

## ARMENIA – IRAQ: BUILDING RELATIONS IN REGIONAL TURMOIL<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Iraq is the closest Arab country to Armenia. From Agarak, the southernmost city of Armenia, to Haji Umran in Iraq is around 400 kilometers. In the recent decade, the relations between Armenia and Iraq are developing quite intensely, involving various fields of cooperation. This article is an attempt to discuss the relations between the two countries since the independence of the Republic of Armenia declared in 1991. In this study, I argue that Armenia-Iraq relations have been greatly affected by the regional situation in and around Iraq. This paper also represents how Iraq has become one of the largest trade partners of Armenia.

**Keywords:** Armenia, Iraq, KRG, trade, the US invasion, bilateral relations

### **The political situation in the Middle East and South Caucasus in the 1990s**

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of new political realities in different regions of Eurasia. Armenia was one of the republics of the Soviet Union, and for the latter Iraq was an ally in the Middle East. Another thing connecting the two countries was the Armenian community of Iraq reaching up to 20.000 according to different estimates. The war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988) severely affected the Armenians living in both countries and forced thousands of them to emigrate.<sup>2</sup>

In the Iran-Iraqi war, more than 17.000 Armenians were conscripted into both armies. On Iran's side, about 260 Armenians<sup>3</sup> fell on the battlefield and tens of soldiers of Armenian origin lost their lives fighting for Iraq.

When Armenia declared its independence in 1991, Iraq had already finished the enduring and devastating war with Iran and unleashed a new military campaign against neighboring Kuwait. Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, and the international coalition led by the US liberated Kuwait's territory and attacked Iraq in 1991. Although the war was limited and did not lead to the overthrowing of the ruling regime in Baghdad, it was a huge military, political and economic blow for Iraq, and the coalition levied a high price on the Iraqi state. Subsequently, no-fly zones and harsh economic blockade imposed on Iraq significantly weakened the capabilities of Saddam Hussein's regime.

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<sup>2</sup> Pashayan A., The Iraqi-Armenian community faces new challenges, 05.03.2007, [http://www.noravank.am/arm/issues/detail.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=2385](http://www.noravank.am/arm/issues/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=2385)

<sup>3</sup> The Iran-Iraq war and the Armenians, 19.10.2020, <https://bit.ly/36Emuzf>, Baiburtnian 2013:

In the beginning of the 1990s, Armenia was involved in a years-long war with Azerbaijan over the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) problem. The war ended in 1994, with Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh as the victorious side. In this period, the establishment of diplomatic and economic relations was not a priority for both countries; however, the search for new partners could have crossed the interests of the two countries.

### **Armenia-Iraq relations in the 1990s**

The political and military situation around Iraq in the beginning of the 1990s largely determined the relations between Armenia and Iraq. The Republic of Armenia was interested in establishing relations with Arab countries after declaring its independence. However, the Armenian government refrained from doing so with Iraq because of the international sanctions imposed on Iraq that followed the Iraqi invasion into Kuwait in 1990, as well as the strained relations between Iran and Iraq. Armenia synchronized its position towards Iraq with its partners and the key actors of the international community. Yerevan voted in favor of the UN resolutions related to Iraq.

In 1992, the government of the Republic of Armenia announced its position on the crisis in the Gulf. "Armenia, as a member of the UN, believes that the UN has shown common sense and flexibility in the issue of establishing the borders of the State of Kuwait, and based on the principle of peaceful coexistence of peoples and states, has made a fair decision taking into account the sovereign rights of the State of Kuwait and the freedom-loving aspirations of the Kuwaiti people," the statement said.<sup>4</sup>

In another statement, the Armenian Foreign Ministry called on Iraq to adhere to the decisions of the Iraq-Kuwait Demarcation Commission and UN Security Council resolutions 773 of 1992 and 833 of 1993. At this stage, Armenia has repeatedly rejected Iraq's offers to secretly establish diplomatic relations and receive oil aid.<sup>5</sup>

The partial easing of international tension over Iraq in the second half of the 1990s, a certain improvement in Iran-Iraq relations, allowed Armenia to act more boldly in the direction of Iraq. Armenian companies tried to participate in the Oil for Food program, acting as a company selling Iraqi oil, which was under sanctions. The Armenian side also started to send official delegations to Baghdad to discuss the possibilities of promoting economic ties. Armenia also refused to broadcast Radio Free Asia, taking into consideration that it could harm future relations with Iraq and negatively impact on the Armenian communities in the Arab countries.<sup>6</sup>

Armenia and Iraq established diplomatic relations in 2000. In the same year, Armenia opened its embassy in Baghdad, and Iraq opened its embassy in Yerevan in 2001. Because of war in 2003, both embassies ceased to operate. In economic terms, Armenia was interested in constructing energy facilities, planning and building hydro stations, selling electrical engines, transformers and other equipment.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The History-Diplomatic Archive of the MFA of the RA, Case 275, list I, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> The History-Diplomatic Archive of the MFA of the RA, Case 275, list I, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> The History-Diplomatic Archive of the MFA of the RA, Case 122, list VIII, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Case 122, list VIII, p. 85.

In 2001, the foreign minister of Armenia visited Baghdad where the Iraqi side highlighted its willingness to deepen relations with Armenia, create opportunities for economic cooperation and sign contacts with Armenian companies.<sup>8</sup>

In 2000, for the first time, Robert Kocharyan, the President of Armenia, congratulated Saddam Hussein on the occasion of the Iraqi revolution of 1968.<sup>9</sup> To promote relations with Baghdad the Armenian parliamentarians, members of the Armenia-Iraq friendship group in the National Assembly of Armenia visited Baghdad.

Following the developments around Iraq, as well as its foreign policy goal to deepen relations with the Arab countries, the Armenian government made cautious attempts to adjust its policy towards Iraq. Armenia could have benefited from the economic cooperation with Iraq. However, the attempts at developing ties stopped because of a new wave of tension around Iraq and the US led invasion in 2003.

### **Armenia's position on Iraqi invasion**

Before the invasion into Iraq, the United States was trying to build a broad alliance supporting its initiation. The decision of invasion caused deep controversies even in the frame of NATO. Many countries, including Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, had to choose to what extent to participate or to support the US or reject Washington's plans. The countries of the South Caucasus had different attitudes.

While Georgia supported the policy of the United States, Azerbaijan took a somewhat limited position, and Armenia took a wait-and-see attitude<sup>10</sup>. Russia and Iran were against the war, and the Turkish parliament rejected the United States for using its territory for the military campaign. On March 19, the Department of State of the US announced that Georgia and Azerbaijan are members of the "coalition of volunteers" consisting of 30 states united in the struggle against Saddam Hussein. On March 20, 2003, Eduard Shevardnadze, then president of Georgia said that if necessary, the military airports and infrastructure would be available for the US Army<sup>11</sup>.

Armenia did not express any support for the US military intervention in Iraq, in contrast to neighboring Georgia and Azerbaijan. However, after the war, Armenia sent a military contingent to Iraq. Armenia's neutrality before and during the war is explained by the existence of numerous Armenians living in Iraq and the fear that any verbal support may put at risk their safety. The second reason was the stance of its key ally, Russia, and partners in the European Union, France and Germany, which overtly opposed and did not support the military intervention.

To balance its position and support its Western partners Armenia decided to participate in post-war peacekeeping and humanitarian operations in the country under

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<sup>8</sup> Case 122, list VIII, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Case 122, list VIII, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Iraq and the Caucasus, 3.06.2003, <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/a-33-a-2003-06-03-6-1/656972.html>

<sup>11</sup> Caucasus excited by Washington's operation against Iraq, 26.03.2003, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/35495/>

the Polish command. In September 2004, the presidents of Poland and Armenia agreed that Armenian troops could serve with the Polish contingent in Iraq to carry out humanitarian work. The Armenian parliament approved the planned deployment, and 46 personnel left for Iraq in January 2005. Armenia's troops pulled out of Iraq in late 2008.<sup>12</sup>

In 2001, Armenia signed a memorandum of understanding with the UN on joining the peacekeeping system.<sup>13</sup> Armenia's participation in the UN peacekeeping and humanitarian mission commenced in 2005 in Iraq. Later Armenia deployed its servicemen in Lebanon and Syria, as well.

On December 24, 2004, the RA National Assembly passed a decision "On the Management of a Multinational Division in the Iraqi Stabilization Forces." The Armenian contingent was under the command of the Polish-led Center-South Multinational (KGB) Division and was stationed in the town of Al-Diwaniya in the state of Wasit. On January 18, 2005, the first contingent left for Iraq (46 servicemen). The main tasks of the Armenian contingent were to provide support to the divisions' units, to transport humanitarian aid, to escort convoys, to patrol, to carry out demining and engineering reconnaissance operations, to provide medical assistance to the division's personnel and to the Iraqi civilian population.<sup>14</sup>

Defense Minister Serzh Sargsyan said that Armenia would make some reservations, in particular, about the participation of the Armenian Armed Forces only in defense and humanitarian operations, as well as the inadmissibility of joint tasks with the Azerbaijani Armed Forces in Iraq.<sup>15</sup>

Speaking about Armenia's motivation to send troops to Iraq, Sargsyan, in another statement, said. "If we support the fight against international terrorism, then we must not only approach the issue from the consumer's point of view, but also make our contribution. Iraq is not far from our borders, and that fact does not allow us to remain an observer."<sup>16</sup> The Armenian military assured that peacekeepers were sent to Iraq as part of the global fight against terrorism as the problem is a global one and if Armenia stayed away, it may be affected by it, too.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Security Issues and Implications for U.S. Interests, 11.03.2010, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL30679.html>

<sup>13</sup> In 2001, Armenia signed a memorandum of understanding with the UN on joining the peacekeeping system. The RA Armed Forces have been carrying out an international peacekeeping mission since February 2004, when a 34-member contingent of Armenian peacekeepers left for Kosovo to carry out a peacekeeping mission as part of a Greek unit. Armenia's participation in the NATO peacekeeping mission in Kosovo continues to this day: every year about 70 Armenian peacekeepers carry out their mission in Kosovo.

<sup>14</sup> Peacekeeping missions, <https://mil.am/en/pages/37>

<sup>15</sup> Today, President Kocharian presented a memorandum on the deployment of Armenian troops in Iraq to the National Assembly, 10.12.2004, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/1575017.html>

<sup>16</sup> Iraqi puzzle, 16.10.2004, <https://a1plus.am/hy/article/7541>

<sup>17</sup> Armenia To Rotate Troops In Iraq, 8.07.2005, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/1577645.html>

Public opinion was against participating in that mission. According to polls, those against participation prevailed over those in favor<sup>18</sup>. Several opposition parties in Armenia, as well as in Russian media also criticized this decision.<sup>19</sup>

The issue triggered debates in parliament, where Serzh Sargsyan said that Armenia's participation in the stabilization process in Iraq, in addition to the country's direct interest in strengthening the security climate and stabilization there, provides a good opportunity to participate in these processes and to neutralize possible developments that run counter to Armenia's national state interests.

Besides, Azerbaijan with 151 servicemen and Georgia with 864 military personnel were also actively participating in the mission in Iraq. Moreover, unlike Armenia, both Georgian and Azerbaijani subdivisions carried out direct military functions. In this context, Armenia's full neutrality may have had a negative impact on some important areas of military cooperation with the NATO countries.<sup>20</sup>

From January 18, 2005 until the end of the mission, 368 Armenian servicemen were sent to Iraq. Overall, Armenia sent eight contingents to Iraq, and the last unit was withdrawn from Iraq in November 2009.<sup>21</sup>

It is obvious that in its attitude towards the Iraqi problem, Armenia had to balance between its ally, Russia, which was against the military operation, and the US and NATO with whom Armenia was seeking closer partnership. In addition, Armenia had to consider the policies of its neighboring countries, Georgia and Azerbaijan, to adjust its stance on the issue. Armenia was navigating to find a solution, which would not have strained relations with major powers. Thus, the Armenian government decided to send a contingent to Iraq but limited the scope of its mission and the number of servicemen compared to its neighboring countries.

### **Building Armenia - Iraq relations: the second attempt**

The relations with the Arab countries are significant for Armenia, as the processes in the turbulent Middle East region directly influence the South Caucasus too, first, because of its geographical proximity. The security problems emerging from the Middle East are of great concern to Armenia.

While the 1990s was the period of establishing relations with the Arab countries, since 2000's Armenia has paid more attention to those relations, especially with the countries of the Gulf region due to their economic capabilities. This trend has become more obvious since 2010's as Armenia has initiated to develop more intense relations, opened embassies in several Arab countries of the Gulf, and the high-ranking officials of Armenia have regularly visited the states of the region seeking to boost trade and bring investments.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, Script N85, 5.12.2006, <https://bit.ly/3xGEAg3>

<sup>21</sup> Peacekeeping missions, <https://mil.am/en/pages/37>

<sup>22</sup> About the visits of the Armenian officials see the website of the MFA of Armenia.

The stabilization of the political situation in Iraq and the latter's improved relations with Iran and the US enhanced the development of the relationships between Armenia and Iraq as many of the limitations hindering those relations weakened. This circumstance immediately had a positive impact on the Armenian-Iraqi relations.

The Iraqi war put an end to the rule of Saddam Hussein, and a provisional administration was established in the country. In 2005, Iraq adopted its new constitution, elected its first postwar parliament and formed a new government. After the toppling of the previous regime, economic sanctions against Iraq were lifted and it opened opportunities for the development of relations between Armenia and Iraq. The war drastically changed the balance of power inside the country, as Shia factions have become the predominant force in the country, Sunnis have lost their privileged positions and the Kurds made enormous gains enlarging their autonomy in the north of the country and the presence in the central government.

During the war and first post-war years, the bilateral relations between Armenia and Iraq were interrupted because of foreign occupation of the country, civil war and political instability. When the situation in Iraq was relatively stabilized the contacts between the two countries resumed.

The period of Armenian-Iraqi rapprochement coincided with the short period of political stability in Iraq and high prices of oil (2010-2013) which ensured unprecedented incomes for the budgets of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Armenia's primary interest in Iraq was economic, as Iraq was a net importer of many goods, and the Armenian companies could export their products to Iraq.

The economic interests, in their turn, promoted the political agenda, including political consultations, opening consulate general in Erbil, military cooperation.

To resume the relations, Armenia reopened its embassy in Baghdad in 2010 and in 2012, Iraq responded similarly reopening its embassy in Yerevan.<sup>23</sup> In 2012 and 2013, Armenia and Iraq signed several agreements on encouraging and protecting investments, and on economic, trade, scientific and technical cooperation. In 2012, Armenia sent a delegation to Baghdad headed by the vice prime minister to discuss the cooperation between the two countries. The foreign minister of Iraq, Hoshiar Zebari informed that Iraq had made a decision to deepen political and economic relations with Armenia and there were all the necessary conditions contributing to it.<sup>24</sup> The first session of the Armenian-Iraqi intergovernmental commission took place in Baghdad in 2012 and the second session was held in Yerevan the following year. At the end of 2013, the foreign minister of Iraq, Hoshiar Zebari, visited Yerevan, and after several months, his Armenian counterpart, Edward Nalbandyan, arrived in Baghdad. These visits aimed at enhancing economic cooperation in various fields such as agriculture,

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<sup>23</sup> Bilateral Relations, Iraq, <https://www.mfa.am/en/bilateral-relations/iq>

<sup>24</sup> Iraq has a position to deepen political and economic relations with Armenia, Iraqi Foreign Ministry, 8.11.2012, <https://armenpress.am/arm/news/698784>

tourism, civil aviation, construction and facilitating visa regimes. For its part, Armenia allowed the citizens of Iraq to visit Armenia without a special invitation.

In 2016, the third session of the Armenian-Iraqi joint intergovernmental commission kicked off in Baghdad, co-chaired by RA Minister of Territorial Administration Armen Yeritsyan and Iraqi Minister of Agriculture Falah Zeydan.<sup>25</sup> In 2017, the fourth session took place in Yerevan.

On February 22, 2021, political-diplomatic consultations between the Foreign Ministries of Armenia and Iraq took place in Baghdad, chaired by Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia Artak Apitonian and Senior Undersecretary of the Foreign Ministry of Iraq Nizar Al-Khairallah.<sup>26</sup>

The Armenian-Iraqi cooperation also includes military aspects. However, it is limited within meetings between the officials of the defence ministries of the two countries. In November 2013, the representative of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Iraq, Air Force General Nadeem Al-Ajvadi, visited Yerevan and discussed matters related to future prospects of cooperation in the field of defence between the two countries in areas such as military education, training, military industry and Air Force.<sup>27</sup>

Another visit took place in 2021. RA Minister of Defence Vagharshak Harutyunyan and Minister of Defence of the Republic of Iraq Jumaa Inad Saadun Khattab signed an agreement of intents for cooperation in the defense sphere that identified 13 areas of cooperation of mutual interest. The document also envisaged the preparation and signing of a Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia and the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Iraq.<sup>28</sup> Two ministers discussed possible cooperation in exchange of experience, regular military-political consultations, military-technical cooperation.<sup>29</sup> Iraqi delegation also was acquainted with Armenia's military-industrial complex. The companies of the military-industrial complex demonstrated the capabilities of Armenian weapons.<sup>30</sup>

The geographical closeness of Armenia and Iraq and open borders with Iran facilitated the trade between the two countries.<sup>31</sup> As soon as Iraq relatively restored internal stability, the trade between the two states rapidly expanded. For instance,

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<sup>25</sup> Economic-humanitarian cooperation issues on agenda of Armenian-Iraqi intergovernmental commission, 26.01.2016, <https://parstoday.com/hy/news/armenia-i1279>

<sup>26</sup> Armenian-Iraqi political consultations, 23.02.2021, <https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2021/02/23/arm-iq/10806>

<sup>27</sup> Future prospects of cooperation in the field of defence discussed, 9.11.2013, <https://mil.am/en/news/2905>.

<sup>28</sup> The delegation led by the Iraqi Minister of Defence is on an official visit to Armenia, 25.03.2021, <https://mil.am/hy/news/9133>

<sup>29</sup> Armenia, Iraq seek to deepen defense cooperation, 25.03.2021, <https://en.armradio.am/2021/03/25/armenia-iraq-seek-to-deepen-defense-cooperation/>

<sup>30</sup> HTI Minister received the delegation led by the Minister of Defense of Iraq, 25.03.2021, [https://hti.am/pages.php?lang=3&page\\_id=1&id=7656&page\\_name=news](https://hti.am/pages.php?lang=3&page_id=1&id=7656&page_name=news)

<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, Armenia's trade relations with Syria and Lebanon were negatively affected because of the Armenia - Turkey closed border.

according to official data, from 2007 to 2010 trade between the two countries barely reached 0.7 million USD. In 2011, trade volumes sharply increased reaching 20 million USD.<sup>32</sup>

Armenia's economic interests in Iraq included the exports of its food and tobacco products and imports of crude oil and oil products. Armenia with an overall large negative balance in foreign trade has a positive trade balance with Iraq.

In 2013, Armenia exported goods worth 48.5 million USD to Iraq; the import was 30 million USD. In 2019, Armenia's exports to Iraq reached its highest point, 177 million USD. Thus, Iraq has become one of the main trade partners of Armenia. Armenia exports to Iraq mainly tobacco, beverages and potatoes, instead importing oil products, oil gases and hydrocarbons.<sup>33</sup>

Iraq was interested in imports of agricultural products and electricity.<sup>34</sup> As Armenia has been implementing projects with Iran, including gas for electricity exchange and high voltage line construction and taking into consideration electricity shortages in Iraq, the cooperation in this field seemed realistic. With its nuclear power plant and hydroenergy facilities Armenia could have been a cheap market for electricity importing. An Iraqi official visiting Armenia announced that the Iraqi market was open for the investors from Armenia, outlining that Iraq needed investments in infrastructure, energy and healthcare.<sup>35</sup> Armenia also offered its capabilities in the IT sector and sharing its experience in introducing e-government and digital technologies.<sup>36</sup>

As of 2012 Armenia imported from Iraq 10 percent of its oil products, however Armenia's announcement of participation in Eurasian Economic Union and privileges given to Russian oil and gas companies led to reduction of oil imports from Iraq. As a result, the imports from Iraq drastically decreased from 28 million USD in 2013 to 270 thousand USD in 2017.

	Exports from Armenia to Iraq (thousand USD)	Imports from Iraq to Armenia (thousand USD)
2013	48473.3	28341.1
2014	35310.9	16032.1
2015	130691.9	1699.1

<sup>32</sup> Data available at the official website of the Statistical Committee of Armenia, <https://bit.ly/3ifTvHk>

<sup>33</sup> Baghdad-Yerevan-Erbil: A Commercial or Political Route? 26.02.2015, <https://hetq.am/hy/article/58739>

<sup>34</sup> Armenian-Iraqi economic cooperation prospects discussed 26.09.2017, <https://www.gov.am/am/news/item/13175/>

<sup>35</sup> Iraq opens its market to Armenian investors, 6.09.2012, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/24700309.html>

<sup>36</sup> Issues related to the development of Armenian-Iraqi economic relations were discussed, 26.09.2017, <https://www.gov.am/am/news/item/13907/>



2016	137895.9	147.5
2017	117239.7	201.9
2018	131 154.2	4 113.2

Among other Arab countries, these numbers of trade are comparable only to the trade turnover with the United Arab Emirates with the difference that Armenia imports from the UAE significantly more than exports. With other Arab countries, trade volumes are insignificant.<sup>37</sup> As of 2020, Iraq is the fourth largest export market for Armenian goods with a 6.7% share, behind Russia, Switzerland and China.

To enhance contacts between the two countries, Armenia and Iraq initiated direct flights between the two countries. In 2015, Iraq Airways announced its first flight from Baghdad to Yerevan with a stop in Erbil. The Iraqi minister of transport arrived in Yerevan on the occasion of the first flight. Later, Armenian Air Company also launched flights to Erbil.

### **The cooperation with Iraqi Kurdistan**

On February 24, 2021, Armenia became the first country of the South Caucasus to open its consulate general in Erbil.<sup>38</sup> The Armenian government formally decided to open its diplomatic mission in Erbil in March 2017 after the Armenian foreign minister Edward Nalbandyan held talks with Massoud Barzani, the Iraqi Kurdish president at the time. However, because of the confrontation between Baghdad and Erbil Armenia temporarily refrained from opening its consulate. The normalization between Baghdad and Erbil later facilitated the resuming of contacts between Armenia and the Kurdistan region.

The Iraqi constitution of 2005 granted large autonomy and privileges to the Kurdistan Regional Government. The weakness of the central government allowed the Kurds to enlarge their territory towards the south, including Kirkuk. Due to the growing capabilities, the Kurdish government pretended for more independence in foreign trade and relations. The KRG opened its diplomatic representations in a number of countries and many countries have opened consulates in Erbil. The war with ISIS further strengthened the role of the Kurds in the region. In 2017, the Kurdish authorities initiated a referendum for independence. Iraq and the international community denied it. As a result, the Kurds lost control over large territories.

<sup>37</sup> Data available at the official website of the Statistical Committee of Armenia.

<sup>38</sup> Opening of the Consulate General of the Republic of Armenia in Erbil, 24.02.2021, [https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2021/02/24/cons\\_erb/10810](https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2021/02/24/cons_erb/10810)

KRG's expectations from the relations with Armenia seems obvious: in its aspirations to become an independent state, the Kurds seek international legitimacy and support from other countries. Armenia's interests in the Kurdish region relate to trade and the Armenian community. Erbil offers certain economic opportunities, as it has its own rich resources. That is why the Armenian political presence there could facilitate exchanges between Armenian industries and service sectors.<sup>39</sup>

The wars in Iraq and instability caused the exodus of Armenians from the country and few of them settled in the Kurdish region. Armenians living in the Kurdish region have their representative in the regional parliament and the Armenian language is one of the official languages of the region.

In terms of the relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Republic of Armenia has not played a separate game, as the central government of Iraq claims that the foreign affairs are within its exceptional competence. However, it did not prevent official contacts between the sides, the Armenian and the KRG officials have regularly met and discussed the possibilities of enlarging the relationships.

Armenia has been advocating the principle of self-determination of the nations over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and Iraq has been struggling for its territorial integrity denying the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in its territory. Both countries maintain neutrality in each other's affairs, Armenia has not supported the Kurdish bid for independence and Iraq has not announced an emphasized pro-Azerbaijani stance. Notwithstanding the fact that in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Iraq votes in favor of the resolutions submitted by Azerbaijan, it does not address the issue beyond the frames of this organization.

With regard to the Kurdish referendum in 2017 and confrontation between Baghdad and the KRG, the MFA of Armenia expressed its hope that the authorities of Iraq and KRG would avoid the tensions and find an opportunity to solve the problems.<sup>40</sup> In sum, the above-mentioned issues have not had any significant impact on bilateral relations.

In 2012, the Chairman of the Commission on Armenian-Iraqi intergovernmental Economic cooperation Armen Gevorgyan met with Massoud Barzani, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The President of Kurdistan said that such mutual visits would promote the development of relations and highlighted that Iraqi Kurdistan was interested in the establishment of deep and strong relations with Armenia. According to Massoud Barzani, Armenian and Kurdish nations had a historical friendship and that one of the main factors of it was the Armenian community.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Gadarigian H., Armenia and Iraqi Kurdistan: Why Doesn't Yerevan Have Diplomatic Representation in Erbil? 4.11.2014, <https://hetq.am/en/article/57174>

<sup>40</sup> The RA Foreign Minister spoke about the referendum held in Iraqi Kurdistan, 27.09.2017, [http://ftp.arka.am/am/news/politics/hh\\_ag\\_nakhararn\\_artahaytvel\\_e/](http://ftp.arka.am/am/news/politics/hh_ag_nakhararn_artahaytvel_e/)

<sup>41</sup> Iraqi Kurdistan is interested in the establishment of active cooperation with Armenia. Massoud Barzani, 8.11.2012, <https://armenpress.am/arm/news/698884/iraqi-kurdistan-is-interested-in-the-establishment-of-active-cooperation-with-armenia-massoud-barzani.html>

In 2018, the prime ministers of Armenia and the Iraqi Kurdistan region met in Switzerland to discuss ways of reviving bilateral commercial ties complicated by Kurdish independence referendum.<sup>42</sup> According to the government statement, Karen Karapetyan and Nechirvan Barzani also discussed the resumption of weekly flights between Yerevan and Erbil. The flights were suspended in September 2017, following the Iraqi government's decision to close Iraqi Kurdistan's airspace to foreign airlines in retaliation for the independence referendum.<sup>43</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the Kurdish region is the main consumer of the Armenian products exported to Iraq<sup>44</sup> (however, no reliable data exists). Besides the food and tobacco products, Armenia also supplies internet connection to Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

It is hard to find a research or policy analysis addressing the history of the relations between Armenia and Iraq notwithstanding the fact that the developments in and around Iraq have this or other way affected Armenia. This paper is an attempt to represent how these relations were influenced by the politics of regional and major powers and Armenia's political and economic interests in Iraq. Generally, the relations of Iraq and Armenia have been largely dependent on the political situation around Iraq. In the 1990s, Armenia refrained from developing relations with Iraq because of the sanctions against Iraq. Despite Armenia did not support the US invasion to Iraq, later it participated in the postwar international peacekeeping mission justifying it by the will to fight against terrorism. While building its relations with Iraq Armenia had to carefully weigh the attitudes of its allies and partner countries and maintain balance between them. In the 2010s, the relations between Armenia and Iraq started to develop due to favorable situation in the regions. In this period Iraq has become one of the key economic partners of Armenia in the Middle East region. Economic interests also contributed to the promotion of the relations between Armenia and the KRG.

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<sup>42</sup> Armenian, Iraqi Kurdish PMs Discuss Closer Business Ties, 24.01.2018, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/28994403.html>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Representatives of Armenian and Iraqi governments discussed prospects for increasing trade turnover and interaction in education, 30.08.2017, [https://finport.am/full\\_news.php?id=31187&lang=3](https://finport.am/full_news.php?id=31187&lang=3)

<sup>45</sup> Telecom Armenia will increase the bandwidth of the Internet supplied to Iraqi Kurdistan, 17.05.2021, [https://finport.am/full\\_news.php?id=44105&lang=3](https://finport.am/full_news.php?id=44105&lang=3)

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