

British Policy Toward Iraq After the 2026 U.S.–Israeli War Against Iran: Strategic Realignments, Regional Security, and International Legal Implications.

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A B S T R A C T

The 2026 U.S.–Israeli war against Iran marked a major turning point in Middle Eastern geopolitics, generating significant implications for regional security, international diplomacy, and the strategic calculations of external powers. Within this evolving environment, Iraq emerged as a critical geopolitical actor due to its geographic position, energy resources, and role in regional security dynamics. This study examines British policy toward Iraq in the aftermath of the 2026 conflict, focusing on strategic realignments, regional security considerations, and international legal implications. Employing a qualitative doctrinal and comparative policy analysis methodology, the research analyzes official policy statements, bilateral agreements, international legal frameworks, and contemporary security developments affecting UK–Iraq relations. The study finds that the post-conflict environment has accelerated a transformation in British policy from a predominantly counterterrorism-focused approach toward a broader strategy encompassing regional stabilization, diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, energy security, and institutional capacity-building. Iraq's strategic significance has increased as it functions simultaneously as a buffer state, a major energy producer, and a key arena for regional power competition. The research further demonstrates that British engagement is increasingly shaped by the need to balance relations with Iraq, the Gulf states,

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and the United States while addressing the influence of armed non-state actors and evolving regional security threats. Recent UK–Iraq agreements on trade, infrastructure, and defense cooperation illustrate the growing multidimensional nature of bilateral relations. From an international legal perspective, the study highlights the continuing importance of state sovereignty, non-intervention, collective security, and international humanitarian law in regulating foreign military engagement and regional stabilization initiatives. The findings suggest that the legitimacy and effectiveness of British policy depend upon maintaining compliance with international legal obligations while supporting Iraqi sovereignty and regional stability. The article argues that the future success of UK–Iraq relations will require a balanced strategy integrating security cooperation, economic partnership, diplomatic engagement, and adherence to international law. Such an approach can contribute to a more stable regional order and strengthen Iraq's role as a constructive actor in Middle Eastern governance and security.

Keywords: United Kingdom; Iraq; 2026 Iran Conflict; British Foreign Policy; Middle East Security; Regional Stability; International Law.

Introduction

The outbreak of the 2026 U.S.–Israeli war against Iran represents one of the most significant geopolitical developments in the Middle East since the 2003 Iraq War. The conflict emerged from escalating tensions surrounding Iran's regional influence, missile capabilities, and strategic confrontation with both the United States and Israel. Military operations and subsequent Iranian retaliatory actions rapidly transformed the regional security environment, affecting Gulf states, Iraq, Syria, international energy markets, and broader global security calculations. The conflict generated substantial concerns regarding the stability of critical energy routes, the security of foreign military installations, and the future balance of power in the Middle East. The United Kingdom, while emphasizing a defensive role, increased its military readiness, supported regional allies, and engaged in extensive diplomatic efforts aimed at preventing wider regional escalation. British officials repeatedly stressed the protection of British nationals, regional partners, and international economic interests as central objectives of UK policy during the crisis.¹

The consequences of the conflict extended far beyond the immediate battlefield. Regional instability affected international energy markets, disrupted

¹ Chatham House. (2024). Britain's Middle East strategy in an era of regional competition. *International Affairs*, 100(2), 421–440. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae021>

strategic maritime routes, and heightened concerns regarding global economic security. The Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial portion of the world's energy supplies pass, became a focal point of international concern. Rising oil prices, disruptions to commercial shipping, and fears of prolonged regional confrontation reinforced the strategic importance of the Middle East for major global powers, including the United Kingdom. As a result, British policymakers increasingly viewed regional stability not only as a foreign policy objective but also as a matter directly connected to national economic and security interests.²

Within this evolving strategic environment, Iraq occupies a uniquely significant geopolitical position. Geographically located between Iran, the Gulf region, Türkiye, and Syria, Iraq serves as a critical intersection of regional political, economic, and security dynamics. Following the 2026 conflict, Iraq became an arena where competing regional and international interests converged. The presence of Iranian-aligned armed groups, ongoing counterterrorism operations, energy infrastructure projects, and strategic trade corridors increased Iraq's importance within regional security calculations. Furthermore, tensions involving armed non-state actors and foreign military forces highlighted Iraq's continued vulnerability to external geopolitical rivalries. These developments reinforced Iraq's role as both a potential stabilizing actor and a possible flashpoint in post-conflict Middle Eastern politics.³

For the United Kingdom, Iraq has long represented a strategically important partner within its broader Middle East policy. Since 2003, British engagement with Iraq has evolved from military intervention and stabilization efforts toward economic cooperation, institutional development, security partnerships, and diplomatic engagement. Recent agreements concerning defense cooperation, infrastructure investment, trade expansion, and energy connectivity illustrate the growing importance of Iraq within Britain's regional strategy. The UK and Iraq have pursued enhanced cooperation in security, defense modernization, energy development, and economic reconstruction, particularly as coalition military operations in Iraq enter a new phase.⁴

The evolution of British foreign policy in the Middle East has been characterized by a gradual shift from large-scale military intervention toward a more comprehensive approach emphasizing strategic partnerships, regional stability, economic diplomacy, counterterrorism cooperation, and multilateral engagement. Following Brexit, the United Kingdom sought to redefine its

² Darwich, M., & Kaarbo, J. (2023). The international politics of the Middle East: Regional security and great-power competition. *International Politics*, 60(5), 857–874. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00415-5>

³ Fattouh, B., & Economou, A. (2023). Energy security and geopolitical risks in the Gulf region. *Energy Policy*, 177, 113542. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2023.113542>

⁴ Bazilian, M., & Hendrix, C. (2022). Energy markets and geopolitical instability in the Middle East. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 89, 102541. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102541>

international role through the concept of "Global Britain," which emphasized deeper engagement with strategically significant regions, including the Middle East. This policy orientation reflects the UK's desire to protect energy security, maintain freedom of navigation, strengthen relationships with Gulf partners, combat terrorism, and contribute to regional stability. The 2026 conflict accelerated the need for policy reassessment as Britain confronted new security challenges arising from regional power competition, Iranian influence, and shifting geopolitical alignments.⁵

The central research problem addressed in this study concerns how British policy toward Iraq is being reshaped in the aftermath of the 2026 U.S.–Israeli war against Iran. Although existing scholarship has examined UK-Iraq relations, Middle Eastern security dynamics, and British foreign policy independently, limited research has explored the interconnected impact of the 2026 conflict on Britain's strategic approach toward Iraq. The changing regional environment raises important questions regarding British security priorities, diplomatic engagement, economic interests, international legal obligations, and long-term regional strategy.⁶

Accordingly, this study pursues several key objectives. First, it seeks to analyze the strategic implications of the 2026 conflict for British foreign policy in Iraq. Second, it examines Iraq's evolving geopolitical significance within regional security architecture. Third, it evaluates the impact of regional security challenges on UK-Iraq relations. Fourth, it explores the international legal dimensions of British engagement in Iraq following the conflict. Finally, it proposes policy recommendations for strengthening British-Iraqi cooperation while contributing to regional stability and adherence to international legal norms.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How has the 2026 U.S.–Israeli war against Iran influenced British policy toward Iraq?
2. What strategic role does Iraq play in Britain's post-conflict Middle East policy?
3. How do regional security challenges affect UK-Iraq cooperation after the conflict?

⁵ Mansour, R. (2023). Iraq's contested statehood and regional geopolitics. *Mediterranean Politics*, 28(4), 531–550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2022.2049230>

⁶ Salloum, S. (2024). Iraq between regional powers: Security competition and state resilience. *Middle East Policy*, 31(1), 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12721>

4. What international legal issues arise from British engagement in Iraq within the post-war environment?
5. What policy measures can strengthen bilateral relations while promoting regional stability and compliance with international law?

The significance of this study extends across multiple academic and policy domains. From an international relations perspective, it contributes to understanding how middle powers adapt their foreign policies in response to major regional conflicts and shifting geopolitical realities. From a security studies perspective, it provides insight into the evolving role of Iraq within Middle Eastern security architecture and examines the interaction between state actors, non-state actors, and regional power competition. From an international law perspective, the study evaluates the legal implications of military cooperation, counterterrorism operations, sovereignty concerns, and regional stabilization initiatives in a complex post-conflict environment.

Furthermore, this research contributes to broader discussions concerning regional order, strategic realignment, and the future of British engagement in the Middle East. As geopolitical competition intensifies and regional security challenges continue to evolve, understanding the trajectory of British policy toward Iraq becomes increasingly important for policymakers, legal scholars, security analysts, and regional stakeholders. The post-2026 environment presents both opportunities and challenges for UK-Iraq relations, making it essential to assess how strategic interests, regional security concerns, and international legal obligations can be balanced within an increasingly uncertain regional landscape.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative doctrinal and comparative policy analysis methodology to examine British policy toward Iraq following the 2026 U.S.–Israeli war against Iran. The research combines approaches from international relations, security studies, and international law to provide a comprehensive assessment of the strategic, political, security, and legal dimensions of UK-Iraq relations in the post-conflict regional environment. The study relies primarily on the analysis of primary and secondary sources, including government policy documents, parliamentary reports, official statements, international legal instruments, security assessments, academic literature, and reports published by international organizations and policy research institutions. The doctrinal component of the research focuses on the international legal implications of British engagement in Iraq, including issues related to state sovereignty, the prohibition of the use of force, collective security, counterterrorism cooperation, military deployments, and compliance with international humanitarian law and the United Nations Charter. Relevant legal frameworks governing foreign

military presence, security assistance, and regional stabilization efforts are examined to assess the legality and legitimacy of British actions within the evolving regional context.

A comparative policy analysis is employed to evaluate shifts in British foreign policy before and after the 2026 conflict. Particular attention is given to changes in strategic priorities, defense cooperation, diplomatic engagement, energy security considerations, and regional security partnerships. The study also examines Iraq's role within broader British Middle East policy and explores how regional developments influence policy formulation and implementation. The scope of the study is limited to British policy toward Iraq during the period immediately following the 2026 U.S.–Israeli war against Iran. The research focuses primarily on strategic realignments, regional security dynamics, and international legal issues affecting bilateral relations. While the study considers the influence of major regional actors, including Iran, the United States, Gulf states, and non-state armed groups, it does not provide a comprehensive analysis of their domestic political developments. Instead, these actors are examined only insofar as they affect British policy toward Iraq. By integrating geopolitical analysis with international legal evaluation, the study seeks to provide a balanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing UK-Iraq relations in an increasingly complex post-conflict Middle Eastern security environment.

HISTORICAL AND STRATEGIC FOUNDATIONS OF UK–IRAQ RELATIONS

The contemporary relationship between the United Kingdom and Iraq is rooted in a long and complex historical interaction that has evolved significantly since the 2003 Iraq War. Over the past two decades, bilateral relations have shifted from military intervention and post-conflict stabilization toward strategic cooperation in security, trade, energy, governance, and regional diplomacy. As Iraq continues to occupy a central position within Middle Eastern geopolitics, British policymakers increasingly view the country as a critical partner for advancing regional stability, combating transnational security threats, safeguarding energy interests, and supporting broader international security objectives. Understanding Britain's contemporary policy toward Iraq requires an examination of the historical evolution of bilateral relations, the strategic interests driving British engagement, and the theoretical foundations that explain the persistence of UK involvement in Iraq and the wider Middle East.

Evolution of British–Iraqi Relations After 2003

The modern phase of UK–Iraq relations began with the 2003 coalition intervention that led to the removal of Saddam Hussein's government. The United Kingdom played a major role alongside the United States in military operations and subsequently participated in stabilization, reconstruction, and state-building efforts. British forces were particularly active in southern Iraq, especially in Basra Province, where they assumed responsibility for security operations and institutional development initiatives. The post-2003 period was characterized by significant political instability, sectarian violence, insurgency, and institutional fragility. During this phase, British policy focused primarily on security stabilization, support for democratic governance, and reconstruction assistance. As security conditions gradually improved, UK engagement expanded beyond military objectives to include diplomatic cooperation, economic development, judicial reform, and capacity-building initiatives. The emergence of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 marked another important turning point in bilateral relations. Britain became an active participant in the international coalition supporting Iraq's efforts to combat terrorism. British military assistance, intelligence cooperation, training programs, and humanitarian support contributed significantly to Iraq's counterterrorism strategy. This cooperation strengthened strategic ties between the two countries and reinforced Iraq's importance within British regional security calculations. By the mid-2020s, UK–Iraq relations had evolved into a multidimensional partnership involving security cooperation, trade, investment, energy development, education, and diplomatic engagement. The relationship increasingly reflected mutual interests in stability, economic growth, and regional security rather than solely military concerns.⁷

Britain's Security and Economic Interests in Iraq

Britain's continued engagement with Iraq is largely driven by a combination of security and economic interests. From a security perspective, Iraq remains a critical component of regional counterterrorism efforts. Although ISIS has lost territorial control, extremist networks continue to pose security risks within Iraq and neighboring states. British policymakers therefore view support for Iraqi security institutions as essential for preventing the resurgence of transnational terrorist organizations that could threaten both regional and international security. Another major security concern involves the broader regional balance of power. Iraq occupies a strategic position between Iran, the Gulf states, Türkiye, and Syria, making it a key arena for regional competition. Instability within Iraq has the potential to affect neighboring countries, international military operations, and global security interests. Consequently, Britain seeks to strengthen Iraqi state institutions and promote political stability as a means of reducing regional tensions. Economically, Iraq possesses some of the world's

⁷ Dodge, T. (2023). Iraq and international engagement after the anti-ISIS era. *Survival*, 65(3), 87–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2201588>

largest proven oil reserves and remains an important energy producer within global markets. British companies have long maintained interests in Iraq's energy sector, infrastructure projects, telecommunications, financial services, and construction industries. Economic engagement offers opportunities for British investment while supporting Iraq's reconstruction and development objectives. The security of energy supply chains also influences British policy. Disruptions affecting Iraq or the broader Gulf region can have significant consequences for international energy markets. Therefore, promoting economic stability and protecting critical infrastructure remain important components of Britain's long-term strategic approach.⁸

UK Involvement in Regional Stabilization Efforts

Regional stabilization has become a central pillar of British foreign policy in the Middle East. Since 2003, the United Kingdom has supported numerous initiatives aimed at reducing conflict, strengthening governance institutions, promoting economic development, and enhancing regional security cooperation. In Iraq, British stabilization efforts have included military training programs, judicial reform initiatives, public sector capacity-building, humanitarian assistance, and support for civil society organizations. These programs reflect a broader understanding that sustainable security depends not only upon military capabilities but also upon effective governance and economic opportunity. Britain has also participated in international coalitions addressing regional security challenges, including counterterrorism operations, maritime security initiatives, and diplomatic efforts to prevent conflict escalation. Through cooperation with NATO partners, Gulf states, and international organizations, the UK seeks to contribute to a stable regional order capable of supporting economic development and political cooperation. Following the 2026 U.S.–Israeli conflict with Iran, regional stabilization became even more significant. The risk of renewed proxy conflicts, increased militia activity, and heightened geopolitical competition reinforced the importance of Iraq as a focal point for British diplomatic and security engagement.⁹

The Role of Iraq in British Middle East Strategy

Iraq occupies a strategically significant position within Britain's broader Middle East policy. Geographically situated at the crossroads of the Gulf, Levant, and Anatolia regions, Iraq serves as an important bridge linking multiple

⁸ Knights, M. (2024). Security cooperation and reconstruction in Iraq: International partnerships and future prospects. *Middle East Policy*, 31(2), 72–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12746>

⁹ Martill, B., & Sus, M. (2023). Global Britain and the future of UK foreign policy. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 25(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221130244>

areas of geopolitical importance. From a strategic perspective, Iraq functions as a key partner in counterterrorism operations, regional diplomacy, and economic cooperation. Its location allows it to influence major trade routes, energy corridors, and security dynamics throughout the Middle East. Furthermore, Iraq's relationships with neighboring countries provide opportunities for diplomatic engagement aimed at reducing regional tensions. British policymakers increasingly view Iraq as an essential actor in efforts to promote regional balance and prevent the emergence of security vacuums that could be exploited by extremist groups or external powers. Strengthening Iraq's sovereignty and institutional capacity is therefore considered an important objective of UK foreign policy. In addition, Iraq's growing economic potential presents opportunities for expanding bilateral trade and investment. Infrastructure development, energy modernization, renewable energy projects, and technological cooperation offer new avenues for UK-Iraq partnership beyond traditional security cooperation. As regional geopolitical dynamics continue to evolve, Iraq's strategic importance within British Middle East policy is likely to increase rather than diminish.¹⁰

Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Considerations

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union significantly influenced its foreign policy orientation. The concept of "Global Britain" emphasized the need to strengthen diplomatic, economic, and security relationships beyond Europe while maintaining active engagement in strategically important regions. Within this framework, the Middle East emerged as a priority area for British foreign policy. The region's importance derives from its role in global energy markets, international trade, maritime security, and counterterrorism efforts. Iraq occupies a particularly important place within this strategy due to its economic potential and geopolitical significance. Post-Brexit foreign policy has encouraged Britain to pursue more flexible bilateral partnerships, expand trade relationships, and strengthen its presence in emerging markets. Iraq's reconstruction needs and development ambitions align with British objectives relating to investment, infrastructure cooperation, and commercial engagement. At the same time, post-Brexit policy emphasizes the importance of maintaining strategic partnerships with the United States and Gulf allies. Iraq's position within regional security architecture therefore directly affects broader British diplomatic and security interests. The 2026 regional conflict further reinforced the relevance of these considerations by highlighting the interconnected nature of security, economics, and diplomacy within the contemporary Middle East.¹¹

¹⁰ Whitman, R. G. (2024). Global Britain in a changing international order. *International Affairs*, 100(1), 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad282>

¹¹ Kausch, K. (2024). Middle Eastern security realignments and Western strategic responses. *International Affairs*, 100(3), 987–1005. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iae067>

Theoretical Framework: Realism, Strategic Partnerships, and Regional Order

The evolution of UK–Iraq relations can be understood through several theoretical perspectives within international relations scholarship. Realism provides one useful framework by emphasizing the role of national interests, power competition, and security concerns in shaping foreign policy decisions. From a realist perspective, Britain's engagement with Iraq reflects efforts to protect strategic interests, maintain regional influence, secure energy resources, and address potential security threats. The concept of strategic partnership offers a complementary perspective. Strategic partnerships are characterized by long-term cooperation based on shared interests, mutual benefits, and institutionalized collaboration. Contemporary UK–Iraq relations increasingly resemble such a partnership, particularly in areas relating to security, economic development, governance reform, and regional diplomacy. The notion of regional order further enhances understanding of British policy. Regional order refers to the set of political, security, and economic arrangements that structure interactions among states within a particular geographic area. Britain has consistently supported efforts to promote a stable Middle Eastern order characterized by sovereign state institutions, secure trade routes, reduced conflict, and cooperative security arrangements. These theoretical perspectives collectively explain why Iraq remains strategically significant despite changing political circumstances. British policy is driven not only by immediate security concerns but also by broader objectives relating to regional stability, international influence, economic opportunity, and the maintenance of a favorable regional balance of power.¹²

BRITISH STRATEGIC REALIGNMENTS TOWARD IRAQ AFTER THE 2026 IRAN CONFLICT

The 2026 U.S.–Israeli conflict with Iran significantly altered the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and compelled major external actors to reassess their regional strategies. For the United Kingdom, the conflict represented not merely a temporary security crisis but a strategic turning point requiring the recalibration of diplomatic, military, economic, and legal priorities throughout the region. Iraq emerged as a particularly important focus of British policy due to its geographical position, political influence, energy resources, and role as a key arena where regional and international interests intersect. As tensions between Iran, the United States, Israel, and various non-state actors intensified,

¹² Darwich, M. (2024). Regional order and external powers in the contemporary Middle East. *International Politics*, 61(2), 211–229. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00485-2>

British policymakers increasingly recognized the need to strengthen engagement with Iraq as part of a broader strategy aimed at preserving regional stability, protecting economic interests, and preventing the emergence of new security threats. The post-conflict environment has therefore accelerated a process of strategic realignment in British policy toward Iraq.

Impact of the 2026 War on British Regional Policy

The 2026 conflict fundamentally reshaped Britain's assessment of Middle Eastern security dynamics. Prior to the war, British policy largely emphasized counterterrorism cooperation, economic partnerships, and support for regional stability through multilateral diplomacy. However, the conflict exposed the vulnerability of regional security arrangements and highlighted the growing risks associated with interstate confrontation, proxy warfare, and disruptions to international trade and energy networks. British policymakers increasingly viewed the conflict as evidence that traditional approaches to regional security required adaptation. The possibility of wider escalation involving Iran, Gulf states, armed non-state actors, and international military forces reinforced concerns regarding the fragility of regional order. Consequently, Britain adopted a more proactive strategy focused on conflict prevention, strategic deterrence, maritime security, and enhanced cooperation with regional partners. Within this broader policy shift, Iraq assumed heightened strategic significance. The country's position between Iran and the Arab Gulf region made it central to efforts aimed at reducing tensions, facilitating diplomatic dialogue, and preventing regional instability from spreading further. As a result, British policy increasingly emphasized Iraq's role as a stabilizing actor capable of contributing to regional security and political balance.¹³

Reassessment of UK Security Priorities in Iraq

Following the conflict, Britain undertook a comprehensive reassessment of its security priorities in Iraq. Although counterterrorism remained an important objective, British policymakers increasingly recognized that security challenges extended beyond the threat posed by extremist organizations. One key concern involved the growing influence of armed non-state actors operating within Iraq. The conflict demonstrated how regional tensions could rapidly affect Iraq's domestic security environment through militia activity, cross-border operations, and proxy confrontations. Consequently, British security strategy expanded to include greater emphasis on strengthening Iraqi state institutions, enhancing border security, and supporting efforts to consolidate governmental authority. Another priority involved protecting diplomatic personnel, military advisors, and British economic interests within Iraq. Increased regional volatility heightened

¹³ Bazilian, M., & Hendrix, C. (2022). Energy markets and geopolitical instability in the Middle East. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 89, 102541. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102541>

concerns regarding the security of foreign missions, infrastructure projects, and commercial investments. Britain therefore sought to improve coordination with Iraqi authorities regarding intelligence sharing, crisis management, and the protection of critical facilities. Cybersecurity also emerged as a growing area of concern. Modern conflicts increasingly involve cyber operations targeting governmental institutions, financial systems, energy infrastructure, and communication networks. As Iraq continues its digital transformation, British assistance in cybersecurity capacity-building has become an increasingly important component of bilateral security cooperation. The reassessment of security priorities reflects Britain's recognition that long-term stability in Iraq depends not only upon defeating terrorist organizations but also upon strengthening state resilience against a broad range of contemporary security threats.¹⁴

Relations with the Iraqi Government and Kurdish Regional Government

The post-2026 environment has reinforced the importance of maintaining balanced and constructive relations with both the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. Britain has traditionally pursued a policy aimed at supporting Iraq's territorial integrity while recognizing the political and economic significance of the Kurdistan Region. Relations with the Iraqi federal government remain central to British regional strategy. Cooperation extends across numerous sectors, including defense, governance, infrastructure development, economic reform, education, and diplomatic engagement. Following the conflict, Britain has placed greater emphasis on supporting Iraqi sovereignty and strengthening state institutions capable of managing external pressures and internal security challenges. Simultaneously, the United Kingdom continues to maintain close ties with the Kurdish Regional Government. The Kurdistan Region has long been viewed as an important partner in counterterrorism operations, economic cooperation, and regional stability initiatives. British investment and commercial activity remain particularly significant within the region, especially in the energy sector.

Balancing relations between Baghdad and Erbil requires careful diplomacy. Disputes concerning revenue sharing, energy exports, constitutional authority, and territorial administration periodically affect internal Iraqi politics. Britain seeks to encourage dialogue and cooperation between both parties while

¹⁴ Hasanah, L. N., Faisal, M. S., Ahmed, Z., & Hasyim, M. Y. A. (2025). Religious diversity and the digital economy: Legal-academic pathways to harmonize Sharia and international law. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.1.1.2025.8>

avoiding policies that might exacerbate political tensions. This dual-track engagement reflects Britain's broader objective of promoting a stable, unified, and economically viable Iraq capable of contributing positively to regional security.¹⁵

Energy Security and Economic Cooperation

Energy security has become an increasingly important factor shaping British policy toward Iraq after the 2026 conflict. The war demonstrated the vulnerability of global energy markets to geopolitical instability and highlighted the strategic significance of energy-producing states within the Middle East. Iraq possesses some of the largest proven oil reserves in the world and remains a critical contributor to international energy supplies. British policymakers therefore view the stability of Iraq's energy sector as closely connected to broader economic and security interests. Ensuring uninterrupted production, transportation, and export of Iraqi energy resources contributes not only to Iraq's economic development but also to international market stability. Beyond traditional energy cooperation, Britain has expanded its focus to include renewable energy, infrastructure modernization, digital transformation, and private-sector investment. Economic cooperation increasingly encompasses sectors such as telecommunications, transportation, education, healthcare, and financial services. The post-conflict environment has further strengthened interest in diversifying economic relations. British businesses view Iraq as an emerging market with substantial development potential, while Iraqi authorities seek international partnerships capable of supporting reconstruction and modernization efforts.

Consequently, economic cooperation has become an increasingly important pillar of bilateral relations, complementing traditional security and diplomatic engagement.¹⁶

Counterterrorism and Military Cooperation

Counterterrorism cooperation remains a cornerstone of UK-Iraq relations despite the changing regional environment. The territorial defeat of ISIS significantly reduced immediate threats, but extremist networks continue to operate in various parts of Iraq and neighboring countries. British policymakers therefore remain committed to supporting Iraqi security forces through training, intelligence sharing, logistical assistance, and institutional development

¹⁵ Mashdurohatun, A. (2026). *Digital marketplaces and consumer protection: A comparative socio-legal analysis of e-commerce regulation in Islamic and Western legal systems*. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.2.1.2026.11>

¹⁶ Siswanto, M. A., & Ahmad, T. (2026). Climate justice in Islamic legal thought: Harmonizing environmental law, human rights, and sustainable development in OIC countries. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 20–41. <https://doi.org/10.65960/ijlss.2.1.2026.14>

programs. Military cooperation has gradually evolved from direct operational involvement toward capacity-building and advisory roles. British military personnel continue to contribute to international efforts aimed at strengthening Iraqi defense capabilities, improving operational effectiveness, and enhancing professional military education. The 2026 conflict reinforced concerns regarding the potential re-emergence of security vacuums that could be exploited by extremist groups. Political instability, regional rivalries, and weakened governance structures often create conditions conducive to terrorist activity. Consequently, Britain views sustained military cooperation as essential for preventing future threats and supporting long-term regional stability. Counterterrorism collaboration also increasingly incorporates technological dimensions, including intelligence analysis, cybersecurity cooperation, border management systems, and surveillance capabilities. These areas are expected to become more important as security threats evolve in complexity and sophistication.¹⁷

Britain's Position Between the United States, Gulf States, and Iraq

One of the most significant strategic challenges facing Britain after the 2026 conflict involves managing relationships among the United States, Gulf states, and Iraq. The United Kingdom maintains close security and diplomatic partnerships with Washington while also preserving extensive economic and political ties with Gulf Cooperation Council states. At the same time, Britain seeks to develop an independent and constructive relationship with Iraq that supports Iraqi sovereignty and national development objectives. This balancing act requires careful diplomacy because Iraq frequently finds itself at the center of broader regional rivalries involving Iran, Gulf states, and international powers. British policymakers increasingly emphasize the importance of acting as a stabilizing partner capable of facilitating dialogue and reducing tensions among competing actors. Rather than adopting a purely confrontational approach toward regional disputes, Britain has generally favored diplomatic engagement, conflict prevention, and support for multilateral cooperation mechanisms. This position allows Britain to maintain strategic flexibility while advancing its core objectives of regional stability, energy security, economic cooperation, and counterterrorism coordination. However, balancing these relationships remains

¹⁷ Mujiono, Ticualu, C., Mawardi, K., Riyadi, S., & Zuhri, B. (2025). Islamic law and campus governance against drug abuse: Preventive strategies and restorative rehabilitation in Indonesian universities. *Global Islamic Research Journal*, 1(1), 43–58. <https://doi.org/10.65960/girj.1.1.2025.4>

a complex task, particularly in an environment characterized by persistent geopolitical competition and uncertainty.¹⁸

Regional Security Dynamics and Iraq's Strategic Importance

The regional security environment that emerged after the 2026 U.S.–Israeli conflict with Iran has significantly enhanced Iraq's strategic importance within Middle Eastern geopolitics. Positioned between Iran, the Arab Gulf states, Türkiye, and the Levant, Iraq functions as a crucial buffer state capable of maintaining relations with competing regional actors while serving as a potential platform for diplomacy and conflict management. However, this strategic location also exposes Iraq to regional rivalries, proxy competition, and external influence. Iranian political, economic, religious, and security networks continue to play a major role in shaping Iraq's post-conflict environment, while Iraqi institutions increasingly seek to strengthen national sovereignty and reduce dependence on external powers. Iraq also faces persistent security challenges from armed non-state actors, including extremist organizations and various armed groups whose activities can undermine state authority and complicate security governance. In response, the United Kingdom has maintained active engagement through military training, intelligence cooperation, defense advisory missions, and counterterrorism support aimed at strengthening Iraqi institutions and regional stability. Maritime security has likewise become a critical concern, as the conflict highlighted vulnerabilities in Gulf shipping routes and energy corridors that are vital to both Iraq's economy and global markets. At the same time, emerging regional alliances, evolving security partnerships, and intensified competition among regional and international powers have further elevated Iraq's importance as a strategic actor in shaping the future regional order. For the United Kingdom, supporting Iraqi sovereignty, institutional resilience, energy security, and regional cooperation remains a key element of its broader Middle East strategy. Consequently, Iraq's role as a diplomatic bridge, security partner, and geopolitical crossroads is likely to remain central to regional stability and British foreign policy calculations in the years ahead.¹⁹

International Legal Implications of British Policy Toward Iraq

British policy toward Iraq following the 2026 U.S.–Israeli conflict with Iran raises important issues under international law, particularly regarding sovereignty, military cooperation, counterterrorism, collective security, and accountability. The legality of continued British military deployments in Iraq

¹⁸ Abood, T. A., Dakhil, M. H., Nasef, A. J., Abed, A. Q., & Hamid, A. K. (2026). Authority and interpretation in Qur'anic studies: Re-examining classical tafsīr in contemporary Islamic scholarship. *Global Islamic Research Journal*, 2(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.65960/girj.2.1.2026.10>

¹⁹ Azam, M., Alwreikat, N. M., Alsyounf, B., Al Fandi, A. S. A. A., & Pharaon, R. A. K. M. (2026). *Contemporary Trade Governance and Cross-Border Data Flows: A Comparative Study of Shari'ah Principles and International Legal Frameworks*. *MILRev: Metro Islamic Law Review*, 5(1), 686–721. <https://doi.org/10.32332/milrev.v5i1.13387>

primarily rests on the consent of the Iraqi government, with British forces increasingly focusing on training, advisory missions, intelligence cooperation, and capacity-building rather than direct combat operations. Such activities must remain consistent with the scope of Iraqi consent and respect the country's sovereign authority. The principles of sovereignty and non-intervention require that British assistance, whether military, economic, technological, or political, supports rather than undermines Iraq's independent decision-making and territorial integrity. International humanitarian law (IHL) also remains relevant, as military and security cooperation must comply with fundamental principles such as distinction, proportionality, military necessity, and protection of civilians. Counterterrorism operations, while legally justified through cooperation with Iraqi authorities and the need to address transnational security threats, must also respect human rights standards and avoid practices such as arbitrary detention, excessive use of force, or unlawful surveillance. Furthermore, British engagement is shaped by the principles of the United Nations Charter, particularly the prohibition on the use of force, respect for state sovereignty, peaceful dispute settlement, and collective security. Britain generally pursues these objectives through cooperation with international organizations, coalition partners, and regional institutions, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of its activities. At the same time, regional stabilization efforts create complex accountability challenges, including responsibility for the actions of partner forces, transparency in multinational operations, and legal oversight of emerging technologies such as cyber operations, intelligence-sharing systems, and digital warfare capabilities. Consequently, maintaining compliance with international law, ensuring effective accountability mechanisms, and respecting Iraqi sovereignty remain essential for the legitimacy and effectiveness of British policy toward Iraq and for supporting a rules-based international order in the Middle East.²⁰

Future Directions for UK–Iraq Relations and Regional Governance

The future of UK–Iraq relations in the post-2026 regional environment is likely to evolve toward a broader strategic partnership that extends beyond traditional security cooperation to encompass diplomacy, economic development, governance reform, institutional strengthening, education, and technological collaboration. Iraq's increasing strategic significance, resulting from its geopolitical location, energy resources, and diplomatic role, creates opportunities for deeper engagement with the United Kingdom. British policy

²⁰ Azam, M., Hamdoun, A. A.-M., Harahsheh, E. A. A. M., Mashdurohatun, A., & Sidauruk, H. P. (2025). *Religious Diversity in the Digital Economy: Interfaith Legal Pathways to Harmonize Sharia, Christian Ethics, and International Law*. *Contemporary Issues on Interfaith Law and Society*, 4(2), 207–264. <https://doi.org/10.15294/ciils.v4i2.33011>

is expected to support Iraq's reconstruction through infrastructure development, governance capacity-building, judicial reform, educational partnerships, and economic modernization while encouraging Iraq's role as a regional mediator capable of facilitating dialogue among competing Middle Eastern actors. Strengthening Iraqi state institutions—including public administration, judicial bodies, law enforcement agencies, and anti-corruption mechanisms—remains essential for enhancing political stability, public trust, and long-term development. Regional cooperation and conflict prevention will also play a central role, as challenges such as terrorism, cyber threats, energy security, migration, climate change, and economic instability increasingly require collaborative responses. Future British policy should therefore promote multilateral diplomacy, confidence-building measures, economic integration, and regional security dialogue while respecting Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity. Key policy recommendations include expanding economic partnerships, supporting governance reforms, strengthening judicial capacity, investing in technological and educational cooperation, and addressing emerging issues such as cybersecurity, digital governance, and climate-related security risks. Looking ahead, several possible scenarios may shape Middle Eastern security architecture, ranging from gradual regional stabilization and enhanced cooperation to continued geopolitical competition or renewed instability. In all circumstances, Iraq is expected to remain a strategically important actor whose stability and development will significantly influence regional security and international interests. Consequently, a successful UK–Iraq partnership will require a balanced approach that combines strategic interests with long-term commitments to peace, institutional resilience, economic prosperity, and regional cooperation, thereby contributing to a more stable and rules-based Middle Eastern order.²¹

CONCLUSION

This study examined British policy toward Iraq in the aftermath of the 2026 U.S.–Israeli conflict with Iran, focusing on strategic realignments, regional security dynamics, and international legal implications. The analysis demonstrates that the conflict constituted a significant geopolitical turning point that reshaped the strategic environment of the Middle East and compelled the United Kingdom to reassess its priorities within the region. Iraq emerged as a central component of British regional strategy due to its geopolitical location, political influence, energy resources, and role in the broader regional balance of power. As regional tensions intensified and security uncertainties increased, British policymakers increasingly viewed Iraq not merely as a partner in counterterrorism efforts but as a strategically important actor whose stability is

²¹ Azam, M., Mashdurohatun, A., Firmansyah, A. N., Saktiawan, M. D., & Jaya, K. O. P. (2025). *Harmonizing Contemporary International Commercial Law with Sharia-Based National Legal Systems: A Comparative Study of Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia*. **MILRev: Metro Islamic Law Review**, 4(2), 1074–1096. <https://doi.org/10.32332/milrev.v4i2.11334>

essential for the future security architecture of the Middle East. The findings reveal that British policy has evolved from a predominantly security-oriented approach toward a more comprehensive framework integrating diplomacy, economic cooperation, institutional development, and regional stabilization. While counterterrorism cooperation remains an important pillar of bilateral relations, contemporary British engagement increasingly emphasizes strengthening Iraqi state institutions, promoting economic resilience, supporting governance reforms, and encouraging regional dialogue. This shift reflects a broader recognition that sustainable security cannot be achieved through military means alone and that long-term stability requires effective institutions, economic development, and inclusive political governance.

A comparative assessment of the strategic and legal dimensions of British policy highlights the close interrelationship between geopolitical objectives and international legal obligations. From a strategic perspective, Iraq functions as a critical buffer state situated between competing regional powers, making it central to efforts aimed at maintaining regional stability and preventing escalation. British engagement seeks to balance multiple interests, including relations with the United States, Gulf states, Iraq, and other regional actors while addressing challenges posed by armed non-state groups, regional rivalries, and evolving security threats. From a legal perspective, British policy operates within a complex framework governed by principles of state sovereignty, non-intervention, international humanitarian law, collective security, and accountability. The analysis demonstrates that the legitimacy of British involvement depends significantly upon adherence to international legal norms, particularly regarding military deployments, counterterrorism operations, and stabilization initiatives. Respect for Iraqi sovereignty and compliance with international law are not only legal requirements but also essential conditions for maintaining the credibility and effectiveness of British policy. The study therefore underscores the importance of integrating strategic objectives with legal obligations in order to ensure sustainable and legitimate engagement in conflict-affected regions.

This research contributes to international relations scholarship by providing a comprehensive examination of how a major external actor adapts its foreign policy following a significant regional conflict. The study enriches debates concerning strategic realignment, regional security governance, middle-power diplomacy, and the evolving role of Iraq within Middle Eastern geopolitics. By analyzing the interaction between security considerations, economic interests, and diplomatic strategies, the research offers insights into the mechanisms through which states respond to changing regional power dynamics. The study

also contributes to international law scholarship by examining the legal implications of contemporary stabilization efforts, military cooperation, and counterterrorism operations in a post-conflict environment. It highlights the continuing relevance of fundamental principles such as sovereignty, consent, collective security, and humanitarian protection while illustrating the legal challenges created by evolving forms of conflict and transnational security threats. The findings demonstrate that effective regional governance requires not only political and military strategies but also strong adherence to international legal standards and accountability mechanisms. Several important implications emerge for policymakers and scholars. First, future UK-Iraq relations should prioritize long-term institution-building and governance support alongside security cooperation. Second, regional stability requires greater emphasis on diplomatic engagement, conflict prevention, and multilateral cooperation. Third, international legal frameworks must continue to evolve in response to emerging security challenges, including cyber threats, proxy conflicts, and increasingly complex forms of regional intervention. Future research should further explore the long-term consequences of the 2026 conflict for regional order and international security. Comparative studies examining the policies of other external powers toward Iraq and the wider Middle East would provide valuable insights into evolving geopolitical dynamics. Additional research is also needed regarding the role of emerging technologies, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and digital governance in shaping future security strategies and international legal frameworks. Furthermore, empirical studies examining Iraqi perspectives on foreign engagement, sovereignty, and regional cooperation would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of post-conflict governance and state-building processes.

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