopolitical and economic position in the region, can act as a bridge between Iran and other Arab countries, as well as Western nations.

Based on the SWOT model analysis, Iraq holds significant advantages over other Iranian neighbors. In this model, Iraq ranks highly in over twelve indicators as strengths (SO), which indicates the substantial potential for interaction with Iran. However, Iraq also faces challenges and threats, reflected in some of the weaknesses (WO) and threats (WT) categories. Nevertheless, Iraq possesses the potential to move from the level of priority to that of paramount importance in Iran's neighborhood policy.

As a result, Iraq occupies a position of particular importance within Iran's neighborhood policy and stands at the forefront of Iran's neighbors. In terms of strategic, cultural, and economic significance, Iraq takes precedence over other neighbors. This priority could lead to expanded bilateral cooperation in various fields, ultimately strengthening Iran's position both regionally and internationally. Therefore, effectively utilizing the existing opportunities and addressing any disagreements could elevate Iran-Iraq relations from priority status to primary importance, thus preventing security threats and challenges.

**Key words:** Iran, Iraq, neighborhood policy, priority, primacy, geopolitics, geo-economics, geo-culture, and geo-strategy.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.